Executed by firing squad

Historian Sean Enright reveals the stories of the Limerick civilians who were tried by the military during the War of Independence.

A & the War of Independence raged around Limerick.

John O'Sullivan from Abbeyfeale stood trial for his life before a military court.

He was charged with being in possession of arms, a capital offence.

An army officer gave evidence that he was leading a military patrol passing through Knockaderry when they came upon a trench in the road and saw the men running away. The soldiers gave chase, and fire was opened. The accused was seen to throw an item as he ran. He was captured nearby. A search was made and a revolver was found. It contained an automatic and ammunition. The revolver was identified with the name Sean Sullivan.

Patrick O'Sullivan sat in the public gallery and watched his son convicted on a capital charge.

Defence counsel was also a Limerick man: Patrick Kelly from Arthbeg. Counsel urged the court to adjourn the trial because the defence witnesses were unable to get to court on account of the trains not running. The court ordered that counsel press on. The prisoner gave evidence denying that he had arms. He was convicted and sentenced to death by shooting.

The case papers list at an untold story. The father of the accused was Patrick O'Sullivan, a 37-year-old farmer who ran a small farm near Adare. He was a father of six, of whom the prisoner was the youngest. The father was present at the trial which took place at Cork Detention Barracks. He had paid for a barrister and arranged for witnesses who had failed to show at his son's trial.

Patrick O'Sullivan sat in the public gallery awaiting anxiously for the witnesses who did not come and watched his son convicted on a capital charge. With the persistence that every father bestowed on a wayward son, he composed himself and wrote a letter which he managed to persuade an officer to put in the case papers. The letter was found by the judge Advocate General some days later. It stated that there were three witnesses for his son who had been unable to get to Cork to attend the trial because the train services had been dislocated.

There is no doubt that the train services were often dislocated during the War of Independence. The roads and trains had become the focus of the war in the north-west, south-west Ireland. Railway signals were torn up, level crossings barricaded and many trains were ambushed, at Miltown, Headford Junction, Millstreet and elsewhere.

Many civilians were inflected on both sides and many civilian passengers were killed or wounded. The army took to travelling in military court there was Thomas Keane who was executed by firing squad on June 4, 1921.
Civilians tried by the military

Continued from page 1

General asked for a medical report on the prisoner and again, the
trump entered and

During the War of Independence, the army took to travelling by train, which led to a number of attacks on these troops. Too, soldiers inspect bullet holes following a train ambush.

Pics. courtesy of the Royal Irish Fusiliers Museum.

The following is an account in the Limerick Leader, Monday, 06 June 1921, to the plane of execution of Thomas Keane.

FOR the first time since the early eleventh, when "Eamonn" Hynes of Ennis was hanged for the murder of a bridayman, an execution took place in Limerick on Sunday morning, when Thomas Keane was shot in the New Barracks.

The condemned man was taken from the Limerick Prison to the military barracks about 10am on Friday morning, afterwards Rev. Father Hyne, C.C. St Michael's, afterwards, in the New Barracks, was sent for and remained most of the day, administering religious communion to the condemned man, who was gratefully received, and Keane, who had a family, his wife and mother on Friday night, was quite reconnoitred to him.

Keane was shot in the condemned cell at 7 o'clock on Saturday morning, only the priest and his assistant being present.

Father Hyne was dismissed Mass in the condemned cell at 7 o'clock on Saturday morning, only the priest and his assistant being present. The execution was performed in the Old Barracks, and was given the full blessing. Shortly before 9 o'clock Keane was transferred from the Old Barracks to the New Barracks, and Father Hayes, who was asked to walk out of sight of the firing party, hurried forward when the final volley had been fired and assisted Keane.

It was stated by the military authorities that the official inquiry into the death would be made to the Press.

Civilians were not allowed to approach the barracks before the execution. Large numbers lined up in the space in front of the Redemptorist Church opposite the Barracks. The Rosary was recited in Irish up to the time of the execution, and the Litany of the Blessed Virgin followed for the repose of the condemned man's soul.

The following official accounts of the execution was supplied on Saturday morning:

Thomas Keane, civilian, 1 Moore Lane, Limerick, was tried by a military court on the 21st of April on two charges - (1) being in possession of a revolver. Keane was found guilty of both charges and sentenced to be shot. Sentence was only carried out on Saturday morning at 8 o'clock.

At the trial of Thomas Keane, it was deposed that as a police party was approaching the barracks, the accused fired at the police. Hen was pursued, and, while doing so, he threw a revolver away and then surrendered. Another witness said he only saw Keane fire one shot.

After the trial, a petition was forwarded to the Board of Deputy's, praying for the reprieve of the condemned man.

Keane, who was about 30 years of age, resided at Moore's Lane, off Clare Street, Limerick. He was employed as a carpenter by the G.S. and W.R. at Limerick. He was the sole support of a wife and a young child, and also of his mother, who resided with them.

Prayers were recited for the repose of the soul of deceased in all Limerick City Catholic churches yesterday morning.

Mr H O'Mor, sotag in for Keane, made a further effort to receive the notification of the confirmation of death sentence on Friday evening, which was refused.

Mr Moran protested, saying it was the first time a solicitor was refused the privileges under similar circumstances. After the execution he made application on behalf of the widow for possession of the body.

The following is the letter written by the condemned man's wife to his children on the eve of his execution:

My dear loving wife and children,

DEAR LOVE - I know this will find you all safe and well, and in good health. It would be worse if I was not standing the streets, I have my own affairs to be looked after. I do not know how I will manage myself in the future, but I will try to get by. I am sure you will do your best to make me happy. I will try to live as long as I can.

Goodbye and God bless you and children.

Your loving husband -

The court-yard of a greyhound.