

and was later hidden in the vicinity of Caherbearna, between Millstreet and Rathmore.

The ambush at Turengarriffe is an example of the rapid evaluation of military Intelligence by the I.R.A., and of the constant state of preparedness of the fighting columns. Indicative of the quality of leadership was the selection of terrain and the competent planning and direction of the fight. The booty taken by the I.R.A. comprised three service rifles, one Winchester shotgun, and seven revolvers.

## DROMKEEN AMBUSH RESTORED THE MORALE OF THE LOCAL I.R.A. AND PEOPLE

East and Mid-Limerick Brigades, February 3, 1921.

By *LIEUT.-COLONEL J. M. MacCARTHY*

(Formerly Adjutant East Limerick Brigade I.R.A.)

FLAUNTING defiance from the highest point of a large, detached building in the village of Pallas,\* County Limerick, a conspicuous flag in the sombre colours of black and tan strikingly, if unconventionally, identified the local police barrack throughout the winter of 1920-21. Pallas was the headquarters of a police district in charge of an officer ranking as a District Inspector, R.I.C., but whose special category, and that of the greater part of the large garrison, was plainly indicated by the unofficial emblem so prominently displayed. The hoisting of this banner reflected the tension prevailing in the area at that period, and was expressive of the challenging sentiments of the garrison towards the countryside at large, but particularly towards the East and Mid-Limerick Brigades, I.R.A. These two units were equally involved through the fact that, though Pallas itself was in the East Limerick domain, the inter-Brigade boundary ran close by, while the police district—and, needless to say, the police activities—extended into both areas.

For long the operations, and more especially the methods, of this garrison had made its personnel exceptionally feared by the general public, and had proved a very sharp thorn for the two Brigades to which it offered a challenge that had to be met. The police were definitely in the ascendant when, early in 1921, they scored what, in the circumstances of the time, was a big success, and for the local I.R.A. a correspondingly serious reverse, by locating and capturing the arms dump of the Mid-Limerick Brigade. The police raiding party took good care to celebrate their feat by visiting the house of Dick O'Connell of Caherconlish, the "on-the-run" C/O of the Brigade's Active Service Column, and staging a *feu-de-joie* with the captured weapons in the presence of the occupants paraded to witness, so they were assured, this proof of defeat and final end of the Column's activities.

These events brought matters to a head. Consultations, already in

\*Author's Note—This is the form of the name by which the village is normally known except when necessary to distinguish it from Old Pallas, 1½ miles to the south-west. According to local usage, it then becomes New Pallas. The Ordnance Survey map versions are respectively, Pallas Green (New) and Pallas Green, but in some map editions Old Pallas is given as an alternative to the latter name.

## AMBUSH A

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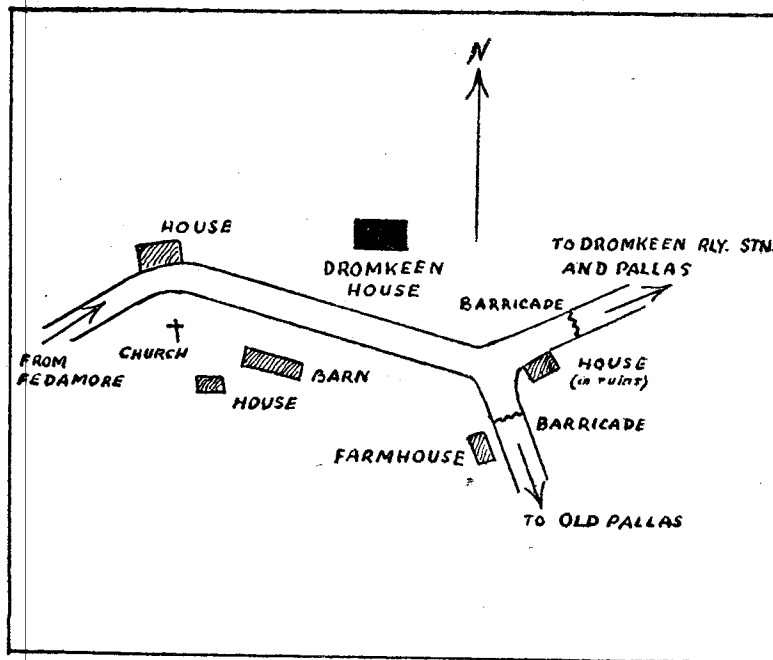
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progress between the two Brigade staffs with a view to common action, were hastened to a conclusion. Plans considered for an attack on the barrack disclosed serious difficulties to be surmounted, in view of the pitifully poor armament of the I.R.A. The nature of the building, its position and defences made for difficulty of approach, and ensured a protracted fight before the defenders could be overcome. Despite the fairly extensive experience of the East Limerick Column in conducting prolonged and successful barrack attacks, such as that at Kilmallock in the previous May, when the attack was sustained for over six hours, the time factor in this case was a definite obstacle to success. The proximity of Pallas to large military and police centres (Limerick City, ten miles; Tipperary, twelve miles) made it probable that the I.R.A. should register a clear-cut success, an awkward building destroyed or captured, notwithstanding all that might be done to impede the arrival of reinforcements. With a mere sniping, or demonstration, attack being of no value since the situation required that the garrison would be relieved long before the barrack could be taken, the problem seemed to defy solution when John Purcell, the I/O of the Mid-Limerick Column, came to the rescue. He was able to report that a considerable portion of the Pallas police garrison regularly travelled with a lorry-convoy to Fedamore, eleven miles distant, making the return journey on the same day. Further, he was able to indicate the route normally followed, and even to fix the usual date of the movement as the first Thursday of each month.

With this information the decision to attack and destroy the convoy was taken, the first Thursday of February being fixed for the effort as a joint operation by East and Mid-Limerick Columns, the C/O of the former, D. O'Hannigan, taking charge of the combined units for the occasion. An examination of the route led to the further conclusion that a carefully laid ambush along a particular stretch of road (see sketch) at Dromkeen, some three miles from Pallas, offered the best method of attack. There a straight section of the route extended for 300 yards, slightly downhill, from a bend at its western (Fedamore) end to a road junction at its eastern (Pallas) limit. A house at the bend afforded observation both over the whole ambush position, and westward for a considerable distance towards Fedamore. The road junction presented almost full right-angled turns to vehicles travelling in any direction, and was an obvious site for barricades which would be out of sight until the turn was about to be taken. From this point, too, observation over the entire position, and extending as far as the western bend and Dromkeen House, was feasible from a ruined house at the road fork.

These facilities, and the lay-out of the road section, were definite advantages in the light of a number of factors. As the intention was to destroy the convoy completely, a fairly lengthy stretch of the route had to be held to ensure that all the vehicles were within the position before the action opened. The position had also to be capable of being sealed-off at both ends when the convoy had entered it. The length, at first sight over-long, was therefore not excessively so in the circumstances, especially when there was no certainty as to the number of lorries likely to be encountered, nor as to the distance between the lorries.

To reduce this uncertain element to the minimum, and for other reasons, it was decided to intercept the convoy on its return, rather than on its outward journey. In this way its strength would be known on its departure from Pallas and might be counted on to be approximately the same when it set out on its return trip from Fedamore, though it had varied somewhat on occasions. With this knowledge any necessary last-minute adjustment in dispositions could be made.



Also, there was the point that some local residents had seen I.R.A. officers in the vicinity a few weeks previously. Although not connected with the planned attack, this circumstance had given rise to not a little gossip locally that the area was being marked out as the scene of an action. There was always the possibility that this gossip had reached further afield and enabled the hostile garrisons in the neighbourhood to have planned a counter-move to any I.R.A. attack. Allowing the convoy to pass unmolested on its outward trip would permit observation of hostile movements in the area during that period and reveal any preparations for such a counter-move. Further, the later in the day the action opened the better from the standpoint of the Column's withdrawal, which it was desired to effect under cover of darkness as far as possible because of the elaborate military and police reactions anticipated. The other grounds for interception on the return journey were that it made actual occupation of the position unnecessary until confirmation of the movement of the convoy was received, and, by that very fact, lessened the possibility of a long and perhaps fruitless wait in the position itself. Also, by ensuring that occupation would not be effected at all if the convoy did not move out, possible disclosure of intentions was avoided, and the same site could be used another day. This consideration was important in view of the suitability of the location, and the distinct chance that the Intelligence Officer's estimate as to the date of the movement might not be borne out by events.

Keeping this valuable consideration in mind, as well as the special caution needed in this particular area, the arrival of the two Columns, and their junction with one another, was so timed that neither would be in the immediate vicinity of Pallas longer than was absolutely necessary. The more distant of the two, the East Limerick Unit was mainly concerned in this "approach march." By the day preceding

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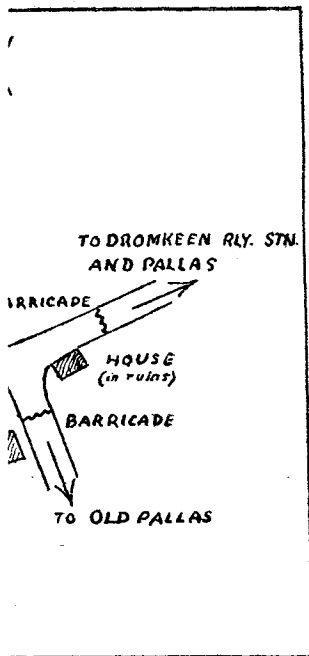
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that fixed for the attack, it had reached a billeting area, nine miles away, near Emly on the Limerick-Tipperary border. At nightfall it moved forward some four miles to the neighbourhood of Killeely, where it remained for a few hours before continuing, while darkness still prevailed, to a previously agreed-on "assembly area," and rendezvous with the Mid-Limerick Column. This rendezvous was at Bennet's farm at Cloverfield, Killeely, a secluded locality away from dwellings, and a little over a mile short of the selected Dromkeen position. There contact was made between the two Columns just before dawn. The combined force, some forty riflemen strong, then lay up to await developments. A dilapidated shed afforded the shelter required, both because of the need for secrecy and because of the fact that the weather during the moves on the preceding nights had been very bad and had continued so. Communication was soon established with the local scouts who, from early morning, were keeping movements in Pallas, and on the adjoining roads, under observation. It was not, however, until close to noon that calculations were in great part fulfilled by the news that two lorries, carrying about twenty policemen, with the District Inspector in charge, had started out along the road towards Fedamore.

A move was at once made to the site for the intended interception through which, as further information soon indicated, the lorries had passed, travelling fast and close together. The weather had then cleared, and luckily, as matters developed, little time was required for taking up positions, these having been assigned beforehand. Excepting the farmhouse at the turn of the road to Old Pallas, and Dromkeen House, all the houses and the barn provided fire positions, and were occupied in varying strength according to accommodation and the field of fire available. The farmhouse, left unoccupied, was used to detain passers-by, some half-dozen being thus "interned." The house on the road bend at the western end held a party detailed to observe the route towards Fedamore, signal movements from that direction, and prevent a withdrawal by the lorries or their occupants by that route. Among the members of the Column who comprised that party were Captain D. Guerin (Killeely Company); Captain Sean Stapleton (Oola Company), and Volunteer M. Meade (Elton Company), all of East Limerick Brigade. The last-mentioned had the distinction of having served with Roger Casement's Irish Brigade in Germany and was a very experienced soldier, who acted as weapon and drill instructor in the Column.

The Command Post was located in the ruined house at the road-junction, its occupants being the East Limerick Column Commander, D. O'Hannigan; the writer, as Column Adjutant, and a few Volunteers, including David Clancy of the Cush Company. This position was the nerve-centre of the operation, being, as already indicated, well placed for observation, fire and control. Any vehicle entering the ambush would face it head-on, and the only doubt about the suitability of its location was whether one or more of the fast-driving police lorries might not crash into it before being stopped by fire and so demolish not only the already tumbled-down structure, but its garrison as well. However, that risk had to be taken. Small detachments also took positions at intervals on both sides of the straight stretch of road along its low boundary walls, in the yard of the farmhouse used as a place of detention, and at the fences covering both the road-fork and two barricades erected there. The main body of the Mid-Limerick Column was placed on the northern side of the straight stretch of road and included the C/O of that Column, Dick O'Connell; Sean Carroll of Castleconnell; James Horan, Johnny Vaughan, Joe Ryan and Ned Punch. A few of the Mid-Limerick



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men—Jimmy Humphreys, the noted county hurler among them—were also detailed to garrison the barn on the opposite side, a position that allowed plunging fire to be brought to bear from the top of its contents, on to the road. The other fire positions on this (southern) side and on the barricades were manned by East Limerick Volunteers, with Liam Hayes, Dan Allis, Ned Tobin, Owen O'Keeffe and Danny Moloney in charge of sections of the Column so located. Other prominent members of the East Limerick Column with these sections included Jim Greene, the late Tom Howard, who was killed in action a few months later; and—such is the ubiquity of the men of Cork—two natives of that county, Bill Bourke of Ballindangan, Mitchelstown, and David Barry of Glanworth. The latter subsequently served in his native county as Brigade Adjutant of one of the hard-fighting Cork brigades.

The barricades were made with farm-carts in preference to other forms of obstruction so that no outward signs need remain should there be a postponement. For the same reason no artificial fire positions were constructed, except at the northern boundary wall of the road where loose stones, readily replaceable, permitted a limited number of loop-holes. Elsewhere fire was to be brought to bear from the tops of the walls and the fences, the hay in the barn, and the windows of the houses. A passing ass and cart conveying a bag of flour was commandeered to form one of the barricades, and the woman owner "interned" in the cross-roads farm house, loudly bewailing the fate of her flour. As events turned out, this barricade was so violently struck by the leading police lorry as to burst open the bag and scatter its contents. This incident, however, had a happy ending for the owner, as she persisted in a claim for compensation, which was fully met years later by the State.

The dispositions of the combined Columns were then complete except for two other measures intended to secure the authors of the projected surprise against being themselves surprised. One was the occupation by a party of armed local Volunteers of a position near Dromkeen across the intended line of retreat, to keep open that route and cover the withdrawal of the Column. This step was considered essential in view of the heavy military traffic in the vicinity. The other security measure was the use of a screen of scouts provided over a wide area by the local Volunteer companies to signal hostile approach from an unexpected direction. The frequency of enemy patrols in the locality generally, and on the main Limerick-Tipperary road, only three-quarters-of-a-mile distant, made such a happening not improbable. Whether or not it was appreciated at the time, the fact is that these scouts had no effective means of delaying, or rapidly communicating the progress of any hostile formation should the latter, as was likely, have been motorized. Consequently, had an occasion for action by the scouts arisen, this protective measure would in all probability have broken down badly.

It was a little after 12.30 p.m., with all in readiness. After an uncomfortable night and morning, and a long cross-country march to their next billeting area in prospect, the Volunteers hoped for an early end to their vigil. In this they were not disappointed, for nearing one o'clock the approach of the lorries was signalled. Hardly had the signal been amplified to indicate the number of vehicles as two, when the first appeared around the road bend, quickly followed by the second at about fifty yards' distance. Orders had provided for the opening of fire when the first of whatever number of lorries might comprise the convoy took the turn at the road-junction. In the event, fire was opened a few seconds before this occurred, due probably to the riflemen in the western half of the position having difficulty in

judging the exact moment to open fire. As matters were by the premature fire there had been a larger detail lest danger should occur on that occasion.

After the opening distance which separated the Command Post from the action of riflemen directly upon them. Command Post garrisoned on to the muzzles of them in a sickening driver survive long or right turn? An volley which struck Confronted with this on the usual route right in an effort to barricade, the lorry house. Thrown, or to be the District adjoining field unless the police were wear good their escape a a total police party expected, but a red made at Fedamore remained, one of the the outset. The latter were again hit, this

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among them—were on the right side, a position from the top of its wall on this (southern) side. The Limerick Volunteers, John O'Keeffe and Danny O'Connell were so located. Other men were with these sections. One man was killed in action—the men of Cork—John O'Connell, Mitchelstown, who had previously served in the 1st Battalion of the hard-fighting

preference to other positions should there be any official fire positions along the wall of the road. Only a limited number of men were to bear from the rear, and the windows of the house. A bag of flour was in the hands of the woman owner who was bewailing the fate of her son. He was so violently wounded that the bag and scatter shot were spilling for the road, which was fully

open when complete except for the authors of the proposition. One was the occupation near Dromkeen. It was open that route and considered essential.

The other security was provided over a wide area. The approach from an easterly direction in the locality of the road, only three men were not improbable. The fact is that these men were not communicating with the other side, as was likely. The occasion for action was in all probability

readiness. After an easterly country march to Dromkeen, the men hoped for an early end, for nearing the town. Hardly had the first lorry followed by the second, had provided for the possibility of lorries might be in action. In the event, the men, due probably to having difficulty in

## AMBUSH AT DROMKEEN, COUNTY LIMERICK 159

judging the exact moment of the leading lorry's arrival at the road-fork. As matters went, the plans of the attackers were not harmed by the premature firing, though it might have been otherwise had there been a larger convoy or a wide interval between the lorries. The happening did serve to emphasize the necessity for a check on detail lest danger should result from a small oversight on a future occasion.

After the opening volley, the first lorry continued along the short distance which separated it from the road-junction. To the occupants of the Command Post it gave a feeling akin to what must be the reaction of riflemen in a trench when confronted by a tank charging directly upon them. The lorry towered to a huge size in the eyes of the Command Post garrison as it thundered down the sloping road almost on to the muzzles of their rifles. Would it maintain its course and crush them in a sickening crash into the ramshackle cottage? Would its driver survive long enough to avoid the crash and take either the left or right turn? Amazingly, he did survive despite the point-blank volleys which struck his lorry from the front and from both sides. Confronted with the barricade as he was taking the left-hand turn on the usual route to Dromkeen Station, he swerved violently to the right in an effort to take the other turn. Faced there with the second barricade, the lorry struck both it and the fence adjoining the ruined house. Thrown, or having jumped clear, the driver, who happened to be the District Inspector, and another policeman, reached the adjoining field unharmed. Aided by the fact that they alone among the police were wearing their civilian clothes, they succeeded in making good their escape and eventually proved to be the only survivors of a total police party of thirteen. A stronger police escort had been expected, but a reduction in the original number had probably been made at Fedamore. Of the five occupants of the first lorry three remained, one of whom was mortally, and two slightly, wounded at the outset. The latter two took cover at the roadside, but shortly after were again hit, this time fatally.

The second lorry contained eight policemen. It had arrived a little beyond mid-way in the ambush when the first shots were fired. Halting at once, its occupants began to dismount. Some were hit while doing so; others as they took up positions at the roadside; of these five were killed outright, and one suffered severe wounds that proved fatal some days later. Two managed to get into positions beneath the lorry, from which they fired from behind the wheels. Refusing to surrender, they maintained a steady exchange of shots, and might have prolonged the situation indefinitely as they were practically secure against being hit by fire from the initial positions of the attackers. A move to get on their own level by firing on them from the actual road-bed was undertaken by Volunteer Johnny Vaughan, a Limerick City member of the Mid-Limerick Column. Assisted by the fire of his comrades, he engaged in a close-range duel by taking up a new position on the roadside, from which he quickly put an end to this last-ditch stand of the police remnant. The two policemen responsible for this determined fight against hopeless odds were two of only three members of the regular R.I.C. in the police party.

In the course of the attack on the second lorry the combined Columns suffered their single casualty when Liam Hayes, in his position on the wall near the church, had his hand shattered by a bullet.

Nightfall saw the Volunteers safely installed in billets some twelve miles from Dromkeen.

In the particular circumstances outlined at the outset, the action at Dromkeen had not inconsiderable effect on the morale of not only

the I.R.A. in County Limerick, but of the civil population as well. Perhaps its achievement in this respect is best illustrated by the remark of a local "character" who, having accosted the Mid-Limerick Commander following the operation, registered his disbelief in rumours then current of an impending political compromise, by enquiring, facetiously: "Would you take Dominion Home Rule now, Dick."

## DRISHANEPEG TRAIN AMBUSH YIELDED FOURTEEN RIFLES TO MILLSTREET COLUMN

Cork No. 2 (North) Brigade, February 11, 1921.

*As told by participants to Patrick Lynch*

THERE is an old saying that "the watched pot never boils." It is aptly used when a period of waiting or watching for something to happen drags interminably, as for instance, on the night of February 11th, 1921, when a score or so of armed men lay in ambush on the southern lip of a railway cutting about two miles east of the town of Millstreet. Eight of them had rifles and the remainder handled shot-guns of various makes and calibres. They were members of the Millstreet Battalion Column of the I.R.A., and it was the tenth successive night of vigil they had kept at a place called Drishanebeg. Their purpose was to attack any party of armed British military on its way in or out of Kerry, whether on the 6.15 o'clock train from Mallow to Tralee or the 6 o'clock train from Tralee to Mallow. Night after night they had assembled and had moved into positions on the damp grass above the railway cutting which yawned beneath them in the darkness. They had watched the night trains pass through and waited vainly for the pre-arranged signal which would indicate that the period of waiting was at an end, and the time for action at hand. Nine times it had happened thus, with nerves on edge in the anticipation of battle, and with nothing happening save the anti-climax of a silent withdrawal in the winter darkness that had come down on the rugged hills of Muskerry and Duhallow. It was a period of strain for the indifferently armed men, who cannot have been unmindful of the analogy of their situation and the "watched pot."

The object of the attack on the British was the capture of arms and ammunition, of which there was an acute shortage — particularly of rifles and rifle ammunition — in the Millstreet Battalion. In this respect the Battalion was no different from any other unit of the I.R.A., for all of them were hopelessly deficient in warlike materials. The Dooneen and Coole Cross Company officers had seen a way to add to their meagre stores by ambushing one of the parties of armed military then in the habit of travelling on the night trains. Millstreet railway station is at Dooneen, a little over a mile from the town itself, so that it naturally followed that amongst the tasks of the Dooneen Company was that of keeping close watch on the use the enemy made of the trains. Having observed the fairly regular use of the night trains made by parties of armed military, the Dooneen and Coole Cross men concluded that one of them could be ambushed successfully, and that rifles and ammunition could be captured from the troops. The place chosen for the attack was Drishanebeg, about a mile and a quarter from Dooneen and some two miles from Millstreet town. There the line runs through a cutting, and it was believed that an attack would succeed if the train could be halted in the cutting. Though they did not possess a single rifle, the Companies which had conceived the idea

## TRAIN AMBUSH

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FOR FREEDOM  
1919 TO THE TRUCE**

**THE RED PATH OF GLORY  
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