



Uniform of Commandant Sean Finn of the West Limerick Brigade, Irish Republican Army, who was killed by British forces at Ballyhahill in March 1921. The Black and Tans rampaged around the Irish countryside in Crossley tenders and armoured cars, right

Fog fell too late to save the gallant Sean Finn

Rathkeale commander in War of Independence killed in fierce battle at Ballyhahill

THE talk all about the Easter Rising and the part people played nearly 100 years ago.

The War of Independence followed a few years later and Limerick people were also at the forefront of the action. This week we mark the 95th anniversary of the death of Sean Finn, one of the Volunteers, who died in action at Ballyroe, Lisreidy Loughill. A memorial marks the spot on McSweeney's land, a nice walk in from the road on an elevated site, overlooking the Shannon Estuary.

Sean was born in Rathkeale on October 1, 1897. He had four sisters and one brother, and the family operated a grocery and bakery business.

Sean attended the local school, where he picked up the knowledge and the qualities that were to benefit him for his role in the Irish Volunteers. He was an altar boy to the patriotic Limerick priest Fr Michael Hayes, who is buried in Ardagh Church grounds.

Both gave distinguished service to their native land, and they were close friends, up to Sean's death at the young age of 23 years. Fr Hayes composed a touching poem, following his death to express his sorrow, which appeared anonymously in the Observer newspaper printed in Newcastle West.

*He gave to Ireland's call his all
His heart's best love, his service high
To break her chain, to end her thrall*

Sean became a member of the Gaelic League, and the GAA. He was well built tall and handsome, and an athlete of no mean achievement, who played hurling with the Rathkeale club.

He grew to become a young man of the noblest character, and showed the qualities of leadership courage and resourcefulness, that led to him being appointed Commandant of the Fifth West Limerick Battalions, Newcastle West, Abbeyfeale, Dromcollogher, Rathkeale, and, Ballyhahill.

His youth and gaiety courage and chivalry made him a hero, among the men of that time who fought for Irish Independence in Limerick.



Then & Now

with Tom Aherne

He proved his heroism during the successful siege of the Kilmallock RIC Barracks, and he played a leading and gallant part in many other engagements, where his personal fearlessness was an inspiration to his men.

Sean was a gentle and kind person and not the typical gunman, and was very thoughtful for others. He was intelligent and widely read, and well informed on the important issues of the time, and he was much admired by the female population.

In the spring of 1921 the West Limerick Brigade of the IRA decided they could deal a decisive blow against the Black and Tans, amongst the hills of West Limerick.

The Tans struck terror throughout the countryside, committing numerous outrages, burning houses and public buildings, beating up civilians and committing murder. They were billeted in the garrison towns of Newcastle West and Rathkeale, and they travelled in strong numbers in Crossley tenders and armoured cars.

The East Limerick Flying Column of 50 heavily armed men were called upon to give assistance, commanded by Donnchadh O'Hannigan. It was decided to engage the enemy in the hills around Athea, and the men were put up in friendly farmhouses around the district.

On Easter Sunday night word came through from Thomas McDonagh, Captain of the IRA in Newcastle West, to Commandant Sean Finn that a big military movement was to be launched against the two Columns in Athea.

Sean Finn sent out scouts to call in the men, and they gathered at Dirreen Cross. It was a bitterly cold night with driving sleet, and

flashes of lighting, as the men stood to arms amongst the heather.

In a short time the enemy arrived in big numbers, in an all-out effort to wipe out the IRA. They used searchlights to light up the surroundings, but failed to locate the IRA positions, and they withdrew.

By skilful manoeuvring the IRA forces were withdrawn to Knocknagorna School House, without being observed. They marched to Ballyhahill later that night, where the men got badly needed rest that extended well into the next day. They were scattered in different houses, over a five mile area, which was to prove fatal for Sean Finn.

The desperate fight in Ballyhahill in which Sean Finn lost his life has been well documented over the years, and a fine account is given in Limerick's Fighting Story. The following is a brief version of the fight between seven IRA men and over 40 members of the British forces that raged for over two hours before Sean Finn was hit by enemy fire.

Three men from the East Limerick Column went unarmed to a house in Quilty's Cross, in order to have their shoes repaired. They were not that long there when they heard the sound of the enemy forces arriving in lorries and Crossley tenders.

The men rushed out from the shoemaker's house, and they were fired upon as they made their way to their billet. The three Volunteers - Tom Howard, Michael Walsh, and Dave Quane - were engaged by over 40 enemy forces, who besieged them and attacked them on three sides of the house.

The sound of firing reached four of their comrades billeted in Danaher's house, who came to their rescue, taking up positions on the

fourth side of the besieged house. The arrival of Sean Finn and Jim Colbert from the West Limerick Column, and Donnchadh O'Hannigan, and Seamus Finn from the East Column, allowed the other three a chance to evacuate the house, and join them.

A running fight developed with the enemy who were heavily armed experienced soldiers, who used their Lorries, to send forth sections of men to cut off the retreat of the IRA men who were positioned between two public roads.

Volunteer Dave Quane was shot through the neck but his comrades brought him along with them as the fight continued.

They refused to surrender despite several calls to do so, and soon they were completely surrounded.

A strong wind was blowing the sound away from where the other Volunteers were billeted removing any last chance they had of help arriving.

The battle continued for over two hours before Sean Finn was shot. He called out to his comrades, as he fell mortally wounded: "Goodbye lads, carry on, I am done."

He had given his all on that black March day to help his comrades, who had been surprised by the enemy. Volunteer Seamus Finn aged 18 years recovered his dead comrade's rifle and ammunition, as the bullets ploughed ridges, around him from about forty yards away.

The British eased off after this remarkable achievement but the fight continued until a welcome fog crept in from the river Shannon, and completely screened both forces.

The Black and Tans withdrew, allowing the brave Volunteers to make their way to safety and to fight another day. Dave Quane recovered in time from his injuries, and the others continued the fight, against the enemy forces.

Volunteer Seamus Finn was promoted to First Lieutenant following his heroic act and Tom Howard was killed in action at Lackelly in East Limerick on May 2 1921.

I will have more on Sean Finn in the next column.

Sinners would be better off hearing the gospel of

John B. Kearney

OUT IN THE OPEN

THE MEN'S mission in Listowel finished last Sunday night and the women's mission finished the Sunday before.

They were both well attended although crowds have fallen off to an alarming degree. I remembered when I first went to a men's mission there was no standing room. Now there are hundreds of empty places crying out for sinners. Be that as it may, the recent mission was very successful and in spite of the falling off in numbers I daresay it was above average.

My first ever mission was a somewhat frightening affair. I was in the company of my father and a brother. I was 12 and the senior missionary was a fat red-faced man with a voice that struck terror into the hearts of the congregation whenever he lifted it. He was death down on close dancing.

"There they are," he would roar, "in the hell they call a ballroom with their bellies touching and evil thoughts raging in their depraved minds." The brother used to squirm in his seat and try to hide. Afterwards I knew how he felt. He fancied himself as a slow waltzer and as everybody knows, slow waltzing means close dancing.

"They will rot," the missionary would roar, "in the dungeons of hell. Their charred bodies will be contorted from the agonising plain and their screams will rise above the roaring of the flames." He would go on in this vein for a quarter of an hour while the sweat flowed freely from the pores of the many close dancers who sat with bent heads, fervently praying that it would end.

In later years there came another smaller missionary who had a thing about motor cars. Travelling brothels, he used to call them.

"They will never see God," he would roar at the top of his voice. "He who would lure a young woman into the back seat of his car is worse than an animal." At this time I used to do a bit of courting in the back seat of a car myself, that is whenever we were lucky enough to get the loan of a car. I didn't lure the girl in. She was quite willing and all that went on was a piece of handholding and maybe kiss or two. Nevertheless, my face would become suffused with the blushes of shame and I would wish for the ground to open and swallow me up.

Seriously speaking the roaring missionary must take a lot of blame for keeping people out of the churches and for unnecessarily filling many innocent people with terror. The gospel of love is always a winner.

Sweet Athea

MRS MARY Shine is the widow of the famous John J.

Shine who was sentenced to death in 1921 and who was hanged in Limerick Prison pending his execution. Shine now lives in Listowel, Close, Langley, which is near Maidstone, Kent.

I had the honour of having a drink with John Shine and his wife a few years ago. What I did not know at the time was that he composed a poem in Limerick Jail while he awaited his execution. It is called Sweet Athea. My wife has very kindly sent me a copy.

*I'm sitting in my cell
and lonely
As the twilight through
window strays
And I'm thinking of a
hamlet only
So distant and so far away
In a valley where the
brooks are tinkling
From the hillsides down
old and grey
And the sunbeams from*

*The senior
missioner was
fat red-faced
man with a
voice that
struck terror
into the hearts
of the
congregation
whenever he
lifted it*

*Ireland's cares are sinking
Cast a halo o'er you Sir
Athea.
And the shades of night
upon your hills are creeping
While your homestead
in peace repose
And the silvery moon
your valleys is peeping
To sparkle on your
flows.
For peace is never found
those who wander
Or happiness by those
stray
But absence make the heart
grow fonder
And faithful to you Sir
Athea.*

Mares Day

I MET Jack Wilberforce Faulkner one day last week. He was coming from Athlone where they were celebrating the Nominating of Mares Day. There were more than 60 mares in Athea according to Jack they passed. On the same day a mare and foal owned by an Athea man were sold for an unprecedented sum of hundred pounds.

We went for a drink. "Your mountain man," Jack explained, "is the