

Third Tipperary Brigade, Number Two Flying Column, January to June 1921

Tony Patterson

In 2002, the Bureau of Military History 1913–1921 made available to the public statements from veterans of the War of Independence which were given in the 1950s. A considerable number of South Tipperary Brigade veterans contributed their recollections. Four of these statements were from members of the Number Two Flying Column, Jack Nagle, the column Vice O.C., Maurice McGrath, the column Adjutant, Tommie Ryan and Dick Dalton. Of these four, Tommie Ryan's account has been published in full in three issues of the Tipperary Historical Journal, but the other three accounts are of at least equal value, and the four between them give us an insight into how the column operated. Seán Sharkey's account, published in the Journal in 1998 is also relevant, though as Intelligence Officer of the Fifth Battalion, he was obliged to remain in Clonmel, rather than join the column.

Formation

In late 1920, the South Tipperary Number One Flying Column was organised.¹ At the time similar Active Service Units were being organised in all brigades. By December, the need for a second unit in South Tipperary was obvious and the sixth or Cahir Battalion and fifth, or Clonmel Battalion supplied the first two groups of men. In both battalion areas, 1920 had seen an increase in activity and a number of men were already on the run before the formation of the new column.

Tommie Ryan has described his ordeal on Bloody Sunday, November 21st 1920, when he played football for Tipperary in Croke Park. He was a witness to the shooting dead of twelve men and women, including his fellow player Mick Hogan, and had himself been held hostage, stripped and humiliated, before being released when the slaughter was over. Back home in the sixth battalion area he was a marked man, and went on the run. Jack Nagle, who had been involved with Seán Hogan in the organising of the sixth battalion, was tipped off by a friendly policeman that his house was due to be raided, and also became a full-time soldier.²

Maurice (Mossy) McGrath describes his own transition to full-time active service. Late at night in October 1920, a party of military arrived at McGraths' shop in Burncourt. At one o'clock, rifle butts battering the front door woke Mossy and he pulled on his pants and went down to open the door, while his brother Pat stayed upstairs:

In rushed a dozen or so masked savages. They began to knock me about, but the Captain shoved me upstairs, and one of the others blew in the lock of the bar door, where they started a drinking orgy. The Captain ordered Pat out of bed and pulled his pants from him, saying 'You don't need this.' He felt the weight of it. It was heavy with the shop takings and price of a horse sold that day, totalling about £120. He

ordered us down on our knees and said, 'You have five minutes, so make the most of it'. The five minutes expired and then we heard the shots, but we did not feel anything as the shots were aimed at the ceiling and the bullet marks were there as evidence for years afterwards. He then said, 'Take them out and flog them', which order was certainly brutally carried out. They used their body belts until we fell unconscious from the numerous blows on head and body.

After the raiding party had gone, the two brothers lay there until 3 a.m. when they were moved. Pat was taken to Clogheen Hospital and spent six weeks under military supervision. He was smuggled out over the hospital wall at night before he could be arrested. Mossy recovered consciousness and went on the run.³ The battalion Active Service Unit consisted of Seán Hogan, Jack Nagle, Mossy McGrath and Jack Butler. To this nucleus were added Ned Mulcahy, Dinny(Sniper) Lonergan, Davie Fitzgerald, Tommie Ryan, Tom Mullaney, Dave Moher, Bill Mulcahy, Bill Keating, Frank Pyne, Davie Quirke and Bill O'Brien.

All men coming to the column for duty were armed and equipped by their own battalions, and the first mobilisation of the new column took place at Ballybacon about two weeks before Christmas of 1920.⁴

While these events were taking place in the Sixth Battalion area, the Clonmel Battalion was also gearing up for a more active role. The ambush at Lisronagh is described by Dick Dalton . Dalton⁵ and Tommy Barron travelled to the village with the object of forming the local volunteers into a separate company:

On the 1st Sunday in December 1920 the two of us - Barron and myself - went to Lisronagh, driving out there in my father's pony and trap. On our way we met a small party of armed Black and Tans, about five in number, marching from Lisronagh to Rathronan to attend Service in the Protestant Church there. Barron remarked: 'I wonder does this happen every Sunday?' We made inquiries from some of the Volunteers in Lisronagh and learned that it was a regular church parade. On our way back Barron and I discussed the question of attacking and disarming this party of Black and Tans, and as a preliminary step we decided to call a meeting of the 14 or 15 members, of A Company whom we knew to be dissatisfied with the inactivity in the area.

During the week, the group that one of them, Seán Sharkey, calls 'the malcontents' met and decided to ambush the Black and Tans. On Sunday, eleven men met in the Sinn Féin hall.

We were armed with revolvers. In ones and twos we moved off and went out the Fethard road to a point between Rathronan Protestant Church and Lisronagh. The last members of our party were just clear of the Sinn Fein hall when it was surrounded by a raiding party of British troops. We took up our positions at both sides of the road, secreting ourselves behind the walls from any passers-by. Then began a long period of waiting. At last we heard the footsteps of the approaching party of Black and Tans. They were four in number, marching two in front and two behind. One of the two in front was a Sergeant named Cooper. They were armed with rifles and revolvers.

Immediately they came opposite to our position we jumped from behind the walls out on to the road and called on them to put their hands up. The two Black and

Tans who were marching in the rear turned and started to run back in the direction they had come. While some of our party were struggling with and disarming Sergeant Cooper and his companion, three of us, Tommy Barron, John (nicknamed Buddy) Donoghue and myself, gave chase to the two Black and Tans who had run away. We fired some shots after them but I am not sure whether they returned our fire or not. One of these two Tans was an exceptionally good runner and he succeeded in getting clear away. The other was wounded in the foot by one of our shots and when we got up to him he was leaning against the wall and he remarked: 'Don't shoot me, Buddy'.⁶ For the moment we thought that he knew 'Buddy' Donoghue, but later on we realised that 'Buddy' was a term used by English soldiers and Black and Tans when addressing each other. We disarmed him and then returned to our companions, who had already disarmed Sergeant Cooper and his companion.

They had captured three rifles, three revolvers, and some ammunition. That night, back in Clonmel, Dalton witnessed an unarmed man being beaten up by Black and Tans who had run amok all over town, beating up men, women and children.

Next day British forces raided either the homes or the places of employment of nine of the eleven men who took part in the attack. The two exceptions were Jack Sharkey's and mine. They were accompanied by Sergeant Cooper, who, however, failed to identify any of the wanted men. Seán Cooney, accompanied by Jack Sharkey, went immediately afterwards to Brigade Headquarters and gave a complete account of the incident.

A week or so later Cooney told Dalton that Dan Breen was organizing a number two flying column, and asked him to prepare a list of twelve men from the Clonmel Battalion to join the Cahir Battalion men who had already been recruited. Along with himself, Dick Dalton picked his brother Ned ('Bubbles') Dalton, John (Buddy) Donoghue, Tom Kirwan, Ned Dwyer, Tom Daly, Matt McKenna, Seán Morrissey, Mick Patterson, John Hayes, Bill Moloughney, all of Clonmel and Paddy Hackett of Newcastle.⁷

Training

Meanwhile, the sixth battalion men had been undergoing training under Seán Hogan, the Column O.C. and later Chris Conway, who was an ex-soldier with experience in the British army, took over training.⁸ They marched to meet the Clonmel contingent, who had met at the Locker near Drohan's of Kilmacomma. In Dick Dalton's words:

Here⁹ we were issued with revolvers, rifles, and ammunition by Jack Killeen, who was then an officer of A Company. We had already provided ourselves with good strong boots, leggings and suitable warm hard-wearing clothing at our own expense. Under cover of darkness, we were brought by a guide named Laurence Hallinan a distance of about four miles across the hills to Derrinlaur where the rest of the column with Dan Breen and Seán Hogan were in billets.

Next day the whole column, which was now about twenty-five strong, with Seán Hogan as column leader marched across the hills to Glenpatrick, which is about half-way between Clonmel and Carrick-on-Suir. Here we took possession of a big vacant residential house which was formerly the residence of a solicitor named Higgins. Here

we remained for seven or eight days, and I understand that the reason for our prolonged stay here was that Dan Breen was still suffering from the effects of the wounds he received at Professor Carolan's house in Drumcondra, Dublin, and was in need of rest. During our stay at Glenpatrick, food, with the exception of fresh meat, was sent out by the Volunteers in Clonmel. To provide fresh meat we caught and killed a few sheep, first a mountainy sheep and then one from the pasture fields nearby. When these sheep were missed the owners took the precaution of removing all their sheep from the nearby fields. It must, however, be emphasised that the farmers and others who lived around this wild desolate part of the country had no idea who we were. They must have thought that we were Black and Tans for they could scarcely be expected to appreciate at that time that armed Irish soldiers had suddenly arrived in their midst. While at Glenpatrick Tom Kirwan, who was a member of the column and who had spent some time in the British Army, acted as drill and musketry instructor.

Maurice McGrath describes the training of the column men:

Rations for the column had to be provided by the Company Captain, who did his job well. Here we were made to realise that worldly comforts were not for column soldiers. We had no beds, just a quantity of hay on the floors and a few blankets, but drill and training were gruelling, our leaders' object being to submit each member to the



Dick Dalton



Seán Morrissey



Maurice McGrath

acid test of his durability and stamina, and readiness to endure the hardships and danger that were yet to follow. Often, after a strenuous day of fatigue work, we were suddenly called during the night for a 'stand to'. That meant each man was to be fully equipped and standing to attention within three minutes. The use of lights was strictly forbidden, and no noise of floundering was to be heard. At times we did not know whether it was a genuine 'stand to' at the enemy's approach or just one of the leaders' acid tests. A night route march often followed, so, as a result of this fortnight in Glenpatrick, the members were hardened into outdoor military life. Eyes, ears and wits were thoroughly sharpened and keyed up, and we were eager to clash with the foe.¹⁰

Nagle details another part of the training:

From Ballypatrick we went to Kilsheelan where, at night time from selected positions, we attacked the R.I.C. Barracks, but not with the intention of capturing it, the idea being to bring the column as a unit into action and under fire for the first time. I would say that we continued the attack with rifle fire for about half an hour and, while little damage was done to the barracks and the garrison suffered no casualties, still we considered that it was well worth while as part of the training of the column.¹¹

Ryan also describes the training. He had seen Mossy McGrath's account before giving his own statement and repeats quite a few of the points made there, but he mentions their first encounter with the itch, a consequence of the difficulty of getting clean clothing, and describes their departure:

When we were leaving Glenpatrick, we marched in military formation across the Comeragh mountains and after, travelling about six miles, we were at a point overlooking Clonmel which commanded a wide view of the town and its surroundings. We rested there as we watched the movements of the military lorries coming and going on the Waterford-Clonmel road, the Cahir-Clonmel road and the Cahir-Ardfinnan road. Perhaps it was because of our height above them at this point, but whatever the reason, we felt a great sense of superiority and confidence and I, for one, felt very happy at this time, believing our organising and training had now fitted us to take the initiative against the enemy.¹²

Mossy McGrath comments on the welcome the column got from the people and on the feeling abroad that there was now some sort of protection from the arbitrary raids, beatings and killings that had become common in the latter half of 1920.

Organisation

Jack Nagle writes of the organisation and day to day activities of the column: It would be impossible now for me to give a day to day account of the movements of the column. As we visited the various battalion areas, it grew in strength to about 35 regular members. Some of these did not remain all the time with the column. There might perhaps be some who would have to return to their homes or to their areas for long or short periods and then rejoin the column again. We also had on the roll a reserve of approximately 38 men. These men remained in their own areas, but could be called upon at any time.

For the information of the reader I would like, at this stage, to give a general outline of how the column operated. The brigade was then well organised and company intelligence officers sent daily reports to their battalion intelligence officers who, in turn, daily sent a summarised report to the brigade intelligence officer. These reports covered the movements of enemy forces in all company areas. The column, too, was in daily touch with brigade headquarters, our dispatch rider being the late Tom Looby (afterwards a Lieutenant Colonel in the army), and it was from the brigade headquarters that the column took its orders as to the areas we were to go to. For instance, if the intelligence reports showed that a lorry or lorries of enemy forces regularly passed along certain roads on given dates or that patrols of police and military were in the habit of taking the same routes at certain times, then the column was ordered by the Brigade H.Q. to go to that particular area with, of course, a view to attacking the lorries or the patrols. This arrangement had one serious drawback - a human one. For some reason or another, company intelligence officers - when there was no enemy movement in their areas - tired of furnishing 'Nil' reports and varied them by giving incorrect information.

This, in turn, often led to the column marching anything from 10 to 25 miles to an area and then being informed by the local company officer that no enemy forces had been seen in that area for, perhaps, two months previously. Before going to a company area, the column leader advised the company O/C in advance, and it was the duty of the company officers to arrange for billets for the column members and to arrange for scouts.

Before dismissing the column to go to billets, the column leader indicated the place and time for assembly on the following day and the place for assembly should there be an alarm during the night.'

Dick Dalton's account confirms these details but adds that column members in turn were given the duty of acting 'as a kind of orderly officer and paid surprise visits to the scouts. This procedure as a rule worked exceptionally well.'¹³

As well as being a column member, Dalton was quartermaster of the fifth battalion: One of my duties as Quartermaster was to deal with the 'Levy' funds collected by the company officers. This levy was a fixed charge on each householder according to his valuation, and was used for the maintenance, of the I.R.A. Most householders paid up willingly but in some cases cattle and property had to be seized and sold to secure payment. Two-thirds of the amounts collected were handed over to the Brigade Quartermaster and one-third retained by the battalion. I sent the amounts proper to be retained by the 5th Battalion to Jack Sharkey in Clonmel, who arranged for their lodgment in a bank.¹⁴

Ballyporeen

Quite early in its life, the Number Two Flying Column targeted RIC and Black-and-Tan posts in their area. Jack Nagle writes:

During the early months of 1921, we spent a good deal of time around the foothills of the Galtee Mountains and, while there, the garrison of R.I.C. and Black and Tans in Ballyporeen were our principal objective. To my knowledge, on at least four

occasions we sniped the barracks there. The police showed no tendency to come out of town or to send patrols out into the countryside, so we decided to go into the town and attack a patrol of six R.I.C. men and Black and Tans who patrolled the streets each night. This patrol moved in twos, about twenty yards apart. On the night of 12th March 1921, we occupied positions in laneways and in doorways along the route the patrol was expected to come.¹⁵

Dick Dalton tells how the column

occupied a row of houses by which the police on night patrol generally passed. The occupants of the houses were, naturally, alarmed and frightened, but we managed to calm them down. Our plans were to let the patrol from the barracks pass by the row of houses until they reached the end house where the column leader and some others were in position. Here they would be attacked for the first time. We allowed that after being attacked they would retreat back the way they had come and thus, when retreating, they would come under the fire of the parties occupying the other houses in the row. With two others I was in the first occupied house which the patrol would pass on its way from the barracks.

The patrol came along but due to the action of an impetuous member of the column who fired at them immediately they came in sight, our plans went sadly astray. The police got back without ever actually entering the trap which had been laid for them. I cannot say what the strength of the patrol was, but I actually saw two of them which I took to be the advance guard.

The police took up a position between the row of houses and the police barrack and covered both the front and rear of the houses with rifle fire. It was only with the utmost difficulty that we succeeded in getting out of a very difficult position, as we had to get away from the houses by the back and get across garden walls and fencing wire to do so. Of course, it was dark at the time.

Nagle adds that one Black-and-Tan was killed, that the remaining members of the patrol withdrew to the barracks and the column withdrew to Ballylooby. 'There was considerable firing from the barracks, even long after we had withdrawn and, on the following day, British forces burned two houses in the town, as a reprisal.'

Nagle may have had a slight mix-up in dates. *The Nationalist and Munster Advertiser* reported an attack on Ballyporeen on Thursday, 24th March. It described how four armed men in the village, with others on the outskirts attacked the barracks. Reinforcements arrived, and the attackers retreated. Houses in the village were searched, thirty men taken into custody, and afterwards released. Two houses were blown up. When the reinforcements left, the barracks was again attacked with no result. Assuming that the report was based on details supplied by the British, one can take the reinforcements and the second attack with a grain of salt. There is agreement on the blowing up of two houses.¹⁶

The Ballygiblin Round-up

All four statements give a fairly full account of a round-up in the countryside between Ballyporeen and Kilbeheny. The three counties of Tipperary, Limerick and Cork come together here. Ryan and Nagle refer to it as the Ballygiblin round-up. McGrath calls it the

Kiltankin round-up as they were in the Kiltankin Company area which lies on a by-road connecting Ballyporeen with the main Dublin-Cork road. He says that the column OC, Hogan sent Bill Mulcahy and others into Ballyporeen as scouts. Mulcahy 'contacted a Black-and-Tan in a public house, shot him and took his side arms.' The column attacked Ballyporeen RIC barracks, and the resulting shooting and Verey lights brought reinforcements from Clogheen. The column retreated and the houses of Kearney and Farrell were burned down.

Nagle says that on a Sunday Afternoon in late April or early May, the column left the Galtees and went to Ballygiblin, south of the R665 road from Mitchelstown, through Ballyporeen. They were at a dance held in Mrs. O'Brien's house, when scouts reported large forces of military assembling in Ballyporeen. They mistrusted the information and the dance continued for some time more.

Ryan says that they had spent four days in the Ballyporeen area, lying in ambush for hours at a stretch, but that no military patrols left the village. He mentions the sniping of the barracks, but continues: 'The column commander then decided to organise a dance and sent word to the local Volunteers and the local girls that we were going to run a dance that night. It was about this that I had a bit of a falling out with him.' He thought the dance was dangerous if reinforcements arrived early and surrounded them, and that they had already stayed too long in the area. The barracks was duly sniped and the dance went ahead. When it became obvious that no reinforcements were coming, they went to billets after arranging a centre for a stand-to.

Dalton had been sent to Clonmel to collect dispatches. On his return to the area, he found that the column had moved, leaving no word for him. After a long search he found his way to the dance, and in annoyance complained about the lack of directions, saying 'Seán, I came into this house tonight without being challenged, and if I could come in anyone else could come in as easily.' He was ordered to go to his billet and left.

The following morning early the column members were awakened in their various billets in the Kiltankin area with the news that troops had assembled in Ballyporeen and were advancing on them. The men of the column assembled at O'Gorman's, the appointed place of assembly. As far as Hogan and Nagle could make out, the military were advancing from the east. To their north was the main Dublin/Cork road, and to the south was the Ballyporeen/Mitchelstown road. They moved off intending to cross one or other of these roads, but very soon discovered that lines of troops from the Mitchelstown direction were ahead of them to the west, moving in extended order. McGrath estimated that three thousand troops from Kilworth, Mitchelstown, Fermoy, and Moorpark to the west, and from Clonmel, Cahir, Clogheen and Tipperary to the east were involved in the round-up. Ryan put the figure much higher.

With one of the column, Dave Moher acting as guide, they crossed the Furrough bog, and then moved slowly, using what cover they could until, about mid-day, they reached Ballygiblin on a by-road which connects the Cork road with the Ballyporeen road. Here they were warned by the local teacher, Miss O'Hanrahan that they were completely surrounded with no hope of crossing either of the main roads.

Hogan suggested breaking up into twos and threes in the hope that some might slip through the cordon, but the men of the column preferred to stay together, so they crossed the Ballygiblin/Kilbeheny road a few hundred feet from where Black-and-Tans were holding up creamery carts. Soon afterwards they arrived in a farmyard, and the farmer, Mr. Molan,

directed them to a field nearby, where they were able to lie concealed in a drain between two lines of bushes. Behind them was the furze-covered bank on the margin of the field, and in front was a line of sallies. They were able to lie un-noticed, but cramped, hungry and apprehensive for the rest of the afternoon, while they listened to the buzzing sound of lorries dropping off troops at various points, and saw aeroplanes overhead scouting for them.

During the day they had a few close calls. At one stage, two officers entered the field and one scanned the surrounding countryside through field glasses. Scouts in trees, on a haybarn, and in Molans' yard also missed seeing them. Eventually they heard signal shots and saw Verey lights go up from various directions, and after a while it became evident that the troops were moving out. When they were sure the coast was clear, they emerged, hungry and cramped, and in a short time the local Cumann na mBan arrived with food. They then discovered that all males between the ages of fifteen and seventy, including Mr. Molan, had been rounded up and held for the day.

All four statements stress that the Ballygiblin round-up was the greatest danger the column faced. Ryan seems to blame Seán Hogan for staying too long in one area, and for being careless in running the dance on the previous night. McGrath, on the other hand, is full of admiration for Hogan's conduct, stresses that a round-up of that magnitude would have been in preparation for a considerable period beforehand, was probably aimed at the East Limerick, and North Cork columns as well as the South Tipperary ones, and that the fact that they were inside the cordon, and the others weren't was largely a matter of coincidence. He also points out that, from the British point of view, the well organised round-up was a complete failure, with no captures and the column intact after the huge effort involved.

Ryan summarises:

From the moment the military round-up began, we had no initiative or no freedom of action left to us. We were driven helter-skelter in our retreat, and it was only a set of lucky coincidences or an act of God that brought us safely through. On the other hand, the members of the Column behaved with admirable courage and fortitude.

Joint Operations with South Tipperary Number One Column

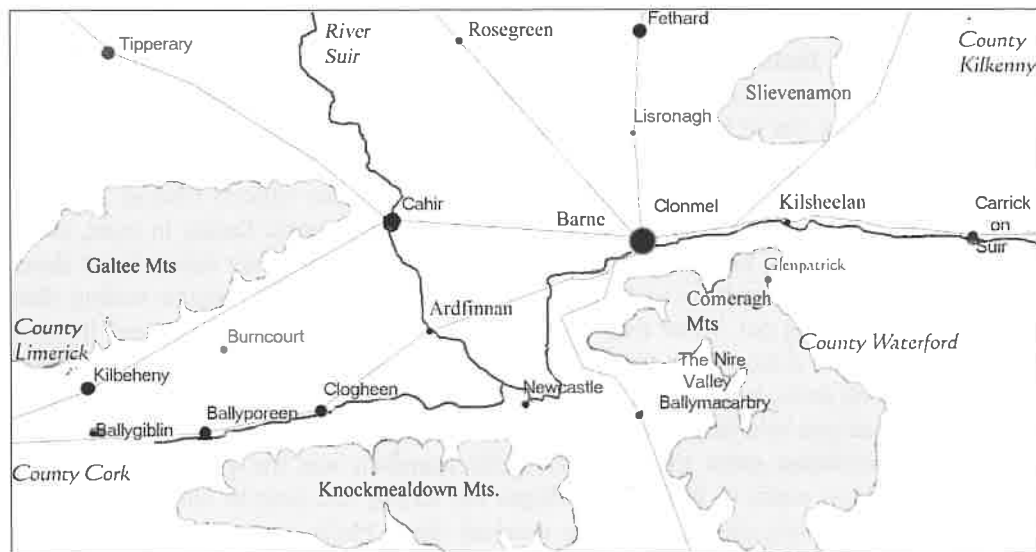
The Number Two Column operated mainly in the southern part of the Third Brigade area, with the Galtees to the North, and the Knockmealdowns to the south, and from the border with Cork and Limerick in the west to the Kilkenny border to the east. It also operated in that part of County Waterford which formed the natural hinterland of Clonmel, and in May of 1921 spent some time in the western parts of County Kilkenny.

The Number One Column was a much larger unit. Before the formation of the second column it had operated over the entire brigade area, but afterwards operated mainly north of the Galtees from the Limerick border to the Kilkenny border.

On at least three occasions, the two columns joined forces to prepare ambushes against crown forces, near Dundrum, at Barne, and near Clogheen.

Dundrum

In March 1921, Seán Hogan received information from Brigade H.Q. of an intended attack by I.R.A. upon an enemy troop train travelling from Dublin to Cork. The place selected for



the attack was near Donohill, about eight miles from Tipperary Town. The column travelled from Newcastle across country over the Galtees and was joined by an Active Service Unit from the Knockgraffon area. They joined the Number One Column under Dinny Lacey, and the combined columns were billeted in the vicinity of Dundrum. Dick Dalton says he was billeted at Golden Garden, and Tommie Ryan mentions Donohill. He says this was the first time they had met with the other column, and 'that evening, in the farmyards where we were billeted, we exchanged confidences and had quite a singsong'.¹⁷

They had laid mines on the railway, anticipating that the train would be carrying a large number of troops. Dan Breen had arrived from Dublin to take part in the proposed ambush, but after two days in ambush positions there was no sign of the troop train. Staying any longer so close to the large garrison of British Troops in Tipperary town would be foolish, so the column divided, and number two column crossed back over the Galtees. Crossing the main Dublin to Cork road at Rehill, they heard lorries and took shelter in the woods. A very large convoy of lorries passed their place of hiding. McGrath says there were ninety-six, and Ryan estimates two hundred. He says these were the troops who had been expected to travel by train.

Barne

Intelligence reported, that two or three lorries of Black and Tans passed almost daily on the Cahir-Clonmel road, and their time of passing varied from 1 p.m. to 1.30 p.m. It was decided to ambush them, so both columns converged at Derrygrath to make arrangements for the attack. The number two column, starting from Tickincor, crossed near the golf links above Clonmel, then on through Grange, and from there to Nicholastown, about three miles from Cahir. Number One Column travelled south via Clerihan. From there they travelled together to Barne, a few miles west of Clonmel. McGrath reports:

A section of No. 1 Column, under Seán Kennedy, machine-gunner, took up a position behind the demesne wall with a Hotchkiss machine-gun, commanding a view of the main road for more than one hundred yards as far as Hayden's public house.

The road to Clerihan runs by the side of the demesne wall, with Hayden's forge opposite. The first lorry was to be allowed to pass the public house and come within fifty yards or so of the demesne wall, when the machine-gun party would open fire. Simultaneously, two selected men were to push out empty horse carts and block both roads. The forge, of course, was a shelter for three column men. It was expected that, should the first lorry escape the machine-gun volley, the cart obstructions would upset it and, likewise, the second lorry. The lorries usually travelled very fast, with a small intervening distance, and we anticipated that the obstruction would possibly overturn the first, and give the following lorries very little time to avoid crashing likewise. The columns were in positions at both sides of the road, some directly inside the fences to deal with any Tans likely to jump off the lorries and take up defensive positions. A few were placed in sniping positions further back, and back far enough to close in on the rear of lorries should the distance between them be greater than usual. All passing traffic was held up, and quietly and quickly sent down two by-roads out of view and danger. Guards were placed over them. The columns maintained their positions for about three and a half hours, but they were disappointed. Fortunately for the enemy, they had left Cahir as usual and had travelled out a few miles when the steering went wrong on one of the lorries, running it into the ditch and disabling it. It had to be towed back to Cahir, where it took a considerable time to repair.¹⁸

Clogheen

This ambush took place on 22nd April, 1921. Jack Nagle describes the action: The purpose of bringing the two columns together was to attack a convoy of British troops which passed regularly between Cahir and Clogheen. On the morning of our arrival at Garrymore, Dan Breen, Seán Hogan, Dinny Lacey, some officers from Lacey's column and myself inspected the proposed ambush position. On account of the proximity of Hyland's house to Garrymore Cross, the position was considered unsuitable and it was decided to call off the attack for the time being. It was also decided that our column would withdraw towards Burncourt and Lacey's column towards Ballyboy in the Ballybacon direction. Before the rearguard of Lacey's column left the Cahir-Clogheen road, a party of seven or eight British soldiers in a wagon drawn by two horses arrived on the scene coming from the Cahir direction. They were engaged by the rearguard. The horses were shot dead and the soldiers dismounted from the wagon, and started to run back towards Cahir. Our column had already moved off towards Burncourt and I should say that we were about 300 yards from the Cahir-Clogheen road when we heard the firing. Not then knowing what exactly had happened, we hurriedly took up the best positions we could and, seeing the soldiers running back along the road, we opened fire on them. This fire of ours held the soldiers on the road and, after a very short time, they surrendered to Lacey's men who searched them and then let them go. It was on that day that District Inspector Potter of the R.I.C. was captured. While the captured booty was being examined, he came along the road in a motor car. He was alone and in civilian clothes, but he was recognised by Seán Downey, a member of Lacey's column. Our column had nothing further to do with him after his capture. It was Lacey's column who held him prisoner and who eventually carried out his

execution, after the British authorities had refused an offer by the staff of the 3rd Tipperary Brigade to release Potter in return for the reprieve of Thomas Traynor, a Dublin Volunteer who was then under sentence of death in Mountjoy Prison.¹⁹

The *Nationalist and Munster Advertiser* reported on the 27th April that one soldier had been fatally wounded, two others wounded, and four horses killed. Some of the details have the flavour of an army press release. It describes the capture from the ambushers of a Hotchkiss gun on a country cart when the attackers were driven off by the relief forces. It also claims that dum dum bullets were found.

Car Thieves

The number two column headed for the Galtees, and a day or two later Seán Hogan sent some of his men to Clonmel. Mossy McGrath tells the story:

Acting on intelligence reports received from Seán Sharkey, I/O 5th Battalion, that some motor cars and motor cycles were available in Clonmel and could easily be seized, Seán Hogan instructed six members of the column who had some knowledge of motoring, to secure those cars and go to Brigade H.Q. with them. The six selected were Mick Patterson, Tom Kirwan, Tom Mullaney, Ned Dalton, Paddy Hackett and myself. Having gone across country to Grange, Jack Lonergan reported two cars at Woodroffe which proved to be of no use - one was very old, the other was locked. One car and one motor cycle were seized in Clonmel, the car by Ned Dalton, and the motor cycle by Mick Patterson, who took it from under the very noses of Auxiliaries billeted in the Central Hotel. That was on our second day in Clonmel, where we stayed with Mick Patterson's aunt, Mrs. Gleeson, Mitchell St. We were visited there by Seán Sharkey and the late Seán Cooney, who gave us the necessary information re time and place for the seizures.

Mrs Gleeson who was recently widowed, and whose husband had been a professional photographer, took a photograph of those present. As she was about to do so, Tom Looby, column despatch rider came in. He had been caught up in the searches after the Clogheen ambush, but had managed to conceal his despatches in time and had been released.²⁰

Capture of Frank Pyne

While the motor-car detail was in Clonmel, the rest were billeted at Skeenarinky. Taking Tom O'Gorman, a column man from the locality, Nagle went to select an ambush position on the Clonmel-Mitchelstown road. Selecting ambush positions was part of Nagle's normal duties, and he was acting on information that a British cycle patrol passed along that road fairly often.

On the way back they saw a party of twelve lancers on horseback passing along the road and later saw the Lancers pass back again with three prisoners, Mr. and Mrs. Fitzgerald, to whose house they were returning, and Frank Pyne, a member of the column.

Nagle and Gorman were picked up by the latter's brother and brought back to Skeheenarinka, but found that the column had left. They picked up some shotguns and ammunition which the column had left. Two Volunteers then arrived with word that the column had gone to the Glen of Aherlow. They followed over the mountains and witnessed, from a height, British troops firing at what looked like mines set in the surface of a road. A



Motor men Front row (l to r) : Maurice McGrath, Column Adjutant; Ned Dalton, Tom Kirwan, Seán Sharkey, the Battalion I/O, and Patrick Hackett. Back row: Tom Mullaney, Mick Patterson, Seán Cooney, and Tom Looby.

local Volunteer officer, when trenching the road, had conceived the bright idea of collecting old round-bottomed boiling pots and setting them with the bottoms and legs or prongs just showing above the level of the road.²¹

Ryan too was a witness to part of what happened. At one house which formed the headquarters or centre of the column, the column assembled twice a day for a bit of arms drill, and they usually left their arms there:

On this particular day I happened to be at the centre when the alarm was raised, and there was no one else with me at the time. I saw a party of about 12 cavalry approaching slowly up the boreen leading to this house where I was. Having no help, I did my best to run with 12 or 14 rifles and equipment that was lying around, bringing them in relays to a place of concealment up the hill. This was rather difficult with the military so close upon me, but I managed, however, to get them all away.²²

Dalton witnessed the capture from his billet a few hundred yards away:

While I might have fired a few shots in an effort to save the situation, I must mention that the members of the column were under a strict order never to take on anything on their own.²³

McGrath wasn't present, but, as was his habit, checked with those who had been. He describes how the column was surprised by the lancers who galloped up the two roads to the Galtees:

Matters could have been very bad only for the quickness and initiative of Tom Fogarty, brother of Michael, a column member. Tom was a member of Liam Lynch's unit in Cork, but was home for a few days. Tom, seeing the cavalry coming along the lower road, flew at express speed to warn the column, who quickly mobilised for action. Before the men at one of the houses directly on the Galtee Castle line could be warned the cavalry were on them. One of the men, Christy Conway, was resting in a chair in the yard. Another, Dave Moher, was resting on the bed in the room when the horsemen dashed into the yard. Conway, an ex-soldier, made a dash for it and got out under the belly of the officer's horse and caused a stampede for a while amongst the other horses. He rushed round to the back of the house, from the window of which Dave Moher had flung out the equipment. The equipment included Frank Pyne's, another member who had gone to the next house some time before and had not returned. Conway and Moher, being men of powerful physique, took the arms and equipment, dodged into a ravine in the side of the hill at the back of the house and were out of view in a short time. The military delayed searching the house for a few minutes, which gave the boys time to escape. Pyne, rushing back, was captured, but, being unarmed was quick to say he was working around and was only hurrying in to Mrs. Fitzgerald, who was alone in the house.

He was later identified, was court-martialed and sentenced to five or so years imprisonment. The cavalry immediately retreated with their prisoner, and strong forces were hurried to the scene and an extensive raid took place which lasted for two days. Tom Fitzgerald, about sixty years of age, owner of the house, was arrested and tried by court-martial. He was fined £100, or twelve months in prison.

Hogan led his men across the Galtees. They exchanged fire with a small body of the enemy on the northern side. They crossed the River Suir near the Moat of Knockgraffon, and reached Brigade H.Q. at Rosegreen where they were joined by the car detail from Clonmel.²⁴

Nire Valley

Ryan, McGrath and Dalton all give an account of the column's stay in the Nire Valley. The mouth of this valley in the Comeragh Mountains is at Ballymacarbry on the Clonmel-Dungarvan road. The upper part of the valley is surrounded by the mountains, and in April or May of 1921 was a very remote area. As Dalton says, British forces had never come farther into the valley than the steel bridge just above Ballymacarbry, and the men of the column felt safe. The area is in Co. Waterford, but the nearest large town is Clonmel. The column was ordered to the Nire to dig dumps for arms which were to be landed on the coast near Dungarvan. The Waterford Brigade was informed and the local company assisted the Tipperary men. Ryan says that the South Tipperary Number One Column was to join them, but enemy activity in their own area prevented this. The dumps were dug and lined with furze.

Dick Dalton's account of the time in the Nire is detailed, and candid:

Actually this cargo of arms did not arrive until some time during the Truce period when it was landed at Helvick Harbour near Dungarvan. Whilst engaged on the

preparation of the dumps I was billeted with two or three other members of the column in a farmhouse owned by people named O'Donnell. The residents of the Nire Valley were under the impression that the reason for our visit was to test explosives, and to confirm them in this belief small quantities of gelignite were exploded from time to time.

As a precautionary measure whilst on the column we rarely, if ever, went to Mass on Sundays. On the first Saturday we were in the Nire Valley the column leader instructed us not to attend Mass next day. As there was no danger of a round-up by British forces, and thinking of all the Sundays I had missed Mass, I decided to take no notice of his instruction, and during that evening I mentioned to Mick Patterson that I would go to Mass in the morning. He told me that he would call to O'Donnell's for me next morning and come with me.

Next morning, the two men had some time to spare before Mass time. Dalton picked up an empty revolver and practiced aiming at a knot hole in the door.

Just then my attention was diverted for a few minutes by something which was happening in the yard. Patterson loaded the revolver whilst I was looking out the window, and when I turned around I again picked up the gun, aimed again at the knot in the door and pulled the trigger. Fancy my dismay when the shot went off.

Mrs. O'Donnell hurried in to ask if they had heard the shot, and obviously took in the situation.

She put the blame on Patterson, saying nothing happened until he came to the house. When it came to time for going to Mass Mrs. O'Donnell took down her coat to put it on and there were four gaping holes in it. The coat had been hanging on the other side of the door. The good woman, however, took it in good part, saying that she hoped some of us would buy her a new coat when we got the Republic.²⁵

Kilkenny

The creation of the Second Division and the appointment of Ernie O'Malley as its first commandant had consequences for the column. The division had five brigades, Mid and East Limerick, Mid and South Tipperary, and Kilkenny. O'Malley looked on South Tipperary as the strongest of these, and Kilkenny as the weakest.²⁶ He decided that the number two column should join with a smaller Kilkenny unit, the Callan Battalion column under Ned Aylward and spread the fight in West Kilkenny.

Early in May, they left the Galtees and travelled across county Tipperary through New Inn and Ballingarry.²⁷ They met up with the Kilkenny men at Windgap²⁸, and moved to the Dunamaggin area several miles south of Callan. McGrath says there were long marches from area to area, that the companies were well organised, but that there was a great shortage of arms and ammunition. Three lorries of Black and Tans were expected to pass through Kilmanagh on Monday May 12th. This village is some miles north of Callan and about the same distance from Ballingarry, with the Tipperary-Kilkenny border in between. Jack Nagle brought the column to Kilmanagh:

At that time, Seán Hogan and I generally travelled together in an 'Overland' motor car which had been commandeered some time previously. Seán Morrissey, a member

of the column, was our driver. Hogan, Aylward, Maher, Ryan and myself, with Morrissey driving, went to Teehan's of Shipton House on the Sunday evening. Later that night, Morrissey and I left Teehan's in the car, as it had been arranged that I should take the column cross country from Oldtown to Kilmanagh. It was a dark night, well past mid-night, and, not knowing the roads, we easily went astray. We knocked up two houses to inquire the way, but we only succeeded in frightening the inhabitants. Come to think of it, anyone knocked up around 1.30 a.m. and seeing two strange men with parabellum revolvers strapped from their shoulders would easily be frightened. Later, we inquired from a man we saw leaving a house. He, too, was going to Oldtown and he stood on the running board of the car and directed us. On the way he told us that his name was Tom Hogan, that he was from Golden and that he was staying with friends in Oldtown. I took the column from Oldtown to Teehan's of Shipton House and then to Kilmanagh where we arrived about 6 o'clock on the Monday morning. Eamon Aylward with his column and some Kilkenny Volunteers were also there. The final plans for the ambush were then made. No one was allowed to leave the village and anyone coming in, such as farmers arriving with milk for the Creamery, were detained as prisoners. My position was at the lower end of the village where the Creamery is situated. Here we occupied houses and some other vantage points. Hogan and Aylward took charge of parties at the upper end of the village and the lorries were expected to enter the village at a crossroads about halfway between both positions. The plan was simple. If the lorries turned towards the upper part of the village they would be attacked by Hogan's and Aylward's parties, and my party would be in a position to deal with them from the rear. The position would, of course, be reversed if they turned towards the lower end of the village; then I would initiate the attack and Hogan and Aylward's men would attack from the rear.²⁹

The lorries failed to arrive and so by six o'clock or so, the columns moved out to the North-West, and passing through the outskirts of Tullaroan, finally found billets between there and Tubrid. Meantime British forces arrived in lorries, and started a comb-out of the whole area. The column were in separate billets, some in Kennedy's house at Knocknamuck to the South-West of the road from Tullaroan to Tubrid, the rest on the far side of the road in Monabrogue. Lorries of Black and Tans stopped at the end of Kennedy's boreen the following morning. Warned in time Hogan, Nagle, Aylward and the others to the number of a dozen or so left the house and headed away from the Black and Tans towards the New England road which was some fields away behind the house. The last three men were Kilkenny volunteers named Walsh, Quinn and Power, who had been sleeping in separate quarters in the farmyard.

As they all headed through the fields, Seán Morrissey spotted soldiers ahead of them and shouted 'tin hats'. An exchange of shots followed, and most of the men were able to cross a high bank and get away, but the last three were unable to do so because of the heavy fire. They doubled back and Pat Walsh and Seán Quinn were shot trying to cross another ditch out of the field. Both died of their wounds.

The men in Monabrogue were outside the cordon, and eventually got away to the west to rejoin their comrades near Ballingarry. The columns went their separate ways.

Two things worked against the plan from the start. The Tipperary men were operating in unfamiliar territory, and the British had changed tactics as regards roundups. The Kilkenny misadventure is very reminiscent of the capture of Pyne in the Galtees. In both cases, the mobility of crown forces, whether on horseback or in lorries was a factor, as was the sudden arrival on parallel roads with the column trapped between. The lengthening summer days must also have helped British efforts.

Capture of Tom Looby

Another idea of O'Malley's was that if the columns failed to entice their enemies out of their urban strongholds, they should go in after them. He had led Lacey's column into Tipperary town, and been forced to withdraw when they were spotted. There were no casualties.

Tom Looby seems to have become a full-time member of the column before the Kilkenny foray. His role of dispatch rider may have become more dangerous after his near capture following the Clogheen ambush. Late in May he brought information that a party of army cyclists moved out from Clonmel each day on patrol. Hogan led a party of ten men in towards Clonmel. Ryan was one of the men chosen:

We had planned to surprise them but, in fact, they came on us unexpectedly so that we were surprised instead. After a short sharp exchange of fire we withdrew.³⁰

Dalton, a Clonmel man is more precise about the location.

On reaching the outskirts of the town they engaged a military patrol near the military barracks at a place called the Barrack Field. In this engagement the late Tom Looby (afterwards a Lieut-Colonel in the Irish Army) was wounded and captured. He was sentenced to death by the British authorities, but the Truce intervening at the time saved his life.³¹

The Column disbands

Jack Nagle describes the end of the Number Two Column:

About three weeks before the Truce, the columns were disbanded by order of the Brigade Staff, and the members were sent to their own battalion areas to form active service units. This decision to disband the columns was taken because they were too small and too ill-equipped, particularly as regards supplies of ammunition, to attack the huge convoys in which the enemy was then moving, and it would not have been feasible to muster a column of sufficient strength to deal with those convoys.

Of the four men on whose statements this account is based, Thomas Ryan fought on the pro-treaty side in the civil war, Richard Dalton and Maurice McGrath fought on the anti-treaty side, and John Nagle resigned from the I.R.A. before the civil war started, and remained neutral throughout that conflict.

Primary Sources

Statements made to The Bureau Of Military History in the 1950s:

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John Nagle. Statement no. WS 1394.

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¹*Trodairí Na Treas Briogáide*, Colm Ó Labhra, Aonach Urmhumhan 1955.

²John Nagle, statement, No. WS 1394.

³Maurice A. McGrath, statement No. W.S. 1701.

⁴Nagle, statement.

⁵Richard Dalton, statement, No. WS 1,116. The ambush is also described by Seán Sharkey, No. WS 1,100.

⁶The wounded man was Constable Charles Cranmer. A report of a court case in March at Clonmel shows that he was awarded £150 compensation. The bullet had gone clean through the leg and there was no permanent damage. The swift runner was Constable Robert Shelbourne: *The Nationalist and Munster Advertiser*, Sat. March 26th 1920.

⁷Dalton, statement.

⁸McGrath, statement.

⁹Dalton, statement.

¹⁰McGrath, statement.

¹¹Nagle, statement.

¹²Ryan, *Tipperary Historical Journal*, 1992.

¹³Nagle, statement.

¹⁴Dalton, statement.

¹⁵Dalton, statement.

¹⁶*The Nationalist and Munster Advertiser*, Sat. March 26th 1920.

¹⁷Ryan, *Tipperary Historical Journal*, 1992.

¹⁸McGrath, statement, also Ryan 1992.

¹⁹Nagle, statement.

²⁰McGrath, statement, and Mrs. McGrath, statement.

²¹Nagle, statement.

²²Nagle, statement.

²³Dalton, statement.

²⁴McGrath, statement.

²⁵Dalton, statement. Also Ryan, 1992 and McGrath, statement.

²⁶*Trodairí*, leathanach 160, O'Malley, chapter 20.

²⁷Nagle, statement.

²⁸Jim Maher, *West Kilkenny, The Flying Column*. Except for direct quotes, the account of the fight in West Kilkenny is based on this book.

²⁹Nagle, statement.

³⁰Ryan, 1993.

³¹Dalton, statement.