

Burnings and panic follow Ballyturn ambush

Week II

Galway Advertiser, Thu, Oct 18, 2012



Midsummer murders: Capt Cecil Blake RIC, District Inspector, was assassinated with his lady companion and two officers near Gort just weeks before the Truce in the Summer 1921. Panic and house burnings followed his death.

Following a tennis party at the home of Mr J C Bagot JP, of Ballyturn House, near Gort, on May 15 1921, the IRA scored a devastating blow against the British forces. The local District Inspector, Captain Cecil Blake, his lady companion Eliza Williams; two officers, Capt Cornwallis and Lieutenant McCreery were shot dead in an ambush as they drove away from the house. The IRA party, probably

as many as ten men, had taken up position in the gate lodge, and in the surrounding bushes. One gate was closed. The car had to stop to open it. At that moment the IRA opened fire. There was one survivor, Margaret Gregory, the widowed daughter-in-law of Lady Gregory.

At the Military Inquiry at Renmore barracks on May 22, Mr Bagot testified that within two minutes of the car's departure he heard a shot, but thought at the time it was a tyre bursting. When he realised there was firing he ran towards the gate accompanied by his daughter May Bagot, and their groom. The Irish Independent reported that a coachman shouted: " For God's sake come. They are killed."

As they approached the scene a man stepped out in front of them with a rifle. He told them to stay where they were, and go back to the house. Bagot held up his hands. He saw the car, and the bodies lying on the drive. He also saw at least four of the attackers, but did not recognise anyone.

One of the attackers, Patrick Glynn,* assisted the second woman (Margaret Gregory) to her feet. 'She asked if Mrs Blake (Eliza Williams) was all right. We said she was. We linked her along the avenue for about 30 or 40 yards until we met Miss Molly (May) Bagot to whom we handed over the lady.'

When the attackers had withdrawn May Bagot got a pony and trap and drove into Gort to get help. She returned with Dr James Sandys, in his car, followed by armed RIC. There were still some IRA in the area. A shot was fired and it appears the RIC panicked. The enormity of the fact that their senior officer and others were murdered in public on a summer's evening seemed to have unnerved them. They began to open fire in all directions, actually killing one of their own men, Constable Kearney. May and her father dived for cover.

'A sunset glow'

The Irish Independent further reported that following the initial response, lorries of soldiers rushed out from Galway. Surgeon O'Malley and a nurse accompanied them. 'The tragedy created a stark terror in the neighbourhood, and people fled from their homes. An eye-witness, who was among those who fled the area, said that before dawn the scene in the neighbourhood was like a sunset glow, the horizon being fringed with the flames from burning houses.'

'It is stated that a number of men called to Ballyturn House and handed in a notice to the owner that if there were any reprisals his house would be burned.'

Interrogation

Patrick Glynn takes up the story: 'The RIC came to the scene of the ambush, firing recklessly from rifles and machine-guns. They shot one of their own men, Constable Kearney. There was an inquiry into the shooting of Kearney after the Truce in Gort. Kearney's sister attended it. It was rumoured that he had handed in his resignation, and that was the reason he was shot.

'The RIC burned Ruane's provision shop in George's Street, Gort, and partly burned McNamara's dwelling house in Queen Street. The men of those families were in the IRA. They also burned Coen's, Callanan's and Fahy's farm houses at Ballycahalan about three miles from the scene of the ambush (John Coen and Padraig Fahy were active IRA members, and well known to the RIC).**

'A few days after the Ballyturn ambush, British military officers came to the gate lodge and questioned the occupying Connolly family (who were held hostage while the IRA waited for the car carrying Capt Blake and the others, to come from the house). They questioned each member of the family separately. They brought them to the RIC barracks in Gort and interrogated them to find out if they knew any of the attacking party. The Connolly family could not be got, by inducements or threats, to say that they knew any of the party. Lady Gregory (Margaret Gregory) and Miss Molly Bagot (May) were also closely questioned. They said they knew nobody in the party, that the IRA were in uniform and spoke with Clare accents.

'Miss Bagot knew Ryan and me quite well. None of the IRA were in uniform.'

Next week: What happened to Margaret Gregory

NOTES: *Patrick Glynn, a member of the Kilbecanty Irish Volunteers, with others, gave a full statement to the Bureau of Military History, now available free on-line.

** I think that the reprisals would have been far worse only that the ambush happened so near the Truce, which followed two months later on July 11. The War of Independence had reached a stalemate. The British believed that the IRA's guerrilla campaign could continue indefinitely with spiralling costs in British casualties and in money. IRA leaders, however, in particular Michael Collins, felt that the IRA, as it was organised at that time, could not continue indefinitely.

Britain was under pressure and fierce criticism at home and abroad for the actions of its forces in Ireland. Just days before Ballyturn, the British made a conciliatory gesture calling off the policy of house burnings as reprisals. That this was ignored after Ballyturn gives some idea of the anger and frustration that the ambush caused.

On June 22 King George V, grandfather of the present queen, and a man who was never happy with British military activities in Ireland, delivered a pivotal speech in Belfast. He called on 'All Irishmen to pause, to stretch out the hand of forbearance and conciliation, to forgive and to forget, and to join in making the land they love a new era of peace, contentment and goodwill.'

The politicians took up the call.

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