



Kilmallock R.I.C. Barracks, as it appeared after the attack

Limerick explodes into War of Independence

EIGHTY-one years ago, the order came down from Dublin to bring Limerick into the War of Independence. Historian **EOIN NEESON** recounts how this was done through an audacious attack on Ballylanders RIC Barracks that set the standard for other Volunteer brigades around the country

EIGHTY one years ago, in the spring of 1920, Tom Malone, under the pseudonym Sean Forde, was sent to Limerick by Volunteer headquarters in Dublin with instructions to "get Limerick into the fight". He and the Limerick men did so much effect that in two actions a month apart, they set a standard and created precedents for many subsequent attacks on RIC Barracks in the country

On April 27, in the first major attack on "enemy" forces in the area, the East Limerick Brigade attacked the strongly fortified RIC Barrack at Ballylanders. Exactly one month later, on May 28, in a second major operation, the same unit attacked the even more strongly defended RIC Barracks at Kilmallock.

More than 60 Volunteers took part in each operation. Because of the nature of the guerrilla war, the units involved were—at that time anyway—much too small to mount such operations on their own. Nor would any single unit have had sufficient arms to mount such an operation on its own.

Accordingly, men were drafted in from further afield to set and man roadblocks, in two rings, in order to inhibit reinforcements coming to the aid of the besieged RIC and to prevent them from making their

escape.

The attack on Ballylanders barracks was organised and carried out primarily by the Galtee Battalion, the oldest in the Brigade; Brigade OC was Sean Wall of Bruff.

The barracks was in a very strong position, facing the square in Ballylanders at the junction with the road to Kilfinane. At first glance, it seemed virtually impregnable. From its position looking onto the square and with a blank gable wall forming the junction with the Kilfinane road, neither a frontal or a flank attack appeared to offer any hope of success. But during the planning conferences, it emerged that, provided the attacking forces were audacious enough, there was one weak spot—the roof!

How to get to it? Although Ballylanders RIC Barracks seemed, on the face of it, impervious to attack from small arms, however, determined, this one weak spot was to prove its undoing and be the catalyst for many future attacks of a similar nature.

Although the barrack was strongly reinforced and was capable of withstanding anything short of medium weapons and explosives, it was a semi-detached building, an identical one, the Dispen-

sary, occupying the other half of the block. It was decided to mount the attack from there.

*Men from adjoining brigades set up an outer ring of road blocks to prevent British troops from Tipperary and North Cork coming to the assistance of the RIC men in Ballylanders. Closer in, about a mile or so outside the town, local Volunteers from Bruff, Kilfinane, Galbally and even as far as Kilmallock, set up an inner ring of roadblocks. The actual attack party numbered about 25 and were posted in groups of from two to five men in six locations.

The attack force, under Tom Malone, assembled at a crossroads outside the town and dispersed in groups to take up their firing positions. This was completed by about 11pm. Malone, who was also in charge of the lead attack unit in the Dispensary, had infiltrated this earlier. Coming up to midnight, the other five positions in Burke's, Upton's, O'Grady's, Condon's and Crowley's were all manned, ready and waiting. Without proper defensive materials, the Volunteers barricaded the windows as best they could with mattresses and other household goods.

Just before midnight, the signal, a green light, was flashed from the Dispensary to be almost instantaneously answered by the opening shots of what was to become a memorable occasion.

Those with Malone in the Dispensary included some of the men who had planned the operation, Jack McCarthy and Tadhg Crow-

ley, besides some other volunteers, simultaneously with the first fusillade against the barracks. Malone and his men broke through the roof of the dispensary and while the fire from the other outposts pinned down the defenders, began to attack the slates of the barrack roof with heavy stones and rocks.

Within minutes, there was a gaping hole in the roofs, but the men inside began to fire upwards towards it, for awhile preventing the attackers from exploiting their initial advantage.

But improvised petrol and paraffin bombs—bottles filled with these liquids—and a hand grenade exploded in fire through the upper storey of the building, while intense fire was concentrated on the besieged from O'Grady's, where Donnchadh O'Hannigan—later to play a dramatic role in the "Limerick Incident" in the lead-up to the Civil War—was in charge, and the other posts.

In a short time, the entire upper storey of the barracks was alight and there was little hope of maintaining the defence. Eventually the fire of the defenders died down and a white flag of surrender was displayed from a window. The five RIC men who had put up a spirited defence were unwounded and the Volunteers were elated at the success of the attack and the capture of weapons and other munitions.

The one Volunteer casualty, Sean Meade, proved not to be fatal and he recovered to later become an officer with the Brigade.