The General Lucas Abduction

by Chris Ryan

In the months of June and July 1920 Pallasgreen and in particular New Pallas RIC Barracks were both involved in events which attracted national and international interest. The Times of London and the New York Times reported the story, and questions were asked in the House of Commons. The events involved the capture, holding and escape of a British Brigadier-General.

On Saturday 26 June 1920, three British Officers were captured by the IRA while they were fishing for salmon on the River Blackwater, at Kilbarry three miles east of Fermoy, County Cork. The IRA party included Liam Lynch, Sean Moylan, George Power, Patrick Clancy and a small party of Volunteers. The British Officers were Brigadier-General Cuthbert Henry Tindall Lucas, Officer Commanding 16th Infantry Brigade at Fermoy, Colonel B W Y Danford, Royal Artillery and Colonel Tyrell, Royal Engineers.

The abductors were working on good information on the movements of General Lucas and his comrades. As Intelligence Officer, George Power had a contact in the British Military Barracks, Fermoy and he received information about Lucas and his fishing expedition. Power later outlined how he came upon and captured General Lucas.

There was still no trace of General Lucas, and, as it was getting late in the afternoon, it was decided that Paddy Clancy and I would proceed, one up and the other down, the river in search of the missing officer. Coming through a small wood I ran unexpectedly into General Lucas as he was making his way back to the lodge. After a moment’s mutual scrutiny, I gave the order “hands up”. The British General hesitated for a moment, but, dropping his fishing rod, he complied. He allowed himself to be disarmed and marched back to the lodge.

Lucas was the highest ranking British Officer kidnapped by the IRA during the War of Independence. He was held as hostage for the safety of certain prisoners including Michael Fitzgerald of Fermoy. Later Michael Collins sought to arrange an exchange, with the British, of General Lucas for Robert Barton.
through Laurence O’Neill, Lord Mayor of Dublin. Following the abduction, Lynch introduced himself and his officers by name and rank, General Lucas did likewise and then the IRA party and prisoners sat off in two cars. Seán Moylan, George Power and Colonel Tyrell travelled in a Model T Ford, borrowed from local man John B Curran and Liam Lynch, Paddy Clancy. General Lucas and Colonel Danford used the British Officer’s large touring car. When the touring car had travelled a short distance, Lucas and Danford held a brief conversation in a strange language, subsequently discovered to be Arabic and then jumped on Lynch and Clancy. In the struggle, Colonel Danford received bullet wounds to the face and shoulder. It was decided to release Colonel Tyrell to attend to Danford and proceed with General Lucas as the sole prisoner.  

It was evening when his colleagues in British Army headquarters in Fermoy were alerted. The *New York Times* dated 28 June, 1920 gave the following account:

Barracks and camp were immediately alarmed and all soldiers turned out of bed. Soldiers of an artillery battery mounted their horses and numerous parties of fully equipped troops in motor lorries and motor cars, accompanied by police, scooted the country for miles around all night and all day today but the search proved unavailing. The general had vanished completely. The affair has created a sensation in military circles and the greatest reticence is being displayed.

Two nights later, troops from the East Kent Regiment (the Buffs) went on the rampage in Fermoy carrying our widespread looting and damage to business properties. Both the *New York Times* and the *Irish Times* reported that over 35 shops were damaged in one street alone, with major damage done to the premises of J Lombard and J J Barber both on Artillery Quay with thousands of pounds of jewellery looted and some of the looted material thrown into the nearby River Blackwater. Florence O’Donoghue recorded that the smashing and splintering of windows was accompanied by chants of “We want our fucking General back”.

Their Brigade Commander later referred to these outrages as ‘an over-zealous display of loyalty’. General Macready, General Officer Commanding-in-Chief British Forces in Ireland, had to defend Lucas against the wrath of Winston Churchill, Secretary of State for War, while pointing out that “it was certainly thoughtless on the part of the officer to while away the monotony of existence by indulging in sport.”

In England no public hall show was complete without a joke at the expense of the unfortunate Lucas and in Ireland the following ballad was written to the air of ‘The Blarney Roses’.

**General Lucas**

’Twas over in Rathcormack near the town of sweet Fermoy
They captured General Lucas and away with him did fly;
They said ‘You are our prisoner and this you’ve got to know,
You can’t do Greenwood’s dirty work where the Blarney roses grow’.

**Chorus**

Can anybody tell me where did General Lucas go?
He may be down in Mallowtown or over in Mallow,
He’s somewhere in the County Cork, but this I want to know,
Can anybody tell me where did General Lucas go?

’Twas on a Sunday morning out a-fishing he did go,
And when he had his fishing done he was caught by ‘who you know’!
They said ‘You’ll have to come with us, or else down you will go, For that’s the way we’ll treat you where the Blarney roses grow. There’s good men down in Galway and the same in County Clare, But the likes of those young Cork men you won’t find anywhere; They treated me so kindly, and if they’d only let me go I promise I’ll stop reprisals where the Blarney roses grow.

Now to conclude and finish, I hope it won’t be long Till I see old Ireland free again and the R.I.C. men gone And when they free our prisoners and tell them they may go We’ll do the same for Lucas where the Blarney roses grow.

On 28 June 1920 the following exchange occurred in the House of Commons:

Sir H. Craik (by Private Notice) asked the Under-Secretary for War whether he has any information to give the House in regard to the kidnapping by Sinn Feiners in Ireland of Brigadier-General Lucas?

Sir A. Williamson (Parliamentary Secretary, War Office) Brigadier-General Lucas and Colonels Danford and Tyrell were arrested at Kilbarry, five miles from Fermoy, where they had been fishing, at 11 p.m. on the 26th instant by twelve armed and masked men, who had a motor car bearing no number. At a place called Rathcormack, Colonel Danford tried to escape. A man in one of the cars fired two revolver shots, wounding him in the head and arm. He was left there with Colonel Tyrell, and the General taken away in the motor car towards Cork. He has not since been found. The two Colonels have returned to Fermoy. The officers were unarmured. A telegram received today at one o’clock says, ‘No news of General Lucas."

Lord R. Cecil Is there any news as to the condition of the wounded Colonel?

Sir A. Williamson I am not able to answer that question.

Mr. C. Palmer May I ask why the right hon. Gentleman used the words General arrested instead of General kidnapped? Do you ‘arrest’ a man without authority?

Sir A. Williamson That is the word used in the press and elsewhere. I suppose the telegraphist thought it was most convenient. (Hon. Members: ‘The wrong word!’)

Mr. Palmer Can Sinn Feiners ‘arrest’ British officers?

Sir A. Williamson It is the wrong word to me –

Mr. Palmer Thank you!

Sir A. Williamson ‘Kidnapped’ is the proper word.

General Lucas was held initially at O’Connell’s farm at Glentane near
Mallow, where he arrived about 3 a.m. on Sunday morning 27 June. He was then transported to Dan McCarthy’s house at Creggan, Lismillstown, near Mallow on Monday night and was then handed over to the West Limerick Brigade of the IRA and moved to the farmhouse of John and Johanna Sheehan, Barna, Templeglantine, County Limerick. In the middle of the night on 1 July he was taken to an unoccupied house, owned by Fr McCarthy in Ballyhahill and after a few hours there he was moved to Doran’s house in Ballistone, near Shanagolden.

He was then taken across the Shannon Estuary from Maidens Rock, at the mouth of the River Maigue to County Clare. He was initially kept at Hogan’s of Moyhuil near Bunratty and on 4 July he was moved by boat to Ernest Corbett’s at Bunratty House. His next abode was Brennan’s at Clonmore and Bunratty where his hosts were a 72 year old Mr Brennan, his wife and twelve children. On 8 July Lucas was moved down river to Hastings’ house at Tullyvarriga and two days later he moved back to Brennan’s. On 14 July Lucas was moved by trap and motor car to Waterpark House, Castleconnell, which was owned by the Hartigan family. A week later on 21 July he was moved to the dispensary residence of Dr John Corboy in Cahirconlish as Dr Corboy was on holidays in Kilkee. After some days, he was transferred by pony and trap to McCarthy’s house in Cahirconlish, about five miles from Cahirconlish on the Limerick to Herbertstown road and two miles west of Herbertstown. He remained there for about three nights before he escaped at 2 a.m. on 30 July 1920. The East Clare Brigade of the IRA, which included brothers Michael Brennan, OC and Paddy Brennan, Joe Keane, Michael O’Hehir, Tom Malone and James Brennan, was responsible for his detention. Dick O’Connell and the Lynch brothers joined the party at Cahirconlish.

Michael Brennan recalled:

General Lucas was an expensive luxury as he drank a bottle of whiskey every day which I hated like hell to pay for. I was very sorry for him and more so for his young wife in England, who was very ill partly after a baby, but mostly I imagine from shock. Through Jack Coughlan, who worked in Limerick Post Office, I arranged a system whereby Lucas wrote to his wife and got a letter from her every day. I put him on his honour that he would make no use of this facility to harm us or to escape and I gave him his letters unopened. He could understand being able to send letters, but receiving them impressed him very much with the machine we appeared to control.

General Lucas played cards, went fishing and helped save the hay whilst in captivity.

A letter published in The Times on 30 June 1920, while he was still a prisoner, stated: 'I am well and considerably treated. They are doing all they possibly can to provide me with everything I want. I want some money, about £10.'

After his escape General Lucas took the direct line through the fields until he reached the main Limerick to Tipperary road, a distance of over seven miles. He breakfasted at New Pallas RIC Barracks later that Friday morning 30 July, had a bath and a change of clothing, and expressed his intention to return to his command at Fermoy by the Military mail which travelled daily from Limerick to Cork, via Tipperary and Fermoy. After a four hour wait, General Lucas, wearing civilian clothes and a soft hat, joined the motor mail, a Crossley Tender, which carried the mails and a guard of eight armed soldiers. A motor dispatch rider, Lance-Corporal G B Parker, preceded the lorry by about thirty yards. The soldiers were members of the 1st Battalion, Oxfordshire and Buckinghamshire Light Infantry, stationed at Limerick.

The Connacht Tribune, on 7 August 1920 described the subsequent events:

The mail left New Pallas at a quarter past ten on Friday morning. General Lucas wearing a forage cap and a waterproof cape, taking his seat with the soldiers. Twenty minutes afterwards, it passed through the village of Oola, which is about 6 miles on the main road. A little beyond the village, not far from
Limerick Junction, the road swings slightly to the left and downhill. A barricade comprising two country carts and a long ladder was concealed by the bend. The despatch rider had just swung round the bend and came within sight of the barricade, sixty yards further on when shots rang out from the thick shrubbery on each side of the road.

Lance-Corporal Parker fell from his motor-cycle mortally wounded in the neck. The lorry came on but found the barricade obstructing it. A second volley rang out from the rear, showing that the lorry was surrounded on all sides. Immediately this was followed by a burst of rifle and gun fire from behind the cottage, opposite which the barricade was erected. Almost before the soldiers had time to reply, there were four other casualties: Pte. Bayliss being killed dead (sic), Pte. Snelling wounded seriously and Pte. Steer and Pte. Cornwall wounded slightly. Led by General Lucas, who took command and also received a flesh wound over the eye and nose from a gunshot which grazed him, the men dismounted.

Utilising the lorry for what cover they could gain from it in the middle of the road, they vigorously replied to the concealed assailants. An engineering motor-lorry, in which there were two riflemen was going in the same direction and hearing the shooting it put on speed. It was followed by 6 policemen but by the time they had arrived, the fight, which had not lasted more than 10 minutes altogether, was at an end. The soldiers did not fire more than 60 rounds. After the affray, General Lucas went on with the lorry to Tipperary.

An early report of the Oola ambush was published in the evening edition of the Limerick Leader of Friday 30 July 1920 - ‘Exchange of Shots in East Limerick, Three Soldiers Shot Dead and Others Wounded, Sensational Occurrence Today’ - following a telegraphic message received this afternoon from Pallasgreen.

The Times, on the same day, gave a graphic account, by Mr John Lynch, a pump sinker from Cappamore, who was an eyewitness of the Oola Ambush:

I was coming to Tipperary this morning with a cartload of timber in company with my brother Tom. It was about half past 9, and we were about a quarter of a mile on the Tipperary side of Oola, when we heard shots in front of us. We proceeded on our way, and a short distance further, on the wife of a farmer, named David O’Donnell, ran out in a very excited state on to the road, and putting up her hands, shouted to us not to go any further, for there was a raid on near Hevitt’s Gate.

The Oola ambush had been organised by the Solohead Company of the IRA and involved some fifty participants including Dan Breen and Sean Treacy and with help from Donchall Volunteers. The OBLI Regimental Chronicle subsequently reported that the two men killed in the Oola ambush were Lance-Corporal Parker, aged 20, motor cycle outrider, and Private Daniel Very Bayliss, aged 18, while the injured included Privates Snelling, Cornwall and Steer.

The Connacht Tribune dated 7 August 1920 described the aftermath:

District Inspector Sanson, New Pallas, telegraphed to Cork for a blood hound, which arrived 6 hours later and was put to the task of tracing the attackers. The party of the road where the attack was made has a few cottages on either side within a short distance of each other. These were carefully searched subsequently, as were also the surrounding districts; locals were commanded at the point of a revolver to tell what they knew of the affair but all efforts to trace the attackers proved futile. On Friday night, the soldiers at Tipperary Barracks, whether the dead bodies had been brought, marched through the town declaring that they would avenge their colleagues. Windows were broken and the soldiers were ultimately driven off by unarmed Volunteers.

Subsequently, the only business person to receive an apology and compensation was Ernie Lyons, whose pub was located near the railway station and was frequented by soldiers from the nearby army barracks.

In Nicker, Pallasgreen, James Mulcahy was killed by a Military patrol on the evening of 31 July. A verdict of wilful murder by Crown Forces was delivered at the inquest on 9 August 1920. It was also reported that a house was burned in reprisal in Pallasgreen.
District Inspector Sanson, a Scot, was in command of the Pallasgreen RIC District in 1920 which had barracks at New Pallas, Oola, Cappamore, Doon and Fedamore. The number of constables under his command increased from 17 in 1919 to 29 in 1920 and then to 70 in 1921. The number of constables stationed in New Pallas increased from 4 in 1919 to 6 in 1920 and 18 in 1921, the final increase being mainly due to recruitment of 'Black and Tans'. In 1921 Sanson was particularly lucky to escape with his life at the Dromkeen ambush which occurred on 3 February 1921. Eleven policemen were killed, including three in the car in which Constable Cox was driver and D I Sanson was front seat passenger. Both Cox and Sanson, wearing civilian clothes, managed to escape but eight policemen in the second lorry were not so lucky.

With increasing IRA activity in 1919 and 1920, the number of Irish recruits to the RIC 'had almost vanished'. Some candidates were sent threatening letters, others were intimidated in person so that during the summer of 1920 there were only 92 Irish recruits. In July 1920, Sir John Anderson, Joint Under-secretary of Ireland, reported that the RIC were showing signs of collapse and that its future lay in the balance.

In August 1920, the RIC County Inspector wrote in his monthly report about clearing out the majority of the old useless men who were not pulling their weight against the rebels. Hundreds of old police were pensioned off during the War of Independence; constables who had completed 25 years of service were entitled to retire on half-pay.

The authorities recognized that there was a shortage of policemen in Ireland and the recruitment of 'Black and Tans' was their answer to the manpower shortage. A proposal was made on 27 December 1919 to employ large numbers of unemployed British ex-servicemen and the first recruits joined the RIC six days later. A shortage of RIC uniforms meant the new recruits had to wear khaki trousers with a black RIC jacket, which led to the 'Black and Tan' sobriquet. By the end of 1920, sufficient RIC uniforms were available, but the 'Black and Tan' nickname continued to be used. In the summer of 1920 a substantial pay rise for RIC constables, from 31 shillings to 70 shillings per week, led to significant increase in recruitment, largely from Britain, but also from Ireland. In late 1920 and early 1921 a total of 8,611 new recruits joined the force.

The RIC Barracks at New Pallas was built in 1874, burned down during the Civil War, rebuilt in 1928 and closed down in 1984. The barracks saw an increase in numbers of two in 1919 and a further twelve in 1920. These new recruits qualified for the title of Black and Tans.

A flag, in the sombre colours of black and tan, flying from the highest building in New Pallas, strikingly identified the police barracks throughout the winter of 1920 - 1921. The hoisting of this banner reflected the tension prevailing in the area at that time. For long, the operations, and more especially the methods, of the garrison, made its personnel exceptionally feared by the general public. It was in this environment that Lucas was held captive and he was lucky to escape with his life.

General Lucas finally made his way back to his command in Fermoy and he later complimented the discipline and efficiency of the IRA men who had held him captive. He was well treated and commented that 'people were very kind to him' and that he had been 'treated as a gentleman by gentlemen'. George Power, Adjutant, 2nd Cork Brigade recalled that 'during his captivity, Lucas was accorded the respect and privileges due to an Officer of his rank and standing'. General Lucas wrote a briefing paper advising that the Volunteers were a much more formidable force than had been thought and despite a possible court martial he refused to identify names or locations associated with his kidnapping.

Ruth Wheeler, granddaughter of Lucas, recalled:

My family has certainly been 'tickled' by my grandfather's stories and are grateful for the kindness that men such as George Power and Ernest Corbett showed him. My grandfather was a man of honour who
Barbara Scully, granddaughter of George Power and Brendan O Cathaor, cousin of Ernest Corbett. The Lucas affair was a memorable phase of a deadly war. In the end Colonel Dunford made a full recovery and the Lucas ballad reverberated long after he returned to England.

Endnotes

1. The fishing party was using Careysville Lodge, on the River Blackwater, as their base. Careysville House and Lodge are still popular venues for salmon fishing.

2. Liam Lynch was born at Barnaguraha, Anglesboro in 1893 and served as Commandant of Cork No. 2 Brigade during the War of Independence. He opposed the Treaty and became Chief of Staff of the IRA in 1922. He died on 10 April 1923 at St Joseph’s Hospital, Clonmel after being wounded on the Knockmealdown Mountains.

3. Seán Moylan was born in 1888 in Kilmallock and served as Commander of Cork No. 2 Battalion during the War of Independence. He was elected to the Dáil as a Sinn Féin TD whilst a prisoner and later went on to become a Fianna Fáil TD, Minister for Lands, Education and Agriculture and a Senator. He died on 16 November 1957.

4. Captain George Power joined the Fennor Company of the Irish Volunteers in 1917 and served as Adjutant and Intelligence Officer of the Cork Brigade between 1917 and 1921. He died in 1956.

5. Cutbert Henry Tindall Lucas was born in 1879 and served in the British Army during the Second Boer War, the First World War at Gallipoli and the Somme and the Irish War of Independence. He became Assistant Adjutant...
General at Aldershot Command in 1924 and served with the staff at General Headquarters, British Army of the Rhine from 1927 until he retired in 1932. Major General Irish C.T. O'Shea was died on 13 June 1955.


7. Laurence O'Neill, Lord Mayor of Dublin 1917-1924, was a friend of both Michael Collins and Eamon de Valera.

8. The car was subsequently returned to Mr. Curran.


12. Florence O'Donnoghue was head of Intelligence of the Cork No. 1 Brigade of the IRA during the War of Independence. She served as a Major in the Irish Army (1939-1946) and was editor of An Coinntóir. She convinced Eamon de Valera to establish the Bureau of Military History. She died in 1967.


16. Seán Sheehan, grandson of John and Joanna Sheehan recalled: "When he was leaving the house for Clare, he thanked my grandmother for the way he was treated. He asked her, 'What will you get out of this?' She replied, 'All I want is an Irish republic!'" A fatal motorcycle accident near the Sheehan household drew unwarranted attention to the hideout, so Lucas was moved again unexpectedly.

17. John O'Brien, a cousin of the Hastings, recollected the house which was a typical thatched farmhouse, common in Ireland in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Generally the walls of such houses were built of mud, but in this instance, good quality stone was used in the lower parts and around the door and window. The main room was the large kitchen in the middle. At the end of the kitchen was the enormous open fireplace, with the wheel belles at the side and a soot-black crane over the fire. As was typical, the furniture was sparse. The Hastings' farmhouse was occupied until the early 1970s before vandals set fire to its thatched roof after which it slowly disintegrated and acquired a mantle of vegetation which all but hid it from view. In August 2012, the Hastings' farm house conservation project was unveiled. Ruth Wheeler, granddaughter of General Lucas, and Aideen Carroll, granddaughter of Seán Moylan, who supported the conservation project were present on the day.

18. WS, BMH, Lieut-Gen, Michael Brennan, WS 1068.

19. Michael Brennan, The War in Clare - Personal Memoirs of the Irish War of Independence, 1919 - 1921, (Dublin, 1980). Michael Brennan, a native of Meechill, led the East Clare Flying Squad during the War of Independence. He subsequently had a distinguished Irish Army career, serving as Chief of Staff from 1931 until he retired in 1940. He was then appointed head of the Board of Works. General Michael Brennan (1896-1986) was buried in Deans Grange Cemetery with full military honours.


21. Lynch Wind Drilling Ltd is in business in Cappamore since 1849.


23. Denis G. Mannane, presentation on Recruitment to the British Army, 1920 at Excel Centre Tipperary, July 2015 and private conversation afterwards.


28. Sir Harman Greenwood, Last Chief Secretary for Ireland, 1920-1922.


35. Letter from Ruth Wheeler, in response to an article covering the British back to the GPO, see edition 30 in the Irish Times 3 June, 2014.


I wish to acknowledge the assistance of Ruth Wheeler, who kindly provided her grandfather's copy of a report of his captivity, used in the proceedings of the Court of Enquiry held on 3 August 1920.

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Chris Ryan is a native of Ballyneety, Pallaspaguen where, in 1690, Patrick Sarsfield destroyed the Williamite siege train en-route to Limerick. He has written and spoken on Sarsfield and in 2013 was one of the organisers of the Sarsfield 320 Festival at Ballyneety. He has recently completed a history of St. Bridgid's Church, located beside Sarsfield's Rock at Ballyneety.