Re-organisation after the Easter Rising

In the previous article from his memoirs, which we published last July, Mr. Harnett told how the West Limerick Volunteers—himself included—assisted at Glenquin Castle on Easter Sunday, 1916. The order countermanding the Rising planned for that day, led to the Volunteers being ordered to return to barracks. From there we now take up Missie Harnett’s account.

EASTER Monday was a bright, warm day, as is usual in late spring. That afternoon I tackled the as to the cart to take some dozens of eggs to sell at Leahy’s shop in Touramulla. This was something I usually did for my aunt. I bought groceries for the house at Leahy’s, bartered for by Father.

As I slowly wound my way homewards I was accosted by an RIC man named Binks who, in a short chat, informed me of the situation in Dublin, of the sinking of the ships, the And, and of the capture of Casement on Good Friday. I was dismayed at the news, and hurried home, impatient to tell everyone what I had just heard.

Cycled

Next morning I cycled into Newcastle West where I met some Volunteers, and we discussed the possibility of trying to reach Dublin. Dan Hanlon of the Monaghans Company was enthusiastic in his views, and was determined to get to Dublin. However, after a lengthy discussion, we agreed there was nothing we could do as individuals without specific orders from our Commandant. Garbled news continued to reach us about events in Dublin.

MOSSIE HARNETT, a native of Knockadine, Touramulla, was an officer in the Irish Volunteers. He played an active part in the War of Independence in Limerick. Later he served as a member of Limerick County Council. Today he lives in Dun Laoghaire.

Commandant

Our first Brigade Commandant of the reorganised Volunteers in 1916 was Tom O’Rahilly, but he resigned after a short period. The man elected Brigade O/C during 1917 and part of 1918. He, too, resigned but remained in the I.R.A. as a medical officer to the Second Battalion. Our Brigade comprised five Battalions, the total approximate strength of the Brigade being about twelve hundred men. Each Battalion had as its centre the nearest local town, these being Newcastle West, Abbeyfeale, Rathkeale, Drimcollogher and Glin-Ballyhahilly. Madame MacKeve addresses a large meeting in Athlone, the home town of Con Colbert, shortly after her release from prison in 1917. While all these exciting events were taking place the people had still to see their daily affairs, buying and selling and attending mass, all the while they were involved in the great conflict.

Newspapers, Life in 1917 and 1918.

DOGS BANNED ACT.

Close
Life in County Limerick in the 1917-18 period

THE FARMERS’ and labourers’ lot improved noticeably from 1917 onwards. Prices for cattle rose steeply—around sixty pounds for incaut heifers, twenty to thirty pounds for calves, thirty pounds for fat sow pigs, with corresponding high prices for bacon pigs, milk, sheep, poultry, eggs and all kinds of farm produce. Agricultural labourers benefited, and their wages came from the twelve pounds a year that was formerly paid to forty to forty-five pounds.

Agricultural feeding stuffs rose in price too, and it was not uncommon to have three pounds of sugar and other commodities enforced as a war measure by the British Government. Pollard was mixed with the flour, giving the latter a vague resemblance to the sense of real taxation, and nobody who ate it ever required medicine. In general, the bad prices paid for cattle, milk, eggs, etc., was that farmers now travel in more comfort than formerly, and the position of comfort, hitherto unknown, from their favour that it supported most of them. The IRA was now used to keeping to the majority of them.

Ladies’ choice

I was usually appointed Master of Ceremonies at these gatherings in my parish. Many of the nice girls I flirted with at these dances, and in neighbouring parishes as well. Felicity and I occupied our time almost daily. The young girls at that time were filled with patriotic ardour, and showed this by their preference for the men and officers of the Volunteers.

As I was living with my aunt at this time, I was free from parental control. My sentiments did not take kindly to the new movement, nor did my views and their disapproval of the course of events. I had a love life, and being a person with political views inherited from my association with the constitutional movements of Parnell, and then Redmond, was reluctant to accept or approve of this business of armed resistance. I lived with her from 1918 to 1920. It was only during periods of turf cutting, hay making and such work that I saw any company. I was busy about the farm, not having any time for social life. Sometimes we met with the violence and violent hostility, that time the police were collecting guns from the owners, and in most cases it was from the tenants. One day, after returning from collecting motor cars, John O’Gara, Paddy Ahern, Ned Tom Leahy and I were called out to carry a raid on a farm in Abbeyfeale district. We met with accepted persons of peace and in our way. On approaching the house of one of these, a large fowl was shown on the stoop, the door was inside, through the door, the wind was slanting in a right hand. We threatened the chicken, and open fire then the windows, if we were not admitted. At the same time, we shouted loudly that we were I.R.A. members, guns. This had the desired effect, and the door opened. We got a splendid if substantial dinner, and the resistance was offered.

To be continued.

ALCOHOLICS ANONYMOUS

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THE MOSS HARNETT MEMOIRS

Death of Liam Scully, birth of a flying column

EARLY IN May, 1920, a meeting between the officers of the West Limerick and East Limerick Brigades of the I.R.A. was held at the home of Mike Cregan, Monagae.

A long discussion took place as to the feasibility of attacking either the Newcastle West or Kilnamona, R.C.A. barracks, and eventually it was decided that the attack would be made against the Kilnamona barracks. Kilnamona, one of the strongest forts in the Free State, had been vacated voluntarily by the Sinn Fein in 1917, and it was felt that its destruction after this stage of the War of Independence would be a demoralising effect on the forces of the British Crown.

The following night of the attack arrived, and West Limerick Volunteers, who had been previously selected to participate in the fight, met at the houses of Tom Kineeney, John MacNamara, Patsy O'Leary, and myself attended, together with the O/C West Limerick Brigade, J.P. Head, Tom McCarthy, Tom Cregan, Larry MacNamee and Jim Connolly.

A number of Volunteers whose names I cannot now recall were present. The numbers of Volunteers present was far in excess of the establishment of the Limerick Brigade. The East Limerick Brigade was to have supplied the latter number of Volunteers being decided by the number of rifles available. The problem of picking the men who would go was left to the Officer in Charge of the Brigade, but the memory serves me right, he chose difficulty in finding it.

Mr. Patrick Finlay, who was present, took the drink and got drunk. He took the water, which was the property of 11-year-old Tina O'Brien, and he left it in a place where none of us would have found it. We got his drink and drink after home on a bike to Ballylongford, admitted taking a pint cycle.

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Next morning, the attack on the Kilnamona barracks started, and after a short siege, the Volunteers entered the barracks and occupied it.

Some motor cars were arrived to take the fighting men to Kilnamona. I know that I got two cars, one from Michael O'Mahony, catterels manager, David Rd., the other from Richard Roche, Meenan- hela cattery. Larry MacNamee drove the O'Mahony car, but I have forgotten who drove Richard Roche's car.

Returned

After seeing our comrades drive off towards Kilnamona, we returned home by Glenquin Castle, and sat for a while by the fireside, speculating on the outcome of the fierce fight we knew was by then in progress in Kilnamona. Down there the central plains of Limerick men engaged in a deadly struggle for possession of that barracks, a long story of British dominance. We had to wait for the light of the next morning to get any news from our comrades about the outcome of the fight.

I was up early, and had occasion to go out to the public road, which was connected with my house by a long boree. I was on the road only a few minutes when I was surprised to see two motor cars arrive. They stopped immediately, saw me, and, from both cars several armed men stepped out.

I noticed a young man lying on the seat of one of the cars, a nurse in uniform sitting beside him, who was dead, was Captain Liam Scully, B.S.A., and he had been shot through the neck in the fight. The young nurse was Miss O'Keeffe, who had rendered first aid to the wounded Scully when he was brought into a house near the barracks after being shot.

As for the fight itself, it had lasted for six hours, and was the most severe engagement of the War of Independence. The garrison in the barracks, consisting of two sections and eighteen constables, put up a heroic defence, even after their fortress began to collapse in flames above their heads at that stage they retreated into a strong, well-outshouse from where they kept up the fight, refusing to surrender. Two of our comrades perished in the flames. The main outcome of the fight, as far as the I.R.A. was concerned, was that they had succeeded in completely destroying the barracks, for long considered an impregnable fortress.

But to return to the scene after the armed men had left their cars that morning near our farm house, among them was a man whom I recognized Sean Flinn, and Sean MacAuley. Sean Flinn introduced me to the man on the right, who introduced himself as Michael Brennan, Tom Bailey, Tom Connolly, and Paddy Chancy. Sean Connolly said, "We must take the place near the barn where we could leave Liam Scully's remains. I suggested a farmyard on O'Briens, near my own home, but even more secluded, and further from the road. In fact this particular farmyard was at a distance of a mile and a quarter, another ten miles and had the added advantage of being occupied only by a caretaker, William Long, and his wife and their three sons.

Burial

As we moved slowly down the winding road, I heard a vivid description of the fight from the body mou's writer, the only lads being dead, that was his story. On reaching the house, we learned that the occupant of the house had been killed in the street fighting. After the fighting the men took some coffee on the front verandas in the house. Meanwhile the car was parked beside a hedge with a guard of honour standing at arms-length attention as they lay in state on a big timber bed.

The funeral procession was to leave at midnight, and after dark, a part of the Volunteers officers went to East Limerick. The mortars of the Volunteers were then in the possession of the British officers, and that a burial was to take place during the night. The battle was in progress for possession of that barracks, a long story of British dominance. We had to wait for the light of the next morning to get any news from our comrades about the outcome of the fight.

In aid of procession we heard the deep voice of Mr. Scully, the young man's remote voice from afar, and the sound of the band playing some patriotic song on a fine balmy summer's night. We gave him a full military funeral and escorted the bier to the brave young man. Mr. Dick McCarthy, the rector, performed the religious ceremonies, and the body was conveyed to the grave in the cemetery, where it was laid to rest.

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**The Mossie Harnett Memoirs**

**Trial and execution of a spy in Co. Limerick**

**NOW TOLD FOR THE FIRST TIME**

**DURING 1919, and up to the Truce in 1921,**

a special effort was made to perfect our intelligence system, much in time in our battalion area organisation the intelligence into a near perfect one.

From my knowledge of arming a natural and put charge a creamy manager of unquestionable integrity as O.A. of a company of intelligence officers in the battalion area. These were to report immediately any suspicious movements of enemy forces, and in particular were to keep a close look out for suspected spies. In addition we had the wholehearted co-operation of Cuman as of the local population, and of various civilians who could move without suspicion among the military and police. All strange coming into the district were closely watched, and their movements reported.

At the period (1919-1920) young men were continued joining our battalion area, seeking refuge. They came from all corners of the district, from the south, the west, and the east.

They were usually welcomed by the officials of the respective areas, but it was an arrangement that carried with it risks of infiltration by the enemy. It happened, in fact, in that in this way a dangerous spy infiltrated our ranks. It took some months before this was discovered.

My first contact with this person was late in the autumn of 1919. He brought with him credentials that convinced all the I.R.A. officers in West Limerick and East Kerry of his genuineness as an I.R.A. man on the run from the enemies of the I.R.A. He was introduced to me by my O.C. by a name that was subsequently found to be fictitious, and so I shall refer to him as "A" for the purpose of this narrative. He said he was from Co. Tipperary, and my officers and I had no doubt that his company was his companions from then on in the activities in which they were engaged, generally raiding for arms. On one such occasion, when we encountered strong opposition, I noticed that "A" was very aggressive and brandished his revolvers.

**Suspicion**

He stayed in my house for approximately six months (late 1919), and then was sent to Knocknagoshel, from there to a district adjourning Castleisland. From there to his departure he joined the brigade, and his offering was looked upon kindly by priests in the Abbeyfeale hotel.

Here "A" surprised me by taking rather too much spirit, a thing foreign to the habits of I.R.A. men on the run. He also engaged in a flow of very false conversation, especially in the presence of an old priest. I (the officers and I) mentioned our activities, and our work. In fact, I made him go to a meeting in the spring of 1920, in different circumstances.

Early in March, 1920, our intelligence received information that led to the arrest of "A" as a suspected spy. He was at that time living among I.R.A. families in Kerry. I notified the Brigade O/C in Castleisland to prepare a squad for the arrest of "A" and to keep him under close guard, night and day. Needless to say, I felt somewhat put out at meeting him again in this manner. Four senior officers of East Kerry Brigade brought him to West Limerick on a night in March 1920. On receipt of the information that had led to his arrest they had searched him, and were unable to find a large sum of money hidden in a place. I was, of course, suspicious. I also asked him about his activities, but he was unable to answer.

On arrival of the prisoner in West Limerick, he was lodged and closely guarded in a remote farmhouse occupied by an old lady and a farm worker, neither of whom had a great welcome for us. Our guard was accompanied by the local police, and four other officers, including Been Hogan of Knocklong Round, Farnham, two days after the prisoner next day questioned him at length, and discussed what should be done with him. It was arranged that he should be court-martialled. The court martial was to be made up of the principal officers of the Brigade staff together with some senior officers from the East Kerry Brigade, and a Sinn Fein TD, then on the run in the area.

**The magpie**

As "A" was arrested, I made arrangements with the occupants of another farmhouse near to provide their sitting room for the court which was to be held there. I took some days before the court was ready to sit. In the meantime the prisoner acted as if nothing of importance was happening. He tried to act naturally, as naturally as we could in the strained circumstances. "A" gave ample supplies of cigarettes; we played cards with him, and accompanied him in walking, exercising outside the house. He seemed calm except for one little incident.

This incident was caused by a magpie which came each morning and perched on the window sill outside the bedroom where "A" slept. The magpie would persist in picking up a stone from the window in the early morning light. "Do you know," said "A" to me, referring to the magpie's strange behaviour, "I don't like it and it portends no good?" Stranger still was the magpie's coming to the window only while "A" slept in the house.

The day of the trial eventually came. Of the seven officers forming the court, one was selected for the "A" defence; another was selected as prosecuting officer.

The prisoner earnestly denied that he was a spy who had infiltrated the I.R.A.

After several hours deliberation, no verdict was forthcoming, but the court decided to sit again if any new evidence should come to light. There was of course the matter of the documents in the case. Here the prisoner gave us no help, and also we were not disposed to search if we were not badly enough to have made him give us the documents he might have spoken, but which were not our concern.

**Execution**

The court decided to send a deputation to the I.R.A. headquarters in Dublin with the documents being deciphered, it was established beyond all doubt that "A" was an enemy agent engaged in espionage. When confirmation of this was received, West Limerick, it was arranged to call the court together again. Meanwhile, "A" seemed to be getting more and more restless. This was particularly noticeable on an occasion when only one guard had charge of him. The surprising thing is that he didn't suddenly try to overpower the guard and escape but he did for it.

The unnamed victim of the court was its second sitting was that "A" was guilty, and he was sentenced by firing squad. The execution was carried out the early morning hours of the next day. The guards were placed in a wide circle round the room where the execution was to take place. With feelings of sorrow I now saw the prisoner being driven off on a pony and trap between two guards. Polly realising how he was being driven off, how his terrible predicament, and visibly trembling, ordered his pony in his hands. Near the place of execution, a priest heard his confession, then shot him with his revolver and admitted his sins.

**Concluding**

In the early hours of the morning, the two guards, one of whom I was to preside, were sent in which the executed man was to be brought. As they were settling down to sleep, the front door gave a very loud bang as a result of a sudden gust of wind and with the drawn revolver, startled by this unexpected alarm, I rushed to the door, ready for the worst. It was a false alarm of course, but I understood the frightful tension under which men lived, living as I was in a state of terror. I was on their minds, I wanted to save my life.

**Final instalment of the Memoirs next week.**
IN OUR area in West Limerick, the truce between the I.R.A. and the British forces was very hard to maintain. The area of the Second Battalion, which included the town of Abbeyfeale, was the Black and Tans inclined to be very aggressive. In their patrols through the town they made it their business to pick up sympathizers of ours off the side-walks, abusing them as they did so. Things were getting so dangerous that there was a grave danger that armed attacks would be made on Tans because of their truculence. Something had to be done about it.

It was agreed by the battalion Viceroys, Commander, and myself that we should approach the Chief Commissioner of the area and ask him to intervene. One evening as we were walking through the town we came across a patrol of our enemy on a foot patrol. We approached the patrol and asked them to come with us to the headquarters of the battalion. We had a long and animated discussion with the patrol and it was decided that we would move in a group of four men, two on either side of the street, to the town hall. After dark there was no light except for the light of our lanterns glowing from the windows.

As I accepted the offer of the officer of the patrol to be our escort, they stopped for a moment to consider the matter. I stated what our business was, and they seemed to understand, and they led our way to the town hall. We entered the building and were welcomed by the staff. We were then seated in the presence of the Chief Commissioner.

He listened to me and I explained the situation to him. He then informed me that he had ordered the patrol to leave the area and that we would be left alone. I then thanked him and left the building. As I walked down the street, I could hear the voices of the patrol behind me.

The truce was maintained until the Treaty was signed.

Imprisonment

Early in the fall of 1923 our people were split, hopelessly amiens, a tragic figure runner of worse to come. This was reflected in our area, and in the towns of West Limerick — as elsewhere in the country — as the two distinct armed forces were in occupation of different buildings. In June, 1923, things looked serious, an open conflict seemed certain, as the days passed.

One day I was visited by the Officer Commanding, Col. O'Brien, of the Free State Forces in West Limerick. He accompanied by a Captain in that Army, a native of East Limerick, and another member of the East Limerick Brigade Flying Column. They visited me to McClory's Hotel, and we had refreshments. We also had an earnest discussion on the existing military and political situation, followed by an invitation to join the Free State Army, with the promise of assistance. I declined, and still gave my allegiance to the Republican cause.

In this extract from my Memoir I have been patient in telling the story of the progress of the Civil War in West Limerick, of the activities and engagements in which I took part. My account of my experience in various campaigns as a Republican can prison have likewise been severely curtailed.

I was arrested in September, 1923, and conveyed to Limerick Jail. I was finally released from the strict control of the jail authorities and the strain from the jail authorities. In October, we were removed to Dublin, and spent our first night in the grim barracks of Kilmainham. We were careful to have in the cell with stones floor that were old, but we moved to Montrose. In January we were moved to the Curragh.

Disease

During this time I was impressed by the suffering of the Irish people due to the lack of food and other necessities. Many suffered from hunger, and we had to send our food ration to the people in need. I then visited the sick and wounded in the hospitals and did my best to help them. We had to leave Dublin and return to our homes in West Limerick.

As I walked through the streets of Abbeyfeale, I could hear the voices of the patrol behind me. I then thanked him and left the building. As I walked down the street, I could hear the voices of the patrol behind me.

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