The Day General Michael Collins came to Limerick

by Des Ryan

Dublin stopping on his way at Limerick. It is not known when he left Tralee or what route he took, but a young boy, Michael Dore, recalled that he saw him in Newcastle West on 14 August, reviewing some soldiers marching in the town square.

I ambled up to the square to find a section of troops in uniform being drilled. They were surrounded by a ring of spectators. The man putting them through their paces was wearing civilian clothing with a Sam Brown belt, rifle and velour hat. Observing the routine close by was a tall erect broad-shouldered man in officer's uniform and great coat, to which was attached distinctive red epaulettes. Two other officers stood close behind him. The tall man had a scowl on his face as he watched the drill and I got the impression he did not like what he saw. Soon the man in the 'civies' brought the drill to an end and, marching across, rifle on shoulder, stood to attention before the tall man. The latter, still scowling, uttered a few words and 'civies' marched back again to his troops and got them to repeat the exercise. This time he apparently made the grade as, on an approving nod from the tall man, the troops were dismissed. An adult behind me enquired, "Do you know who that man is, sonny?" No I replied. "That's Michael Collins," said he. "And who is Michael Collins? I asked. "He is a great general."

On Tuesday morning, 15 August, Collins attended a Requiem High Mass for the late President Griffith in St John's Cathedral, Limerick. The church was filled to capacity with some of those attending kneeling on the street outside. The Bishop, Most Reverend Dr Hallinan, presided at the ceremonies, those present besides Collins included General Eoin O'Duffy and other officers of the Command Staff. Accompanied by a guard of honour, General Collins and his staff were recognized on the way to the church and were given a cordial ovation by the people. At the conclusion of the Mass they remained a while chatting with Dr Hallinan. When they emerged from the church they were warmly greeted by the people.

Later on, General Collins gave an interview on the military situation to members of the press. The main resistance of the Irregulars [anti-treaty forces] he said "was practically at an end." He did not think, "their tactics in ambushing the National troops could last very long or meet with any degree of success. The military operations in the south will be completed within the next fortnight." The "other people appear to be unable to make a strong stand in any place, and their resistance will rapidly vanish." When asked how soon the new parliament could be expected to meet, he said: "I can advise the government that as far as the military situation is concerned the new parliament can meet at any time. Whether it will be further postponed out of respect to the late President Griffith I do not know."

To questions concerning the possibility of the Irregulars interfering with the meeting of the new Parliament in Dublin, the General smilingly replied, "they have been unable to do practically any damage so far." Their greatest efforts, he pointed out, "resulted principally in causing casualties among the civilian population, but as far as
interfering with the new Parliament is concerned, the government will be able to deal with them fully. 4

One of the people who saw Collins that day was Charlie St George, a young man whose family owned a public house, on Parnell Street, in 1922. Charlie related many years later how he got to see Collins. Apparently a local National Army officer, Timmy Murphy, from Carey’s Road, was a customer in the pub.

On Monday morning I arrived as usual [at the pub] and I served him his pint. We got chatting, and I mentioned that ‘The Chief’, as they used to call Collins, would be in town the following morning, Tuesday, and that he was on a tour of inspection. As I had never seen Collins in person, I asked Timmy if it was possible to see him, not necessarily meet him, just get a look at him. Timmy replied that if I were in front of the National Army headquarters (formerly the offices of Bord na gCon near the Garda Station) in Henry Street, between 11 and 11.30 am Collins would be leaving to continue his journey.

So the following morning, I was standing on the road in front of the headquarters, close to a small armoured car in front of which were two motorcycles, standing on their props and facing up the road. Behind them were three big touring cars standing around, which were six drivers in all. There were no visible signs of arms of any description, with the exception of the muzzle of a machine-gun, pointing out from the slot at the front of the turret of the Whippet.

Occasionally, the muzzle moved, indicating there was another soldier in there, like as if he was settling the inside or that he was uncomfortable inside. There were no pressmen or photographers to be seen.

After about twenty minutes, Collins appeared at the door of the headquarters. He moved forward slowly, followed by six or seven officers, including Timmy Murphy. Collins wore a very long green overcoat, buttoned up to the neck, and he wore a peaked round military-style cap. He had his two arms across his chest, as he stood at the top of the steps at the entrance. He looked straight ahead. There were groups of people standing around in curiosity, and Collins looked at them and then looked left and right. Collins group moved to the cars with the drivers now in position. Suddenly Collins turned round to his right, stretched out his arm and shook hands with Murphy. Then the group broke up. Collins taking his seat alongside the driver of the first car, the other officers divided up between the other two cars. As I stood looking the convoy moved off, in the general direction of the Redemptorist church.

After Griffith’s funeral Collins resumed his inspection tour of the South. Limerick man, Willie W Gleeson, then a young man in National Army, stationed outside Limerick at Bruree, relates how Collins passed through the area on his way to Cork.

On his way to his native Cork, he had a meal at the Big Tree restaurant in Cabercolish. Resuming his journey, he made a brief stop at Bruree, where a Unit of ‘D’ Company, 39th Infantry Battalion, Limerick, was based at Cleaves Factory. As one of the unit, my guard duty was from 2 pm to 4 pm, that day was for me, something to remember.

My post was inside the entrance door, the main gate adjoining. Suddenly on the stroke of 3 o’clock, a fierce kick sent the double gate wide open. I shouted to the two relief sentries, Vols. Paddy Morrissey and Mickey Bowman, "Guard turn out."

Almost immediately, an officer whom I recognised as Comdt. General Donal O’Hainnain, since he never wore a cap in the army, at the same time, carried a 45 Smith and Wesson automatic pistol, held tightly in his hand, came into the yard. He was followed by a high-ranking officer, whom I did not recognise, with gold braid on peak of cap and shoulders notwithstanding. Immediately he approached me and asked: "Who’s in charge here?"

Captain Costello, sir, but he’s not here today, he being on official army business in Dublin. "Who then, is acting during his absence?" he quipped. Lieutenant Carmody, sir, I replied. Scarcely had I finished, when the Lieutenant, who was in the office nearby, met his superior officer. They both moved towards a fence overlooking the Maigue River, and after a brief conversation, the matter ended.

Next, Lt. Carmody, who appeared to be smiling as he approached me, said:

"Did you know who the high ranking officer was?" "No" I said, "I never saw him before." Well, he said, he was General Michael Collins.

On the evening of 22 August, Collins and his convoy were driving through Béal na Bláth, in County Cork, when rifle shots rang out from the hills above them. As the ambush party retreated, Collins was shot dead. The motor cyclist, or outrider, Scout officer, Lt. John Joe Smith, who had been sent to Limerick to meet the convoy was hit by a bullet in the neck as he helped to retrieve the General’s body.

After the Civil War Lt. John Joe Smith, originally from Enniscreigh, County Wexford, settled in Limerick, where he worked for the ESB for many years. Apart from a short period spent in Bengal Terrace, he lived at Charlotte Quay, Limerick from 1927, until his death, from a heart attack at the age of 67, in 1963.

In Limerick the news of Collins’ death was received with shock and horror. The first intimation of the General’s death was when he was prayed for at midday and evening Masses in the city. As the day progressed the news became common knowledge and the feelings that it created was visible on the faces of the people. In Limerick, as elsewhere throughout the country, the people revered the dead soldier patriot, and this was only too evident during his recent visit to the city, when he received a hearty ovation every time he appeared on the streets.

On learning of the tragic news, the Deputy Mayor of Limerick, Paul O’Brien sent the following message to Mr. Liam T. Cosgrave, Acting Chairman of the Irish Government: - The bravest and best is gone for ever. The word 'sorrow' fails to describe my feelings.

Limerick County Council also sent messages of sympathy to the Provisional Government and relatives of the dead General: - Profoundly shocked at calamitous disaster to Ireland in the death of General Michael Collins, and we offer to the government and relatives, on behalf of Limerick County Council, our sincere sympathy. 5

The Civil War ended in May 1922 when the Anti-Treaty leadership ordered their forces to dump their arms. I would like to thank Sean Gannon, Mike Maguire and the staff of Limerick City Library for all their help and allowing me access to their very valuable archives.

REFERENCES
2 T Ryle Dwyer, Michael Collins and the Civil War (Corr 2012).
4 Neagh Guardian 19 August 1922.
5 Limerick Leader 8 April 1989.
8 Cork Examiner 24 August 1922.
10 Cork Examiner, 24 August 1922.