

# The destruction of Ballylanders barracks

ALLOWING the events of Easter Week, 1916, in the southern part of East Limerick, there developed in the area a bitter internal dispute in which senior officers and rank-and-file took opposite sides.

The dispute increased in intensity until General Headquarters in Dublin was compelled to take action.

In May 1918, Michael W. Reilly was sent to hold an inquiry. The inquiry was held in the house of Danny Moloney, Edge House, Knocklong, and resulted in the suspension of many officers and men whose names subsequently figured prominently in the War of Independence.

It also resulted in the disbandment of the old Galtee Brigade, which had operated since the formation of the Irish Volunteers.

It was replaced in the scheme of reorganisation by the East Limerick Brigade, which continued to exist during the remainder of the fight against the British forces in Ireland.

In order to preserve the historic name of the Galtee Brigade, however, three battalions of the newly-formed East Limerick Brigade were named First, Second and Third Galtee Battalions. Later, the East Limerick Brigade was divided into six battalion areas and the word "Galtee" was completely dropped.

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The Ballylanders company was the hub of the dispute. It was the only company in the area, and, despite the General Headquarters' inquiry and several other efforts to eliminate the dispute, the bitterness continued to increase.

As a further effort to bring the situation under control, following the inquiry at Knocklong, General Headquarters appointed Sean Wall, of Bruff, as Brigade O/C, of the newly-formed East Limerick Brigade, and Sean T. Riordan, of Kilmallock, as battalion commandant of the First Galtee Battalion.

As both officers had no connection with the dispute, it was thought that their election might terminate it. In spite of the above, partisanship entered into the election of practically all the senior company and battalion officers in the First Battalion.

The dispute continued to persist, to the detriment of the work of the organisation.

It was in these circumstances that the Battalion Council of the First Galtee Battalion decided to attack the Royal Irish Constabulary barracks at Ballylanders, which was in the centre of

the disaffected area.

It was hoped that the engagement would bring the two factions together in an operation which would make them forget their differences.

It was further decided that the operation should be particularly a battalion one, but as a test of efficiency all Volunteer companies between Limerick city and Mitchelstown, and between Tipperary and Mallow, were brought out on the night of the attack, to block roads and cut communications.

Accordingly, what was a local battalion operation took on the appearance of widespread activity inside the points mentioned. In fact, evidence given later at the court-martial of Michael Gamell and Sean T. O'Riordan, of Kilmallock, suggested that over 300 men were engaged in the attack.

In point of fact, those who took part in the actual fighting, and for whom arms were available at the time, numbered only 29 men.

Sean T. O'Riordan was in command of the operation and the assault party on the roof of the barracks was in charge of Tomas Malone who was on the run in the locality and who assumed the name "Sean Forde" to hide his identity from the enemy.

The plans for the attack on Ballylanders Barracks were drawn up at the house of Ned Tobin, of Ballinalackin, about two miles from Ballylanders.

Among the officers present, on the occasion, were Sean T. O'Riordan, Sean McCarthy, Brigade Ordnance Officer, Tomas Malone, Operations Officer, and Ned Tobin himself, Brigade Quartermaster.

A despatch from Brigade O/C, Sean Wall, advised Tobin to be on the alert for a consignment of rifles and bombs on their way from Doon to Ballylanders.

These arrived shortly afterwards, due largely to the courageous work of Bertie Burke. Bombs were manufactured at Tobin's forge, Ballinalackin, and at David Clancy's, Cush, Kilfinane.

The plan of operation, adopted for the first time, prescribed that the attack should be chiefly directed against the roof of the barracks, while at the same time the building should be covered by fire from all sides in order to keep the garrison of about six RIC men fully occupied.

The building itself was a commanding one on the street of Ballylanders with walls of solid stone, stout steel-lined doors, steel-shuttered windows and loopholes placed at strategic points. The particular points from which the attack was to be launched were outlined to the

men.

The attackers mustered quietly at Ballylanders Bridge, about a mile below the village. They were issued with firearms, bombs and ammunition, and detailed to their various posts.

At 11pm, it was ascertained that two of the constables were in bed and that the sergeant and the remaining constables were in different parts of the building.

At exactly 11.20pm, "Sean Forde" flashed the "open fire" signal from the roof of No. 1 position, and there was an immediate volley of rifle-fire and a shower of grenades, to which the garrison replied intensively.

The assault party on the roof set about breaking a gaping hole into the building with sledgehammers. Bombs and incendiaries were immediately thrown in to set the building on fire. A lighted torch was soaked in paraffin and tar, and used to set fire to a bed. This in turn, fired a wooden partition.

In a few minutes the entire building was blazing furiously and the barracks had become a raging furnace.

In the meantime, the party on the roof had many narrow escapes from the rifle fire of the garrison, some of whom blazed away through the hole in the roof of their Barracks.

Hot exchanges were also in

progress between others of the garrison and the IRA sections which occupied the different positions surrounding the doomed building.

After 15 minutes' fighting, Sean Meade, Crecora, was shot through the left lung by a rifle bullet.

He was one of the party in the post at Mrs Fanny Burke's house, directly opposite the front window of the barracks, and it was thought that he exposed himself to fire whilst endeavouring to free his rifle which had jammed.

All the while the countryside was continually lighted up by Verey lights from the barracks, signalling for assistance from other enemy posts in the locality.

After half-an-hour's fighting the blazing building had become untenable, and the sergeant-in-charge hoisted the white flag of surrender which was attached to a rifle and waved through one of the windows. Following their surrender, the RIC were lined up outside their barracks and marched under armed escort down the main street to the home of one of the attackers.

They were treated with courtesy by their captors. All arms and ammunition and many of the explosives belonging to the garrison were secured at great risk by the battalion.

Official books, papers and correspondence kept in the barracks were also seized, and were taken in charge by Lt. Scully.

The mills bombs captured were afterwards used in the attack on Kilmallock RIC barracks. In fact, all war material captured, following the surrender of Ballylanders Barracks, played an important part in subsequent operations by the East Limerick Brigade.

The captured documents gave valuable information about enemy communications, the activities of the RIC, and the instructions.

Sean Meade, the only IRA casualty, was treated at a local first-aid station. Later, the sorely-wounded soldier was brought to a series of satellite houses while on the run. He ultimately reached the County Infirmary at Limerick, where he was admitted under an assumed name and entered as a pneumonia patient. There he was given every attention and nursed back to health and vigour.

The attack and capture of Ballylanders police barracks had more of a far-reaching effect than was thought at the time by those engaged in the operation.

It was an audacious enterprise, carried out within the reach of enemy forces at Tipperary.



A long-shot of Clancy's Strand looking towards Thomondgate.