40 years on, men of the Emergency

By SEAMUS
O CINNEIDE

DURING World War II, the Irish Army's 12th Battalion, then stationed at scenic Castleconnell, was alerted that a big German Air Force bomber had landed in the mountains near Nenagh, 20 miles away in County Tipperary.

In response to the alert, a convoy of soldiers drove to the crash area. One of the truck drivers was Private Clem Kirby, a Limerickman, who now resides at St. Joseph's Street.

This week, on the 40th anniversary of the end of the European phase of the war, Clem and two fellow-Limerickmen, Mick Bowman and Andy Murphy, as typical soldiers of the 56,000 strong Irish Army — which successfully defended Eire's neutrality in those war years — reminisced about their years in the green uniform.

Mine-laying

Clem added that after a tough climb up the trackless mountain near Nenagh, the 12th Battalion soldiers located the German bomber. "It was a Fokker-Wolf — it had been on a mine-laying mission over the Atlantic, out from the Irish west coast".

While Clem and his comrades were guarding the force-landed bomber, the following day, another German Air Force plane flew low over the scene and took photographs. The pilot waved to the 12th Battalion guards.

The grim horror of World War II graphically impinged on Clem's soldiering for neutral Eire, another time in County Kerry.

This week he recalled that the 12th Battalion (as part of the 7th Brigade) was on summer manoeuvres at Glenbeigh, a Kerry seaside resort, when a British Air Force flying boat crashed in the local mountain hinterland.

All the British crew were dead when the 12th Battalion reached the scene.

The 12th Battalion — an infantry unit — under the inspiring command of then Major Sean McEoin (later Irish Army Chief-of-Staff and U.N.O. Supreme Commander in the Congo) was rated the Irish Army's elite battalion.

Life at Castleconnell, Clem recalled, was very happy for the battalion. "The local people treated us as friends and we had many nice cups of tea at Mrs. Mackey's house — the mother of Mick, the legendary Limerick hurler", he added.

Pay was 13s 2d a week — 67 new pence today. "It got you a few pints on Wednesday nights (pay day) and shortage of funds kept you confined to barracks for the rest of the week", Clem recalled.

Bailey bridge

Clem drove a truck across the Cork Blackwater River via the first Bailey bridge erected in Eire, during the biggest military manoeuvres ever held by the Irish army in the 1942 "battles" between General Costello's Southern (Thunderbolt) Division and General McWeill's Eastern (Spearhead) Division.

Lieutenant Ryan (of Cashel) and Sergeant McElligott (of Castleisland) were fatally drowned during that tough Blackwater River crossing. "I had the sad duty of driving their remains in a

The local trio today: Mr. Clem Kirby (centre), pres., Patrick Sarsfield Branch O.N.E., Mr. Andy Murphy (left), and Mr. Mick Bowman (right), secretary and chairman respectively of the branch.

Vickers machine-gunner, Mick Bowman (arrowed), with some of his 23rd Battalion comrades at Dromoland Castle during World War II.

military ambulance", Clem added.

He was a crack marksman with the invincible 12th Battalion team that won the Southern Command and All-Army Shooting Championship successively for six years — from 1940 to 1945.

Clem joined the 12th Desmond Battalion (Volunteers) and was on active service from June 1939. He was thrilled at the end of World War Two in May 1945.

"Things had got monotonous in the Irish Army — there were growing numbers deserting to join the British forces", he concluded.

After being demobbed, he spent some years working in the coalmines in England and returned to Limerick in 1949 when he got a driver's job with C.I.E. He retired from it recently with a 27-years safe driving record.

MICK BOWMAN, who resides at Janesboro, served all during World War II with the 23rd Battalion. "We were known as The Fighting 23rd — but 'twas mostly between ourselves we fought", Mick joked.

He joined up at Sarsfield Barracks and his first real taste of the roughness of army life came on Christmas Eve 1940. "We were all getting ready to get out of barracks to see our girl friends that Christmas Eve, when we were convoyed out to Rineanna air base (now Shannon Airport) where we spent all that festive night digging emplacements for anti-aircraft guns", Mick recalled.

Machine gun

Mick was a Vickers machine-gunner in the 23rd Infantry Battalion, which after stints at Cork's Collins Barracks and Ballincollig Barracks, was based at Dromoland Castle — as part of the defence of strategically vital Rineanna Airport.

He took part in the 23rd in the gruelling 1942 manoeuvres. "We had to swim across in full kit clutching a rope", he explained. "Horrifying", is how he described the sight of the remains of a German Air Force pilot and aircraftman, whose plane crashlanded near Fermoy, around that time.

"The German pilot and the airman were only cinders", he added.

Generally, however, he enjoyed his wartime Irish Army service. In fact, so much so, he regrets that he didn't stay on in the army.

Mick went back to work at Ranks in 1945. A native of Limerick's famous seamens enclave, The Windmill, he always wanted to be a sailor.

Before joining the Irish Army, himself and a few pals stowed away on a ship out of Limerick Docks, with the aim of getting to England to join the British Navy. "We were discovered at Fenit (Kerry) and sent home", Mick recalled.

But he happily found a fulfilling way of achieving his military and naval ambitions by joining Limerick No. 5 Company Slua Muiri — the Irish Naval Service Reserve. He served 33 years, during which he reached the rank of Chief Petty Officer and Senior Chief Petty Officer, before his recent retirement.

ANDY MURPHY, joined up at Sarsfield Barracks in 1940. A native of Francis Street (near Arthurs Quay) he was posted to the Coastal Defence Artillery at Spike Island, Cork Harbour.

Spike Island

Spike Island was one of the bases retained by the British after the 1922 Anglo-Irish Treaty. Spike Island (and other Cork Harbour bases) were handed over to Eire in 1938, following negotiations between the then Taoiseach, Mr. de Valera, and British premier, Mr. Neville Chamberlain.

"At Spike Island, in the military cemetery, we tend to the graves of British soldiers who died on service there", Andy recalled.

Military life was happy for Andy at Spike and Crosshaven, Fort Camden and Whitegate and other Cork Harbour stations from 1940 to 1945. The only complaint he remembered was that by a gunner who complained at a Saturday morning commanding officer's parade that he wasn't getting enough to eat.

Andy recalled that the huge shells for the coastal defence artillery measured 9 feet 2 inches in circumference. They had to be loaded mechanically.

A strong pro-British feeling continued among the civilian population at Cobh and other Cork Harbour centres where the British Army and navy formerly had bases, Andy recalled.

"Many of the locals didn't accept us — I have a feeling that some of them still wouldn't accept Irish soldiers and sailors even today", he declared.

Garage

On return to civvie street in 1945, Andy started his own garage business.

Summing up his Irish Army wartime service, he said: "I am glad and proud to have done it and would just as gladly serve again if there should be a need to protect our freedom and shores".

Mick Bowman as a Chief Petty Officer in Limerick's No. 5 Coy. Slua Muiri.

Magnificent Marinella

Seventeen-year-old Laurel Hill "A" School student Marinella Raftery, who recently won the Republic of Ireland final of the Soroptimists International Public Speaking competition, photographed with (left to right): Mrs. Sylvia Morrow, president of the Limerick club; Mrs. Ann Kavanagh, national president, and Sr. M. Catherine, F.C.J.

Area award winners for County Limerick in the Shannon Development Schools Business Ideas competition were Scoil Bhanrion na hEagna, Rathkeale, for their project on frozen foods. The students with their teacher, Mrs. McCarthy are pictured with Dr. Edward Walsh, president of NIHE, Limerick, who presented the prizes, and Shannon Developments schools liaison officer, Mr. Kevin O'Loughlin (right).

Second overall prize in the Shannon Development Schools Business Ideas competition went to the Salesian College, Pallaskenry, County Clare, for their project Home-Made Cheese. The boys with their teacher, Mr. P. J. O'Connor, are pictured with Mr. Jim Beary, Shannon Development senior field officer for County Limerick (2nd from left), the presenter of the prizes Dr. Edward Walsh, president of NIHE, Limerick, and Mr. Kevin O'Loughlin, schools liaison officer, Shannon Development (right).