The Murder of the O'Donovan Brothers

by Tom Toomey

Black and Tans was under Sergeants James Horan and Lawrence Flynn. Fourteen year old Aiden O'Donovan was immediately hit in the chest and he fell mortally wounded. His older brother Cecil was hit between the eyes by a bullet and was killed instantly. Their cousin Brendan managed to escape through the grounds of the mill. A badly shocked and frightened Thomas O'Donovan, put up his hands and surrendered to Captain Sturrock. A ceasefire was called immediately and details of the tragedy soon unfolded.

A Military Inquiry into the shooting of the O'Donovan brothers was held at the New Barracks on Tuesday 22 February. The Inquiry was under the Presidency of Colonel R J P Anderson assisted by Major Kemble of the Royal Garrison Artillery and Lieutenant H J Byrne of the Royal Inniskilling Fusiliers. It was very clear that no order to open fire was given by either Captain Sturrock or Inspector Greally and in Sturrock's own evidence he stated that...

O'Donovan brothers pictured shortly before the tragedy at Blackwater, L-R: Cecil, Aiden, Clement and John
when he took the surrender of Thomas O'Donovan he was actually putting himself in the line of fire. In his evidence Thomas O'Donovan said that he whilst he saw the lorries arriving he did not hear any order to halt, but when he saw the police he decided that the safest thing to do was to put up his hands and not to run. His two brothers were very close to him when they were hit but his cousin had escaped at the start of the firing.

Major Skarte of the Warwickshire Regiment who had planned the operation, stated in his evidence that he had not actually arrived with his men when the police had opened fire. To further reinforce the point on the unauthorized firing Skarte stated that he had given clear orders that fire was only to be opened if the raiding party was under attack or in the event of the IRA attempting to break out. In the event Sturrock and Greally were only moving up to investigate when the RIC demolished and the O'Donovans were shot. At the Court of Inquiry there was no question raised as to who gave the order to open fire while the officers in charge were still investigating. Neither was a question raised about the supposed '9 or 9' men that Sergeant Horan and Captain Sturrock claimed to have seen. This was especially important in light of the fact that the Court accepted that the incident was a 'tragic misadventure'. If the court believed that there were other persons other than Ben O'Donovan present, it is doubtful that they would have classified the incident as a 'tragic misadventure', they were much more likely to deem it justifiable homicide.

Even today, over ninety one years after the tragedy there are many unanswered questions over what happened on that fateful Sunday. In view of the timescale involved and the fact that the information was sent to the Military Intelligence Officer at the New Barracks, rather than to the RIC at William Street, the person who alerted the military almost certainly had to have access to a telephone. If an informant were travelling by motorcar or by horse and trap, he or she would most likely have gone to the nearest post which at the time would have been William Street. The most likely informant was a person who had military connections and access to a telephone and who was living in the Blackwater area. The fact that the O'Donovans were apolitical and from Limerick city rather than local to the Blackwater area probably accounts for the fact that the IRA do not seem to have carried out any follow up investigation.

Another interesting detail to emerge at the Military Inquiry was the role of Captain David Sturrock. Ostensibly Sturrock was listed as the O/C of the Royal Army Service Corp detachment in the New Barr-

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**Mortuary card for the O'Donovan brothers**

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[Map image: British Military Intelligence map, of the scene of the shooting, drawn by Captain Sturrock]
Brendan John, (known as John) who was born in November 1911, married Julia Murphy from Tralee and they lived in O’Connell Street. They had two children Michael and Mary. Julia O’Donovan died in 1971 and her husband John died in 1982. Michael attended the CBS in Sexton Street and was a very useful hurler and soccer player until he emigrated to England. Mary, his younger sister, married Pat Beegan and settled in Limerick. Surprisingly, Mary who was the youngest child of the youngest child is the only one still living in Limerick.

Sadly the fate of the two young O’Donovans has long been forgotten and their memory has slipped inexorably from the pages of history. However, the ‘Meelick and Cratloe War of Independence Commemoration Committee’ plan to rectify this matter by raising a plaque to the memory of the young men in 2013.

The author would like to thank Mrs Mary Beegan (nee O’Donovan) and Mrs Deirdre O’Donovan (nee Lloyd) for their assistance in compiling this article.

REFERENCES
1 The O’Donovan family was closely connected to Lloyds, a noted family of Limerick wine merchants. Cecil O’Donovan was employed as a clerk at White’s Wine Store in O’Connell Street while Thomas O’Donovan was employed in a similar capacity at O’Brien’s Wine Store in Thomas Street. Ref: Limerick Leader 21 February 1921.
3 Sergeant James Horan, a native of County Mayo, was the most notorious ‘RIC man or Black and Tan in Limerick during the period. Length the outbreak of hostilities he was regarded as a town bully. After the War of Independence he emigrated to London where he worked under an assumed name. He was seen working in Gamulodes Department Store by a Limerick family in the 1930s.
5 The Royal Garrison Artillery was based at King John’s Castle.
6 Corbally and Ardnacrusha RIC Barracks had both been closed since 1920.