



**TIPPERARY HISTORICAL JOURNAL  
1991**

**© County Tipperary Historical Society**

**[www.tipperaryllibraries.ie/thc](http://www.tipperaryllibraries.ie/thc)  
[society@tipperaryllibraries.ie](mailto:society@tipperaryllibraries.ie)**

**ISSN 0791-0655**

# One Man's Flying Column

---

by Lieutenant - Colonel Thomas Ryan

## EDITORIAL INTRODUCTION

The *Tipperary Historical Journal* is pleased to publish, with the permission of his family, the first of three instalments of an autobiographical manuscript by one of the leading figures in the War of Independence in Co. Tipperary, the late Lieut. Col. Thomas Ryan. In addition to his military career, Tommy Ryan was also a prominent inter-county Gaelic footballer, and a member of the Tipperary team on 'Bloody Sunday' 1920, when (following an attack on the stadium by British military) 14 people (including the Tipperary captain, Michael Hogan) were killed. Tommy Ryan had been on the Tipperary team which lost the 1918 All Ireland football final to Wexford by one point, and in 1920 was on the victorious Tipperary team that defeated Dublin in the All-Ireland final.

Born in 1897 at Ballylooby, Tommy Ryan joined the Irish Volunteers in 1914 and was prominent with Sean Treacy in the re-organisation of that force in 1917. He became Vice-Commandant of the Third Tipperary Brigade, and from Bloody Sunday until the Anglo-Irish Truce in July 1921 was on the run. He fought under Dan Breen in a flying column from 1919 to 1921.

After the Anglo-Irish Treaty of 1921 Tommy Ryan took the pro-Treaty side and joined the new National Army of the Irish Free State. In the Civil War he took part in the attack on the Republican forces in the Four Courts, Dublin, and was wounded in the advance by Free State forces on Clonmel in August 1922 - described by An tAthair Colmcille, O. Cist. in the *Tipperary Historical Journal* of 1990. Declining an appointment as a Chief Superintendent of the new Gárda Síochána, Lieut. Col. Ryan served in the Army until the end of World War II. He was a founder-member and first Hon. Secretary of the Tipperary Association in Dublin, and died in 1980 aged 83.

I was born on the 13th September, 1897, at Tubrid, Ballylooby, Cahir, Co. Tipperary, my family being middle-class farmers. The name of Ryan had been connected with our farm for the past eight generations, which fact may be confirmed by an inspection of the headstone inscriptions in the graveyard at Newcastle, Co. Tipperary.

I learned as a boy that members of our family had figured in every Irish national movement of their time and that, in consequence, the pick of them were forced to emigrate. There was one outstanding athlete in the family two generations ago, Thomas Ryan, who is still remembered and spoken of among the people of the Galtee and Knockmealdown mountains.

I began my education as an infant in the local national schools. But my schooling finished there at the age of 12 because of the fact that my father died then, his death bringing about a domestic financial crisis which demanded my constant labour on the farm.

We were a family of seven, four boys and three girls, of whom I was third eldest, a brother being the eldest and a sister next to him. My eldest brother had contracted rheumatic fever at the age of 15 which left him unfit for work on the farm, so that, following my father's death, my mother had to rely upon me to carry on the work of the farm.

My memory of my schooldays centres about the pals I made there. The schoolmistress was a





*The late Col. Ryan in the uniform of the National Army.*

deeply religious woman and was outstanding as a religious instructor; but beyond that nothing else mattered to her. Nationality was never referred to, but instead we were taught in a fashion in keeping with the slave mentality of the period.

We were frequently lectured on the deference due to what was then termed the local gentry, to whom we were ordered to raise our hats in salute whenever they passed. I was caned several times following reports to the effect that I had failed to tip my cap to the local landlord.

The responsibility of running the farm had fallen directly upon my mother's shoulders after my father's death, and I was aware that the place was in debt at this time. She was a saintly, God-fearing woman, and I made up my mind that she would not be alone in the struggle to make provision for the family. So in the space of a few years we had cleared off the debt, and a few years later, when I was forced to go on the run, we had £3,000 in a deposit account.

This success was due partly to the fact that I had acquired a good knowledge of the cattle and sheep trade. The farmers in the locality, who appreciated my knowledge of the business, began to look upon

me as a lunatic when it became known that I was one of the principal officers in the local Volunteer organisation.

Looking back now upon my work, I feel that my efforts justified me to some extent. Each of my sisters received £600 by way of a fortune or dowry, an essential asset for a farmer's daughter in those days. To the present day they have each remembered, time and again, that their success was due to my early efforts.

As a boy growing up, even though I had little time for relaxation, I was head and neck in every devilment and diversion which took place in the neighbourhood. I followed the wren at Christmas, organised dances and was enthusiastic about hurling and football. I was still only a boy when I was asked to shave an old man who had died nearby, and I made such a good job of it that I was requested by a number of old men in the locality to give them their last shave.

I had reached the age of 15 when an Irish teacher named Carroll formed a voluntary night class for teaching the Irish language, and I became a member of this class, which continued for two years. Several of those attending the classes acquired a working knowledge of the Irish language; but our teacher also awakened our interest in Irish history.

Through him I got a history of Ireland, which I read with interest and learned of the wrongs that

had been inflicted on our country through the centuries. My interest quickened and I read the lives of Sarsfield and Michael Dwyer, and learned from old men in the locality of the wrongs inflicted by landlords, and of the execution of Father Sheehy and about Dr. Geoffrey Keating, who were connected with my native countryside.

Organised entertainment in the days of my youth was practically non-existent. The only big event outside a local wedding or an odd football match was an annual dance at Christmas. Neighbours met nightly at the crossroads to exchange gossip, and threshing operations were looked forward to as a social event where a panel of about 20 local farmers accompanied the threshing mill to each other's farms, and the end of each threshing was celebrated by singing and dancing.

It was an understood obligation upon the farmer whose corn had been threshed to provide scope for the celebration afterwards, and the local girls attended for the dancing. At such functions I heard, learned and sang the songs of Irish nationhood as well as Irish love songs; but it was the Irish national songs that made a deep impression on my mind.

My first effort at organisation was an occasion when I organised a crossroads dance in my own area. I collected some money from the neighbours with which I bought some timber, and with this constructed a dancing platform which provided amusement for many a year afterwards.

When the organisation of the Volunteers began, there was a Company formed in our parish some time about the beginning of the 1914-1918 war, of which I was elected Company Captain. This Company never became a very prominent unit and, the Redmondite split coming soon after its inception, it faded completely away.

I have a distinct recollection of the conditions existing in our locality at the start of the 1914-1918 war. The people of the garrison towns and the villages in my area were 100% pro-British, and some 85% of the country people had similar leanings.

My best pal at the time, who was also my second in-charge of the Volunteer Company, a lad named O'Brien, fell for the British propaganda of the period and decided to join the British Army. He was the son of a labouring man in the locality and a fine upstanding fellow of over six feet. He and I had many arguments on the rights and wrongs of the war and where our duty lay, and it finished with each of us going our own way.

He was killed at the battle of Mons, and I often regretted his passing when later we were fighting the British, knowing that he would have been foremost in the fight for Ireland on the hills of Tipperary. False propaganda had brought him to his doom.

The 1916 Rising in Dublin came to me as a bolt from the blue. Not being a Volunteer at the time, I had no reason to expect anything of the kind, and the news raised my mind to a fever of excitement, giving me the feeling that I wanted to do something to help the cause. I learned of the fighting from the local manager of the post office, and kept in constant touch with him throughout the week to learn more of the progress of events.

I knew Séan Treacy at this time, as his aunt was married to a cousin of mine named Walsh, and on Easter Monday I received a dispatch from him for delivery on the following day to Christy Ryan of Mitchelstown. On Easter Monday night I met my godfather, a local publican named James Hanrahan, and having discussed the fighting in Dublin, we decided to show our sympathy with the national cause by hoisting a tricolour on the topmost pinnacle of the highest steeple in the local Protestant church.

Hanrahan supplied the flag and I undertook the hoisting of it, which was successfully accomplished though at risk for my life. The top floor within the steeple collapsed under my weight when I was getting down, precipitating me some 16 feet to the next floor, but I fortunately sustained no serious injury. It took the British garrison from Cahir a week to shoot down this flag as none of them seemed capable or cared to undertake the dangerous task of climbing up to remove it.



I delivered my dispatch to Mitchelstown on the following day, Tuesday of Easter Week, and passing through Ballyporeen on my return trip I was arrested by the RIC and detained for questioning. Fortunately for me, however, there was an RIC man named Vaughan there who knew me, as he was paying attentions to the sister of James Hanrahan, my godfather. This man interceded for me and assured the others of my innocence, so that I was released after a short delay.

Immediately following the Rising the general local opinion, as expressed in daily conversations, was one of condemnation of the national leaders of the cause for which they had died. They considered that the general rank-and-file of the rebels were innocent, ignorant, misguided young men, and that the leaders had instigated the enterprise not to free Ireland but to help Germany.

There was, however, a small percentage of the youth of the rural areas who thought differently. They felt a strong admiration for and belief in the leaders of the Rising, and felt the urge to follow in their footsteps. There was no organisation and no arms in our area, but rebel songs were sung at every crossroads and we cherished the hope that the glory that was theirs would also be ours at some later stage.

My younger brother at school in Melleray had become keen on football. He came home one Christmas, bringing five or six other students with him to organise a local team in our district. There had never been a football team there before, but they got a lot of other young fellows in with them to form a team.

They played a match against a local team from Ardfinnan and, to the great surprise of everyone concerned, this scratch team played a draw against the Ardfinnan team. There was a re-play of this match before the students returned to school. This was, I think, in the year 1917.

A dispute arose when it was found that the Ardfinnan team was putting in some of their senior players to ensure victory in the re-play. I objected to this and challenged this procedure to the Ardfinnan team. They replied by telling me that I was as big as any of their players and why wouldn't I and any other big fellows we could muster go in against their players.

I had never played football in my life before and had only a pair of strong hob-nailed shoes on. In this way I went in to play my first football game. By the time the game was finished, I had succeeded in flattening out every player of the Ardfinnan team. I had the ball at the goalmouth but was unable to score - I knew so little about football.

Nevertheless this gave me an interest in the game which I followed up. One year later - in 1918 - I was selected to play on the county team, and played in the All Ireland final that year against Wexford.

Some time about April 1917 Séan Treacy made a few trips to the locality and suggested the organising of a Volunteer unit there. On his second visit to us he gave us an outline of the organisation and generally encouraged us, pointing out what should be done and how to do it. Treacy came to Ned McGrath of Cahir who afterwards became Battalion Commander of the 6th Battalion, and he spent two days between McGrath's place and mine trying to organise that Battalion.

As a result of Treacy's visit the Battalion was formed, with Ned McGrath as the Battalion Commandant. I was Vice Commandant: Mick Ladrigan was Battalion Adjutant; Bill Dempsey of Ballylooby was Battalion Quartermaster. That was the Battalion Staff. This was really the beginning of my career in the Volunteer movement.

Following Treacy's instructions, we set to work from then on to organise Companies in the surrounding parishes, to appoint officers for these and to direct their training. We had very little in the way of arms at this time, but we collected from well-wishers and sympathisers anything we could lay hands on in the way of shotguns and miscellaneous revolvers; but our armament was very poor.



The organising of Companies in this locality was difficult because the European war was not yet over and the general sympathies of the people around were still tending towards the British. In villages where, in the Redmondite Volunteer days, they were able to raise Companies of 100-150, we were only able to get together 5 or 6, or 10 at the outside.

The advent of the conscription crisis, however, brought about a bit of change in this respect, as recruits then flocked in, so that, where we had 8 or 10 men previously, we now had 60 or 80. When the threat of conscription had passed, most of these fell away again, leaving very few of those who came in during the conscription threat to become serious Volunteers.

I would say that, after the conscription crisis had passed, the strength of various companies in the Battalion averaged 12 to 20, and I think the strength of the whole Battalion did not exceed about 100. The Battalion area extended from Newcastle, Co. Tipperary, to the borders of Mitchelstown, along by the Galtees into Cahir. That was the 6th Battalion area of the South Tipperary Brigade.

In the political sphere the people around were generally supporters of the Irish Party. There was, therefore, no one to undertake political propaganda for the electioneering work except the Volunteers. The responsibility for this branch of activity became a primary duty of the Battalion Staff.

Consequently, a large part of our activities during the latter end of 1918 was devoted to the work in connection with the 1918 general election. We had to arrange for various meetings, people to make speeches at them, transport to take people around and Volunteer units to protect the speakers from interference. Besides some training and organisation, this constituted our chief activity at this time.

Ned McGrath, the Battalion Commandant, was arrested about this time. I can't remember precisely when it was that he was arrested, but he was imprisoned in Wormwood Scrubbs and was involved in the hunger-strikes there. The result was that the command and administration of the Battalion fell upon me as Vice Commandant during his absence.

We were very green and inexperienced in political methods and, in the carrying out of the work of the elections, we had to use our own imagination to do the best we could. I remember on one occasion I was passing through Ardfinnan when the Irish Parliamentary Party were holding a meeting which was being addressed by the local Irish Party representative, the MP for the constituency.

Feeling that it was my duty to do something about this, I got up on the platform and told this man off, that we would not tolerate this British propaganda. He got off and that finished the meeting. So perhaps our methods were crude and direct, but at least they were effective. P.J. Moloney was the Sinn Fein candidate in that area, and his candidature was successful in the election.

During the election days, the Volunteers mounted guards on the polling booths to prevent any attempt at hooliganism by any other elements. Volunteer guards accompanied the ballot boxes and mounted guard on them during the count, so that, as in other places, the Volunteers appeared to be in complete control of the election.

### **Soloheadbeg - and Jail**

On the 21st January, 1919, the same day as the assembly of the First Dáil, the attack on Soloheadbeg by the Tipperary Volunteers took place. I was in close touch with the Brigade Staff at this time and knew Dan Breen, Séan Treacy and the others very well. I did not actually know anything about the projected attack at Soloheadbeg but, on the day it occurred, I got a message from Treacy informing me that it had taken place and that they, the attacking party, intended to stay at my place that night.

As it happened, there was a threshing machine coming to our place on the same evening to begin





Dan Breen — a photo taken in the 1960s.

threshing operations the following day, which, of course, brought a lot of people around the place. There was also a strong rumour current that I was about to be arrested as a result of my appearing in command and drilling Volunteers openly at Clogheen a short time before that.

I left my own house that evening to meet Treacy, Breen and Seamus Robinson at Tincurry but, when I arrived there, I was told that they had changed their plans. I then returned home. On the following morning my home was raided by six RIC men and I was arrested. I was tried in Clogheen Court that day and sentenced to three months' imprisonment.

Discussing this afterwards with Breen and Treacy, they remarked that it would have been a bad job for the RIC if they had carried out their original intention to stay with me on that night. They would have attacked the raiding party the moment they appeared.

Up to a short time previous to my arrest I had no arms, but a short time before I was arrested I succeeded in gaining possession of a Webley revolver in a peculiar manner. There was a British Army officer named La Terriere who was stationed in Cahir Barracks and who was married to a lady in

the locality named Grubb. This officer was a pretty wealthy man and knocked about the country, driving a pony and trap usually and spending money freely in hotel bars and suchlike. He was known to go about armed with a revolver.

At this time I was making some dummy rifles - wooden guns - for the purpose of drilling the Volunteers, and I took great delight in making these as realistic looking as possible. I had just completed the making of about six of these one day when I saw La Terriere coming along the road. On the spur of the moment I decided to hold him up.

I went to a point about 200 yards from my home, where I hid myself behind a gate pier until he came along. Producing my wooden gun, I held him up. He dropped his revolver and proceeded on his way. In this manner I gained possession of my first revolver, a long Webley 45.

I am not sure whether La Terriere was then a serving officer or not, but he continually frequented Cahir Barracks and his father-in-law's place. He had been left a lot of money from time to time and lived a riotous kind of life in the locality. He may have been an intelligence officer; but I don't know for sure.

I therefore had possession of this revolver at the time of my arrest, but it was not in the house with me. I had it planked in a calf-shed about a field away from the house, where it was carefully hidden. Consequently, even if it had occurred to me to resist arrest, I had no arms by me at the time. The question of violent resistance to arrest had not arisen at that time, so that I don't know whether, if I had the gun at hand, I would have used it to avoid arrest or not. I think that things had not progressed sufficiently far at that time to take such action, and I doubt whether I would have done so.

When I was arrested on the day following the Soloheadbeg ambush - January 22nd, 1919 - I received a sentence of three months' imprisonment, which I served in Waterford jail. On the day of my release, which would be some time in April, 1919, the Governor of the Jail sent for me that I was being released.

He proceeded to give me a lecture on my future conduct. Realising, however, that I was not

listening to him, he got very annoyed and called me a young pup, saying, "Do you think a lot of pups like you can defeat the British Government?", and dismissed me contemptuously from his presence.

Leaving Waterford, I went to Dungarvan where the Tipperary football team was then in training. The Tipperary players had to go into Waterford to carry out their training as there was martial law in Tipperary at the time and no assemblies were allowed by the military authorities. As I was one of the Tipperary All-Ireland footballers at this time, there was a reception arranged for me on my arrival there. I went into training with the rest of the team and nothing much happened there for a fortnight.

The team were staying at the Eagle Hotel in Dungarvan. We learned in the course of our stay there that the barmaid in the hotel was being courted by one of the local RIC constables. We got to know where they met and when. So one night another member of the team, Bill Grant, and myself went for a walk in that direction when it was dark and we saw the two of these sitting on a seat in the park.

Turning up our coat collars and pulling our caps down over our eyes, we came up behind. Seeing his revolver lying handy, I grabbed it and we left them. Having hidden this revolver away, I had it when the Column started. When I grabbed the revolver, we held him up and he did not seem to know whether we were joking or in earnest but, as I had the revolver before he could do anything, he was helpless.

The joke of the matter was that there was not a word about this incident afterwards. No one was arrested, nor was there any mention of the loss of his revolver. I don't know how the constable managed to get away with it, or whether he reported its loss or concealed the fact. Neither the policeman nor the girl appeared to have recognised us, although we were both staying in the hotel.

I was Officer Commanding the 6th Battalion South Tipperary Brigade from about May, 1920, until November, 1920. I also acted as Battalion O/C for a period in 1919. This was in the absence of Ned McGrath, who was Battalion Commander and who was imprisoned during these periods.

Mick Ladrigan was Adjutant of the Battalion. He being a man who had nothing much to do otherwise, I thought he would be a better man to look after the organisation of the Battalion, as I had my work on the farm to attend to and could not devote sufficient time to the Battalion. I brought this matter up at a Battalion Council meeting and convinced the other officers that it would be in the best interests of the Battalion to appoint Ladrigan as Acting Officer Commanding. He therefore acted in that capacity for some months.

I am not very clear on the dates of my appointment as Acting Battalion Commander. I took up this job when Ned McGrath was arrested on two occasions, and I don't remember just when that was. I know that during McGrath's imprisonment he was on the hunger strike which took place in Wormwood Scrubbs Prison in London. This might, perhaps, fix the approximate date of his arrest.

It was during this first period of McGrath's imprisonment that I first took over as Acting Battalion Commander, which position I held for a few months until, as I have said, I handed over to Mick Ladrigan. Ladrigan then carried on as Battalion Commander until he also was arrested, and it was then I took over for the second time.

I think this second take-over of the Battalion would have been about April, 1920. I am not clear as to the circumstances surrounding Ned McGrath's position because I think he was released, or came back and resumed his appointment for a short time, but was again arrested and interned from then until some time after the Truce.

During the period I acted as Officer Commanding the Battalion, I had occasion to preside at the trial of three spies or, at any rate, people who were suspected of spying for the enemy. This was in the early part of the war, when the manner of dealing with spies had not been formally established.

In the case of these three, the evidence against them was not very conclusive. They were people





of the itinerant class, and the way we dealt with them was to take them by the ear about 20 miles out of the area where they were left, with the warning that, if they appeared again in the area, they would be shot at sight.

Another thing I would like to refer to, which occurred about that time also, concerned a man named Chris Conway, who was a member of our Column afterwards. It was reported to us from a Company Commander of the Galtee Battalion that there was an ex-British soldier named Conway in his area whom he was convinced was a spy. I summoned a Battalion Council meeting to inquire into this matter. Evidence regarding this man's movements was sought.

The Company Commander concerned, while he could produce no concrete proofs of the man's guilt, was adamant in his conviction that the man was a spy. In this predicament I put it to the Company Commander, in view of his rooted conviction, as to whether he would accept responsibility for taking the life of Conway, but he would not accept this, although he still adhered to his belief that Conway was a spy.

The matter was left standing for the moment but I was not too happy about my decision in the matter, and so I arranged to meet Conway and investigate the matter further. I found out from him that he had deserted from a number of regiments in the British Army during the war, not because he was afraid to fight but because he felt unwilling to fight for England, though he had been driven by economic pressure to join the British Army in the first place. He claimed a pride in being an Irishman and stated that it was his ambition to fight for Ireland. I kept him under observation from that time until the Column was formed.

Some time after that, I invited Conway to take part in an attack on the RIC Barracks at Ballyporeen. He was posted in the most dangerous position during the attack where we kept him under observation, with a view to shooting him at once if he showed any sign of treachery in his behaviour. Instead, to our surprise, he showed himself fearless and determined in the course of the attack, and demonstrated to those of us who watched him how a man should behave under fire.

From that night onwards, he became the white-haired boy and was taken into the Column without having taken the Volunteer oath. He remained with the Column through all its activities until the Truce and was our principal instructor in drill and musketry, being an expert on these subjects through his British Army training.

Conway was fearless and a natural born fighter. I often thought in the subsequent years that, had the circumstances afforded him the opportunity, he might have become a famous leader like Tom Barry, for instance. During the Spanish Civil War, he was killed while fighting with the Irish Brigade.

He had a very varied career, having been in the National Army for a time from 1922. When he went to Spain with the Irish Brigade, he assumed the name of Tommy Ryan - that is, my name - and when he became a casualty it was under this name.

An incident which occurred during one of the periods when I was acting as Battalion Commander, about 1919 or early 1920, deserves mention. I am not sure of the date, but the particular incident is mentioned in Ernie O'Malley's book which may give the date. It was while he was in Tipperary as organiser.

A Battalion Council meeting was held at Mrs. Tobin's of Tincurry, at which Séan Treacy and Ernie O'Malley were present. After the meeting Treacy and O'Malley detained me to go into some question on training details. We had just about finished our discussion when we got word to the effect that the local Company had been rounded up and were all arrested. We did not know at the time what had happened, but Treacy said, "Come on! We will see what this is all about!", and we headed for the main Mitchelstown-Cahir road.

When we reached the main road we saw on the Mitchelstown side of us, about 400 yards away,



a troop of cavalry coming towards us. There were about 30 or so of these horsemen. The prisoners, amounting to about 40, were being marched along between the files of soldiers, handcuffed in pairs. We learned afterwards that the Company had been surprised at drill and the soldiers apparently had been informed where to find them, because they came prepared with handcuffs to take them in.

When the troops were within about 300 yards of us, the three of us opened fire on them with our pistols and revolvers. A couple of horses fell and there was a general stampede, the soldiers jumping from their horses and flying for cover. In the middle of the excitement, the prisoners cleared off, handcuffed as they were. All the Volunteers made good their escape, though some of them remained in their handcuffs for hours before they were able to get rid of them.

This incident was one that demonstrated the character of Séan Treacy. He was full of enterprise and initiative. It was he who first suggested that we should go and see what had happened and it was he, when we saw the soldiers coming towards us with their prisoners, decided that we should attack them.

He was armed with his parabellum pistol; O'Malley had a Peter-the-Painter and I had a 45 Webley revolver. It was characteristic of Séan that he would take the offensive whatever the odds, and he probably realised that the surprise of our fire would be effective in concealing the weakness of our force.

### Arms Coup in Cahir

Another incident that occurred about that time shows how the gradual arming of the Tipperary Volunteers was carried on. Cahir town, by reason of the fact that it was a garrison town and that most of the population were the loyalist type, was considered a good place for the people in Dublin to send consignments of arms for Tipperary Volunteers.

Some time in 1919, or it may have been early 1920, such a consignment was sent, packed in egg boxes. It was consigned to the hardware shop of Irwin's of Cahir. Irwin's had no connection with the Volunteers and were looked upon, if anything, as antagonistic.

There were only three Volunteers in the town of Cahir. Two of these had been arrested and were in jail at this time, and the third was a man who worked in Irwin's but at this time was on holidays.

Irwin's shop was next-door to the RIC Barracks. When this particular consignment of arms arrived and the Volunteer assistant being away on holidays, the boxes were opened by Mr. Irwin himself. The consignment consisted of some 5 or 6 rifles and bayonets, ammunition and hand-grenades.

When Irwin saw this, he became alarmed but, though a loyalist, he said nothing about it except to one of his assistants, whom he asked to get in touch with somebody to have this stuff removed from his premises.

This young assistant came out to my place one evening, there being no Volunteer living anywhere between my place and Cahir. I therefore had no one to fall back on to get the stuff away, and so I had to do something about it myself. I decided that if I went into Cahir, all dressed up, I would be sure to be arrested. On the other hand, I had often been seen in town in my ordinary working clothes, where I went often on a Monday to pig fairs and markets, and I decided to take a chance on this.

I took a horse and cart and drove into the town as I was. I drove into the market yard and waited there until an opportune moment arrived to pull down to Irwin's end, when the coast was clear, threw the cases up on the cart. I drove off for Brigade Headquarters at Rosegreen, where I delivered the stuff and returned home without incident.

During the time I was Officer Commanding the 6th Battalion Séan Treacy instructed me, following a Battalion Council meeting, to make arrangements for the capture of Ardfinnan RIC



barracks. The situation of it was such that it would not be taken other than through a ruse. I decided to request a publican's daughter, a cousin of mine, to do a line with one of the local RIC for the purpose of securing vital information of their movements.

I ascertained in due course that all the RIC went to 8 o'clock Mass on Sunday morning, with the exception of one left in Barracks. I conveyed the information to Treacy. Treacy came to my home on a Saturday evening and made plans for rushing the barracks next morning.

I consulted with Pa Maher, one of the few Volunteers in the village, to scout the village early on Sunday morning and report to Mochra cross-roads at 8 o'clock. He reported and, to our surprise, he stated that there was plenty of military in the village.

The attack was abandoned and we were at a loss to know what happened. I got the impression that my cousin had fallen for the RIC man. Such, however, was not the case. The following may explain somewhat.

When I was Officer Commanding the Free State garrison in Clonmel in 1922, an RIC man from Ardfinnan presented himself for an interview with the O/C. My curiosity was aroused and I accorded him the interview. His statement to me was that they, the RIC of Ardfinnan, had an understanding with the local O/C of the Volunteers to the effect that the O/C and the Volunteers in his area could feel safe from molestation or arrest provided the RIC Barracks was not attacked.

Also, this particular RIC man had an assurance that if the Volunteers were successful and that if it should come about that a new police force was established, he would be accepted without question. This was his story to me, and his principal purpose in calling was to state his case for application to the *Gárda Síochána*. Needless to say I didn't recommend him.

It was apparent to me in November, 1920 that the might of the British Empire had been massed and prepared for one great blow to wipe out the Irish Republican Army. I had visions that this fight might last ten years, and my desire therefore was that I should become a first-class soldier, hoping to fight under the leadership of Séan Treacy.

I had great confidence in Treacy, and felt that with him in command we would bring honour to our native county, Tipperary, in the fighting ahead for our national freedom. Treacy's death in October of that year came as a considerable shock to me.

I was a farmer's son working 16 hours a day, and though it was my burning desire to study military tactics, I did not have an opportunity to do so. I realised that to be a leader it was essential to be fully conversant with military tactics and strategy in order to counter the enemy moves and beat its forces in the field.

I was particularly convinced that one of the essential qualities of a leader was his ability to safeguard the lives of the men he led and not to sacrifice these carelessly. I believed that I would be fighting in my own area, and that as few are prophets in their own country I could lay no claim to leadership.

In brief, I had no desire to be an officer of any rank but considered that I would be sufficiently honoured if I could prove myself a good soldier in the field. I appreciated the heavy responsibility that rested upon the General Staff of the IRA, and that any let-down to GHQ would be a let-down to our cause. Hence none but the best fitted to command would be good enough to put the GHQ plans into action. I felt that if blundering ineptitude were revealed on the part of any IRA leader in any action that we might face, it would be a betrayal of the spade-work of the national cause done in 1916.

I gave many anxious thoughts to the situation confronting us at this time. I knew from Treacy that Columns were about to be formed, and that these would consist of picked men, men not afraid to die, and who, if by any chance captured, would reveal no secret, regardless of threats or painful sufferings.



The area I commanded, that is, the 6th Battalion area, covered the valley which lies between the Galtee and the Knockmealdown Mountains. Up to then I had not been connected with any actual fighting or, in fact, in any action where firearms were used. I had undergone a term of imprisonment and I had carried out my duties as Acting Battalion Commander which, up to that time, entailed little beyond a few raids for arms and a raid on the mails, besides training and organisation.

I was on one raid on the mails which was at Gormanstown, near Ardfinnan. Three of us held up the local mail car, which was driven by a Post Office official, and having taken the mails from it, we censored the official correspondence included in it or, in fact, all letters addressed to the local RIC or other officials in the area. This was for the purpose of gaining information of their activities and of ascertaining whether or not there were any spies in the area.

So I felt that someone else with an established reputation as a soldier who had seen some action should command the Battalion. At that time I did not feel sure how I would react to military action; I did not know whether or not I might become so frightened as to be unable to give as good an account of myself as I might wish.

While I looked forward to the coming fight and hoped to prove myself a good soldier when it came, I felt that it would be unfair of me to go into my first fight in a responsible position of command. So I cast about for someone else who could fill the position more adequately.

All these things had occupied my mind before Treacy's death; but, following his death, I felt I had to make a serious decision about all these things. After a lot of anxious consideration of the problems involved, I solemnly made up my mind that, if I went into the fight which I intended to do, I would in all probability become a casualty.

I thought to myself that, if I must die, I would die bravely as Treacy had done but that I did not want to involve anyone else in my decision. That was why I wanted to be an ordinary soldier and not the officer commanding the Column.

The strange effect of coming to this serious decision was that any fears I had hitherto had evaporated and that, for the first time, I felt really happy and contented. It wasn't that I wanted to die or anything like that, but I considered it in this way: here we were ready to face a trained, disciplined and well-armed army, while we were only very ill-trained, ill-armed and with a casual sort of discipline. Number for number, we therefore could not stand a moment against the enemy except we had something else, or some other quality that would throw the balance in our favour, such as courage.

If one had absolute courage and were not afraid, we might well snap our fingers at those well-trained, well-armed forces who had little to sustain them in the face of death, except their expectation of wordly reward, which would be of little use to them if they were killed. It was this line of reasoning that brought me to the decision that I would die, that I would offer my life in the cause for freedom in such a way that my death might be an example to my fellows.

We Volunteers in the rural areas from 1917 onwards were very enthusiastic and impatient. We had great expectations during that time of getting supplied with arms. At times we got encouraging messages from General Headquarters and at other times very confusing messages but, particularly in 1918, we were part-soldiers, part-politicians, and we became very confused regarding the role we were to play.

Up to the date of Treacy's death, we pinned our faith in him as the leader in whom we had the utmost confidence. I knew him well and I knew his worth. He was a man who knew precisely what he was doing and why he was doing it, and he radiated that confidence which we all felt in him. It was men like that who were selected for leadership and who carried the confidence of others, particularly so where, as in my case, I felt that I had not sufficient knowledge.

Losing Treacy was like losing the captain of a football or a hurling team. We were thrown on our



own resources. Knowing the critical situation that we faced and feeling, as I did, that almost any day now we would be in a condition of open war, brought my thoughts towards the critical decision, as I have already stated, where I had made up my mind to die in the fight and to die bravely in the best attempt I could make to carry on that fight.

From my knowledge of the psychological make-up of the Volunteers I was associated with, I knew that, while there were many other serious-minded men like myself, yet, however, there were few prepared to die. The vast majority were inclined to treat matters lightly and casually, not giving serious thought to the possible developments of the future.

Perhaps I was rather more serious-minded in this way than most of the others with whom I was associated. Maybe my early training, having the responsibility of a farm and providing for my family thrust upon me at an early age, had tended to influence me in this way. But, when I said here that we expected the coming fight pretty soon and were, in fact, impatient for its event, I considered this fight as a matter of open war where we would have to fight every day against the overwhelming numbers of the enemy.

I felt the inadequacy of my own training and preparedness for this and realised that few others were much better than I was. But I nevertheless was determined to go on and to sustain the fight in the best way we could for as long as such a fight might last, or until we had all become casualties. This was why I felt forced to make the serious and solemn decision that I would die.

I said to myself, and to myself only, 'For God and Ireland!' and, as I have stated already, when I had registered this solemn vow to myself, I felt extremely happy about it. I felt confident now for the first time that I would be a good soldier and would not flinch. But I still felt that, until I had gained experience, I was not capable of command where I must take responsibility for the lives of others as well.

The fact that I would not consent to become Flying Column Commander was a disappointment to the Company Commanders who gave me their enthusiastic support. The Brigade Commander, Séamus Robinson, also expressed his disappointment that I would not accept command of the Column. I had suggested Séan Hogan for this appointment because Hogan had indicated to me that he was willing and even anxious to be appointed as Column Commander.

I was invited by the Brigade Commander to attend at Brigade Headquarters, which was at Rosegreen. It was there that I discussed this matter of the appointment of a Column Commander with Séamus Robinson. Seán O'Meara was present with Robinson when I went to Brigade Headquarters. Robinson asked me what was the idea of inviting Hogan to take command of the Battalion and the Column. I told him that I felt that Hogan was more capable than I of carrying out the duties of such an appointment.

As I said already, up to then I had had no real active service whereas Séan Hogan, though he was only a boy at the time, had gained a certain fame through his connection with the Soloheadbeg raid and his rescue by Treacy and the others at Knocklong. In fact, his name had become a household word in Tipperary by that time, where songs commemorating the Knocklong rescue were sung.

He lived at the opposite side of the Galtee mountains but, as his name was so well known, I felt he would be acceptable to the Battalion as its Commanding Officer. I put this argument before Séamus Robinson.

I had known Hogan before this, as I had looked after him when he had stayed at my place for some time following the Knocklong rescue. At this period he held no appointment, but was merely a Staff Officer going around and having no other work to do. He visited my Battalion area pretty often because he was at that time paying attentions to a girl in that area, whom he afterwards married.

He knew that my time was very largely occupied in attending fairs and markets. He had put it up to me to nominate him for the Battalion and Column appointment as, he suggested, he had more



time and was better able to look after these things than I was.

Robinson, however, knew Hogan rather better than I did, and his remarks to me on this occasion showed his wisdom. He said: "If you insist in handing over the Battalion to Hogan, you will regret it". I could not see any reason why I should ever regret such a thing at the time, and so Hogan was appointed to the command of the 6th Battalion. Fighting as an individual for Ireland meant everything to me; rank and command meant nothing.

I have mentioned here indiscriminately the command of the Battalion and of the Column. The explanation is that, even before Séan Treacy's death, he had forecast the start of the Columns. In fact, he had told me that he would be starting a Column "next month", that is, some time shortly before his death.

In our minds, therefore, the command of the Battalion meant nothing other than administration, training and protecting the Columns. The Column, as we looked upon it at this time, would be the picked fighting men of the Brigade area and commanded by the officer with the best record to date of fighting leadership.

The question of starting the Column was, in fact, referred by Hogan to me when he asked me to nominate him for the appointment. He pointed out what would be involved by this, the kind of special training that would be required for the Column members and the business of going around the Companies selecting suitable men and all that.

He pointed out to me that I had not got the time to devote to it, while he knew what was wanted and had ample time at his disposal. He pointed out that not only would he be able to give his full-time to this work but that he proposed to bring Jack Nagle of Knockgraffon over to our Battalion area to assist him in the work.

Hogan's arguments in favour of his own appointment agreed, in fact, with my own views at the time and I therefore was very anxious to have him appointed to the position. The chief argument Robinson made against Hogan's appointment was that he considered him too young for the job. At any rate he was appointed. He took up duties in the Battalion right away, and he brought Jack Nagle of Knockgraffon along with him to assist him.

### **Bloody Sunday: Croke Park**

The details of my experiences of Bloody Sunday, which may be of interest, are given here. I was a member of the Tipperary All-Ireland football team which travelled to Dublin to play a match at Croke Park on Sunday November 21, 1920 which became known afterwards as Bloody Sunday. We travelled to Dublin on the previous day, Saturday.

The Tipperary team was selected from all over the county in a similar way to which it is to-day and, as we travelled to Dublin by train, it was not until we reached Ballybrophy that we had our full complement of players on the train. Here we were joined by the Kilkenny train which carried four of our players, Mick Hogan, Jerry Shelly, Dick Lanigan and Seán Brett.

An incident which happened shortly after the train left Ballybrophy station may have given rise to a statement which appeared in the press on the following Monday, that "a band of assassins had come up from Tipperary to carry out the shootings in Dublin on the Sunday". One of the players, Jacky Brett, who was killed later in the fighting, was with a Father Delahunty from Kilkenny in one of our carriages. A crowd of soldiers of the Lincolnshire Regiment, who boarded the train, came into their carriage and made some unseemly remarks to Brett and the priest.

Brett, resenting these remarks, went for them but he was knocked down and Fr. Delahunty called for assistance. We at this time were engaged in a penny 'twenty-five' card game and had not noticed the disturbance. We rushed to the carriage and, when we saw what had happened, we saw red and



Jim Ryan and I enjoyed ourselves immensely by playing handball with half-a-dozen of these soldiers.

When we finally had them all down for the count, we took two of them up and pitched them out through the carriage window. By this time the whole train was wildly excited, but things calmed down as we travelled along.

Considering matters in a calmer light, we fully expected to be met by military and police and placed under arrest when we reached Kingsbridge [Heuston]. There was no indication of any reception party at Kingsbridge when we arrived there, but we decided nevertheless to scatter. The team was booked to stay at Barry's Hotel in Gardiner Place but, instead of that, we divided ourselves up amongst several other hotels.

Hogan and I were, in fact, the only two Volunteer officers on the team and so went to Phil Shanahan's. There we learned of the plans to execute the British Intelligence officers on the following day. It would be nine o'clock on the Saturday night before Bloody Sunday that we were in Phil Shanahan's. We were not told any details of what was being done. We just heard that there was a big job coming off in the morning.

While we were at Phil Shanahan's D.P. Walsh came along. Seemingly D.P. had information about the plans for the morning, and he was on a mission to collect arms and ammunition. He asked me to accompany him down to Phil Shanahan's cellar, where there were some revolvers and .45 ammunition contained in porter bottles. D.P. then asked me to accompany him and to carry some of this stuff for him up to Fleming's Hotel in Gardiner Place.

The plan we adopted was to walk one on either side of the street on our route up Gardiner Place with the understanding that, should one of us be intercepted or fired at by any enemy agent, the other would be in a position to assist by firing on the attacker. Sudden raids and hold-ups on the street were common in Dublin at this time, and this was my first experience of war conditions in the city.

Having deposited the material at Fleming's Hotel, arriving there without incident, we returned again to Phil Shanahan's that night and I volunteered to take part in the job, whatever it was to be, on the next morning. In between times, we had gone to confession and felt then that we were fully prepared to meet anything that might turn up.

Seemingly somebody in Phil Shanahan's that night had got worried about the fact that we had learned that there was a job coming off the next morning, and so there was an atmosphere of hush-hush. We were told that the whole thing had been called off or postponed or something. So we returned to our lodgings and went to bed.

The first intimation of the shooting I had was when Phil Shanahan called on us the next morning to tell us about it. Going for a walk across the town, we went around Mount Street and these places where the shootings had taken place; but, of course, there was nothing to be seen there then.

About eleven o'clock that morning, I got a message from Dan Breen, who was staying somewhere in Phibsboro, to say that he was returning to Tipperary soon and would be glad to have me accompany him. He also said that he thought it would be very inadvisable for me to appear at Croke Park that day. Notwithstanding this appeal, I went to Croke Park to take my place with the Tipperary team on the field.

The general story of the attack by Auxiliaries upon the assembled crowd at Croke Park has been written up on a number of occasions, and so I only give here my own impressions of what occurred to me at the time. The match was in progress for about ten minutes when an aeroplane flew overhead and fired a Verey light signal. Tipperary was playing Dublin on this occasion and the play was concentrating about the Dublin goal.

A penalty had been awarded against the Dublin team, and I was about to take the free kick when





*Stephen Synnott - from the photograph of the Dublin team taken before the game in Croke Park on "Bloody Sunday", November 1920.*

(LOANED BY HIS SON SEAN SYNNOTT, DUBLIN).

a burst of machine-gun and rifle fire occurred. The crowd of spectators immediately stampeded. The players also fled from the field in among the sideline spectators except six of us who threw ourselves on the ground where we were.

The six of us who remained - Hogan and I and four of the Dublin team - were, I think, all Volunteers. I suppose it was our Volunteer training that prompted us to protect ourselves by lying down rather than rushing around. From where we lay, we could see sparks flying off the railway embankment wall where the bullets struck the wall, and we saw people rolling down the embankment, who presumably were hit. There was general pandemonium at this stage between the firing, people rushing and a general panic amongst the crowd.

Two of the players who were lying on the field at this stage got up and made a rush for the paling surrounding the pitch on the Hill Sixty [now Hill 16] side, which was nearest to them. One by one we followed their example, and it was while Hogan

was running from the field to the paling that he got hit by a bullet. I think Josie Synnott [Dublin] and myself were the last to leave the field.

Going across to Hogan, I tried to lift him, but the blood was spurting from a wound in his back and I knew he was very badly injured. He made the exclamation when I lifted him: "Jesus, Mary and Joseph! I am done!" and he died on the spot. My hands and my jersey were covered with his blood.

Making a quick survey of the situation, I ran for a spot in the paling. The Auxiliaries had not come in on the playing-pitch but were all around the grounds marshalling the people into groups, making them keep their hands up searching them, while here and there some of them kept firing shots in all directions.

As I reached the paling, I saw one 'Auxie' loading a round into the breech of his rifle who appeared to be looking in my direction. I dropped to the ground, and a youngster near me fell, which I took to be from the shot that was intended for me. So, jumping over the paling, I got into the crowd.

At this stage the firing began to die down and I began to think. Realising that I was a wanted man - the police had been looking for me at my home a few days before I left - and that, therefore, I would probably be arrested at least, I cast about for some means of escape.

I was the only member of the Tipperary team who wore the national tricolour in my stockings and knickers, and I realised that this fact alone made me conspicuous. I made a dash across Hill Sixty and got out of Croke Park over the wall.

I made my way into a house in Clonliffe Road, where I thought I was safe. I was only a short time in the house, however, when it was surrounded by the Black and Tans or Auxiliaries. They forced in the door of the house. An old man who made some remark to them in the hall was knocked down with a blow from the butt of a revolver.

One of them, seeing me, said, "There is one of the Tipperary assassins! Take him out and shoot him!" Two of them had bayonets drawn, and I was knocked down and the stockings and knickers ripped off me with the bayonets, leaving me naked.



Just then an officer came on the scene and instructed the Auxiliaries to bring me back into Croke Park, where I would be shot with the rest of the team. I believe they would have shot me there and then, were it not for the intervention of the officer who, I think, acted not from motives of mercy, but just that he wanted to be tidy and, instead of having odd shootings here and there, to have them all done together in Croke Park.

I was marched along the road, quite naked, and in the course of my move back to Croke Park, I could see people rushing about. They were jumping from the wall out of Croke Park, and one man had become impaled on the spikes of an iron railing. A spike of the railing had penetrated his thigh and, while he was in this predicament, others were using his body to step over the railing on him.

A man who was standing with his girl friend, with his hands up, taking pity on my nakedness, threw me a coat; but his thanks for this was a blow from the butt of a rifle from one of the Auxiliaries. As I entered the grounds, I saw a priest ministering to the wounded and dying, and a drunken 'Tan' coming up behind him and knocking him flat with the butt of a revolver. The priest was holding aloft the Blessed Sacrament at the time. The people in the grounds had been holding their hands up for about 20 minutes at this time, and numbers were collapsing from the strain.

I found myself eventually back at the railway wall inside Croke Park, where I was placed in company with the remainder of the team. I was still in my nakedness as the Auxiliaries had refused to allowed me to take the coat I was offered. The newspapers the following day made reference to a naked player. I was the one they referred to.

I and the remainder of the team were lined up against the railway embankment wall, and a firing party stood in front of us. There we remained until all the people in the grounds had been searched. We fully expected to be shot, as the Auxiliaries had promised us, but later a military officer informed us that, if any shooting or resistance took place during the searching of the crowd, he had orders to shoot two of us for every such incident.

Our clothes, which had been left in the dressing-room, were searched for documents or arms. Not finding anything like that, they relieved us of every penny they found in our pockets. That night, as we were penniless, an ex-British army officer, who was in sympathy with us and Ireland's cause, divided £50 amongst the team to enable us to subsist and get home to Tipperary. His name was Jack Kavanagh of Seville Place.

When our clothes had been searched by the Auxiliaries and they had found nothing incriminating, we were released and then we scattered. The Dublin players were very good to us and took us to their homes, which were mostly around about Seville Place and [St. Laurence] O'Toole's parish. That is how we met Jack Kavanagh.

I stayed that night at Stephen Synnott's house, which was somewhere off Seville Place. There was a raid in the locality that night, and someone about three doors away was taken out and shot by the military or Auxiliary raiding party. We heard the sounds of the raid and the shots.

Thinking it was for us they were coming, Tommy O'Connor, myself and Synnott went out into the yard. Running into the middle of a heap of manure, we covered ourselves in this and waited until the excitement had died away. Actually, none of the raiding party came to Synnott's house.

I remained in Dublin over the Monday, returning to Tipperary for Hogan's funeral about Wednesday. I did not go home, however, as the police and military had raided my home looking for me that night, and they raided the place in search of me once, and sometimes twice, a week from then onwards until the Truce. From then on, I became a full-time Volunteer.

