

The Civil War in Galway

Part 8 of Nollaig O Gadhra's series to mark the 75th anniversary

Following the horrible blood-letting at official level in January 1923 there seems to have been a lull in the course of the Civil War hostilities during February.

Already the toll of "official executions" (the "unofficial" ones are another day's work entirely!) had reached 55 in the three winter months of November, December and January. During the month of February, 1923 there was only one Free State execution when Thomas Gibson, a former Free State soldier, faced the firing squad in Portlaoise which is why the particularly poignant shootings of the final 21 Republicans — including the six at Tuam — in the months of March, April and May, 1923 (even after the cease-fire had come into effect by the I.R.A. on April 30th) left such a bitter taste.

But hostilities, raids and round-ups continued in the Tuam area during February and into March 1923. J.J. Waldron deals in particular with the raid on Cluid and the capture of 18 Republicans prisoners at the end of that episode on February 1923. Most (perhaps all?) of these prisoners were sentenced to death, shortly afterwards, and held as hostages in Tuam Workhouse against the "good behaviour" of other local I.R.A. groups.

And it was from these prisoners of war that the six men were selected for execution in Tuam on April 11th, 1923, following an I.R.A. attack on Headford on April 9th, 1923. Obviously, the policy of state hostage-taking was still in use at this stage of the Civil War. Those arrested in Cluid could not possibly have had anything to do with the Headford attack. But they had been sentenced to death, and then held as hostages, for execution on an arbitrary basis as soon as some other incident annoyed the Free State brass sufficiently. The Waldron notes for February 1923 begin as follows:

February 3rd, 1923

On Saturday last a young man named Geddes was arrested in his father's house, Bishop Street, Tuam and brought to the Military Barracks.

February 3rd, 1923

The Free State Army took over possession of the Hibernian Hall in Vicar Street last week and erected a sandbagged shelter outside on the path. The situation controls the Mall and the Railway Station and is near the Guards Barracks. Military patrols also parade the town at night. This is relied on as a method of defence and protection for the men in case of further raids.

Mr. Michael Loftus, jnr. who had been detained in Athlone Barracks was released on Friday last.

February 10th, 1923

The military operating from Claremorris made some important captures in Milltown, Co. Galway during the weekend. They first of all surrounded a farmhouse and took three prisoners and then went in the direction of Dunmore. They returned to Milltown by another route and surprised a party of men engaged in demolishing the local Barracks and arrested them.

The names of the prisoners are not given; they are alleged to have taken a gun (Lewis) about six weeks ago.

The following escaped from Military custody in Claremorris; John and Dan McCormack, Liskeavy and Peter Burke, Knock, Milltown.

The Raid at Cluid

At 3 a.m. one morning during the week of February 19th, 1923 Captain MacElligott set off from Galway Barracks with thirty men under his charge. They were skirmishing in the fields near Cluid at 6 a.m. whilst the country was still in darkness intensified with cold showers of sleet. The howling of the storm prevented any sound of their movements being heard. The troops moved with caution and noticed about 200 yards from them, some shadowed figures moving around a group of four houses.

Having encircled the buildings and men before the latter were aware of what was happening, Captain MacElligott then delivered a loud challenge.

Immediately there was a dash for cover in the houses and the bright flashes of fire from the army rifles. One section of the men took refuge in an old barn so Captain MacElligott called on them to come forth but there was no answer to the challenge.

There was a bomb then thrown on the roof of the barn and the troops awaited further developments.

After a short time, the eight men inside saw that there was no other alternative, as they were surrounded by superior forces, but to surrender.

They appeared at the small door of the barn with a white flag, hands raised above their heads, all wearing new trench coats.

Their leader admitted that they were completely taken by surprise, never expecting to be disturbed at such an early hour.

The cordon then gradually drew closer to the farm houses, when it was noticed that one man was trying to escape making a furious dash to get through the lines.

The Captain called on him to halt and fired a shot over his head but he continued to run notwithstanding. Another shot was fired direct at him and he was seen to fall, mortally wounded. The remaining ten then surrendered and were thereupon marched into Galway, a distance of 15 miles where they arrived about three o'clock in the afternoon. The equipment captured included 15 Lee Enfield Rifles, three Mauser Rifles, a large land mine, a number of bombs, revolvers, new trench coats and leggings and Sam Brown belts.

All the arms were well oiled and in excellent condition. The men had been billeting in the small group of houses overnight.

The following are the prisoners captured at Cluid: *John Newell, Headford; Pat Farragher, Kilmaine, Co. Mayo; Michael Joyce, Headford; James Craddock, Headford; *Martin Moylan, Farmerstown, Annaghdown; Patrick Jennings, Milltown; Thomas Madden, Caherlistrane; Edward Dooley, Headford; Michael Sweeney, Seefin, Claremorris; Batty Canavan, Mossfort; John Hession, Turlane, Caherlistrane; Michael Connolly, Hollymount, Co. Mayo; *Michael Monaghan, Headford; *Francis Cunnane, Headford; *John Maguire, Cross, Cong; Joseph Collins, Kilkeel, Headford; Peter Brennan, Milltown, and *Seamus O'Malley, Oughterard.

The following report was issued from Army Headquarters, Portobello Barracks, the day after the engagement — Troops operating in North Galway captured a column of Republicans, 18-strong, all of whom were fully armed. A short engagement preceded the capture, in the course of which one Republican was mortally wounded.

The month of March 1923 got off to a very bad start with the events in Ballyseedy and

other places of slaughter in Co. Kerry, that saw a total of 22 people blown into eternity within a few short days. But the executions also resumed with the shooting on March 13th of three in Wexford — James Pearle, Patrick Hogan and John Creane — as well as James O'Rourke in Dublin, and William Healy in Cork.

Then, on the following day, the Free State policy of executing their prisoners extended beyond Leinster and Munster into Ulster when Charlie Daly, Tim O'Sullivan, Dan Enright and Dean Larkin were executed at Drumboe Castle, Co. Donegal. The shootings in the Northwest were a cause of particular outrage, because three of these I.R.A. men, Daly, O'Sullivan and Enright, had been sent northwards from their native Kerry to boost resistance at a time when even some of the pro-Treaty cabinet agreed that Collins' policy of assisting the I.R.A. in the North was the right one, and in particular, that Republicans should be allowed to remain active in the as yet undefined "border areas" — in order to maximise the Republican/Nationalist claims when the Boundary Commission would consider the matter.

Now, within a week of Ballyseedy, where eight of the nine men selected for death had been blown to bits, as well as Countess Bridge near Killarney, where four I.R.A. prisoners died on the same day, and Bahaghs, Cahirciveen, where five more men were first shot and then put on a mine and blown to pieces on March 12th, the Free State Army was executing three more Kerry men who had been sent North to the Donegal/Derry/Tyrone "border" area to assist in the resistance which Collins had seen as being vitally necessary if the Boundary Commission provisions were to provide the sort of results that lay at the base of his "Stepping Stone" theory. By the way, the fourth I.R.A. man shot in Drumboe, Sean Larkin, was from mid-Co. Derry — a close relative of the SDLP politician Aidan Larkin, who has had to wrestle with the failure of the "Stepping Stone" strategy in our own times!

With the symbolic spilling of Kerry and Derry blood right on what was later to become the border between Donegal and Tyrone, the Free State Army toll of "official executions" had come to 65, just before St. Patrick's Day, 1923. The next horrific increase to 71 would see the extension of the shooting of prisoners, effectively being held as hostages, into Connacht, in Tuam Workhouse, on April 11th, 1923.

The only other entry in the Waldron notes for the month of March from the Tuam area, concerns a round-up on March 3rd, 1923 which states that in the round up from Tuam Barracks, the following were arrested: Joe Donnellan, Rychill; Thomas Concannon, Lavally; John Newell, Belclare; Wm. Fahy, Feigh, Ballyglunin; Mal. Higgins, Ballyglunin; M. McDonagh, Barna; Michael Leonard, Belclare; Matt and Michael Garvey, Sylane, Tuam; Peter Canney, Belclare; Thomas Connolly, Russeltown, Milltown; James Hynes, Barnaderg and James Burke, Rychill.

In all about 200 prisoners, detained in Tuam Barracks were removed last week (probably to Athlone).

*These six men were the people executed in Tuam almost two months later on April 11th, 1923.

†Younger brother of Commdt. Tom Maguire, T.D., 2nd Western Division, I.R.A., who evaded execution in Athlone on January 20th, 1923, presumably because of his status as an elected Republican Sinn Féin representative.

(To be continued)