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West Cork
Stories of the Revolution
1916 - 1923

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Person 1 interviewed: Diarmuid Kingston (my Grandad) Timoleague, Co Cork.

Burgatia House Attack

From numerous documented reports circulated on this attack, it can be ascertained that about 3 a.m on the morning of 1 February, 1921, the flying column of the IRA under the command of Tom Barry commandeered Burgatia House which belonged to a British loyalist and his family. It was the IRA's intention to use the property as a base to launch an attack on the police barracks in the nearby town of Rosscarbery. This large house, situated just off the Clonakilty to Rosscarbery main road, was about a mile from the town. However, the IRA's presence was made known to the military and police in the town by a postman who had called to the house. Although the postman had sworn to the IRA men that he would not report their presence and was duly released, he went straight to the barracks in the town.

Following this, a large force of police and military began a manoeuvre to encircle the house. Fearing they would be left with no line of retreat, since the sea blocked their escape route on the southern side, Barry ordered thirty riflemen to delay their fire until the British forces were in the open and vulnerable before opening fire. The sudden fusillade of shots sent the British troops running back for cover to an adjoining wood. This gave Barry and his men the opportunity to make their escape to the north-east. A number of IRA men returned to the house later that night and burned it to the ground.

The postman, a local man, fled to England. Had he remained in Ireland, he most certainly would have been shot. Another local man, O'Sullivan by name, alleged by the IRA of helping the British with their enquiries into the Burgatia attack, was shot and killed. He was a worker on the estate of a Miss Whitley who was a neighbour of 'Big' Tom Kingston who owned Burgatia House. The Kingston's also fled to England, never to return, their substantial property being taken over by the Free State Land Commission the following year and allocated out to suitable applicants. Tom Barry openly stated that he would have shot and killed Tom Kingston if any of his actions resulted in the death of a Volunteer.

However, Kingston did admit that he carried mails in his motor car for the police and military but said he did so to prevent ambushes and loss of life. His actions would be viewed by the IRA as a treasonable offence and would carry the death penalty. In this case, most people felt that Tom Barry, who was also a native of Rosscarbery, was giving Tom Kingston the benefit of a very dubious doubt.

Attack on Rosscarbery Barracks



The barracks came under attack from the Flying Column of the Third Cork Brigade under the command of Tom Barry about 1 a.m on the morning of 31 March 1921. A mine was detonated at the front door of the building, partly destroying it and blowing in several windows. Through these breaches, the IRA threw home-made bombs and canisters of petrol commandeered from local shops.

The fight continued for several hours with the RIC ignoring calls to surrender. With the ground floor completely demolished and the upper stories ablaze, the policemen escaped from the rear of the building into the grounds of an adjoining convent. Before doing so, they threw all their weapons into the burning building. Tom Barry afterwards said he made a decision not to fire on the escaping policemen since there was no record of them having committed crimes against civilians or Volunteers. There were two fatalities, Sergeant Ambrose O' Shea and Temporary Constable Charles H. Bowles. It is thought they were killed when the first floor collapsed since both their bodies were found under the debris on the ground floor.

The following day was fair day in Rosscarbery with the streets thronged with people and animals. An unexploded bomb from the previous nights fighting was unintentionally detonated, killing three people including a four year old child. One of the victims was a grandfather of Chris Collins of Lisavaird Co-Op.

Killing of Policemen



In the nearby parish of Timoleague, the killing of three policemen on 10 May 1920, signalled the greatest loss of life suffered by the Regular RIC in a single ambush during the War of Independence in West Cork. On that day, Sergeant John Flynn with Constables Edward Dunne and William Brick from Timoleague RIC barracks set out on a foot patrol to investigate a report of a serious dispute between neighbouring farmers regarding a piece of land. The three policemen were accompanied by a Black and Tan named Grimsdale who had been assigned to the barracks a few days previously. About two miles out from Timoleague, the patrol took a right turn at Ahawadda Cross which brought them onto the Ring – Argehane road. They had gone about two hundred yards out this road when they were ambushed by eleven Volunteers drawn from the Barryroe and Kilbrittain IRA companies. The three RIC men were killed, while the Black and Tan escaped.

The IRA leader of the ambush was Charlie Hurley, C/O of Kilbrittain Company with his comrades Jack Fitzgerald and Jim O'Mahony. The remaining IRA men came from Barryroe Company with their C/O Jim Moloney and Volunteers Michael Coleman, Daniel Santry, Denis O'Brien, Denis Murphy, Batt Whelton, Timothy Crowley and Jerome O'Hea.

The three policemen were Roman Catholic, two of them married men with young families (Constable Brick was single). There was widespread condemnation of the killings throughout West Cork by clergymen of all denominations. The parish priest of Timoleague, Father Timothy O'Hea, in a scathing sermon, condemned the IRA as being 'Merciless, cruel, callous assassins'. The Bishop of Ross, Most Reverend Doctor Kelly, said it was 'Callous, wicked murder, it was slaughter, it made my blood creep'. In the days after his sermon, the parish priest of Timoleague was visited by the local IRA and warned, very severely, to tone down his sermons and condemnation of IRA activities. A reporter who forwarded the priest's sermon for publication to local newspapers was tarred and feathered and ordered to leave the district.

Volunteer Denis Hegarty and Volunteer Con Murphy



A strong IRA cell existed in this area during the War of Independence as part of the Timoleague Company of the First (Bandon) Battalion of the Third Cork Brigade. Local members included such as the Hegarty brothers, Denis and Michael who lived here in Cloughgriffin; The Keohanes, Dan and Tim in Carhue; Dan and John Cleary in Cloughgriffin; Tim and Con Sexton in Carhue; Dan Minihane and Con Murphy in Ballinroher. Two of these Volunteers were killed in the fight for freedom, namely, Denis Hegarty and Con Murphy.

Denis Hegarty worked for a large Protestant farmer named John Good in the townland of Barrys Hall. He slept in a house in the farmyard. Good told the court of inquiry that he heard movement in the yard during the night and in the morning the young man's body was found in a laneway several hundred yards away with gunshot wounds. The fact that he was a member of the IRA would point the finger of suspicion at loyalist forces. His employer, John Good, was himself shot by the IRA some three months later in March 1921.

Con Murphy lived on the family farm just off the Clonakilty to Timoleague main road near Clashfluck. It is said that he used the Teampallín (Templequinlan) graveyard at the end of our driveway as a lookout point for spotting British military and police leaving Clonakilty to raid in this direction. From here one can see right to the top of the hospital hill in Gullane. Gullane wasn't a built up area back then, I would think there was just one house on the side of the road, that being the house where Kathleen and JJ Spillane now live. On sighting any oncoming activity, Con would hurriedly convey the news to the safe house in the glen about three hundred yards east of here. I think it was owned by a McCarthy family at that time though no trace of it remains. From there they could signal down the valley to the Volunteers in the village of Timoleague of the impending military incursion and so be duly prepared to lay an ambush or go into hiding. The distance between Clonakilty town and Timoleague would be over six miles but in a matter of minutes, the Timoleague IRA would have been alerted. Growing up, we had listened to stories of Con Murphy's athleticism, of his powerful physique, and of him having inserted footstones or stepping stones in the graveyard ditch to aid his flight from there to the safe house. People of my age can be forgiven for thinking there was a certain amount of embellishment in the exploits of these fallen men who gave their life for the freedom of Ireland. But this was not so in Con's story.

These stones were not visible until the 1980s when the county council first used burn-off spray thus revealing underneath the vegetation what had been concealed for decades. This practice was discontinued some years later when it was realised by the local authorities of the terrible damage being caused to the environment and eco-system by such sprays. In a sweep of the west Cork countryside by the Essex regiment under Major Percival, Con Murphy came under fire at Cloundireen, Kilbrittain on 11 May 1921 and was shot dead. Similar to his great friend and C/O, Charlie Hurley, who was killed on the morning of the Crossbarry ambush some seven weeks previous, Con Murphy was buried with full military honours at midnight in Clogagh cemetery.

The Capture of Two British Soldiers



Two British army deserters named Taylor and Watling were captured near Bandon by the IRA. They were believed to be spies for the British Army and they were held prisoner in a farmer's house in the townland of Carrigroe in the Rathbarry area. After some time, orders were issued by the IRA headquarters that the two soldiers were to be shot. The family on whose property the soldiers were held, had grown very friendly with them and were shocked by this decision. The deed was carried out and their bodies were reputed to have been buried in Kilkernmore graveyard. Also in the same graveyard, it is said that the local IRA had an arms dump in an underground vault there.

Escape from Essex Regiment

In the early summer of 1921, the West Cork IRA was under pressure from the British Essex regiment which was carrying out a sweep of West Cork to capture IRA men. Two prominent local IRA men, Jim Lane from Ardfield and James 'Spud' Murphy from Clonakilty town, were being surrounded by the British and were forced to seek refuge in a cave on a cliff-face over the sea near Dunnycove. They were given food by local people who knew where they were hiding. This had to be lowered down by rope in a basket from the cliff-top. After a number of days, they managed to escape to another district.

Commandeered Goods



In an adjoining townland, in the spring of 1921, there was a wealthy Protestant farmer shot and killed by the IRA. It appears this man had a son serving in the British army and he too was killed by the IRA. After the killings, the IRA put one of their officers in charge of commandeering the property, selling cattle and horses off the farm and goods from the 'Big House'. The IRA officer in charge of operations was also a farmer. Some years later when 'The Troubles' were over, this man was having a station Mass in his house. After the Mass was over, the Parish Priest and the neighbours were invited to stay for breakfast. When the priest saw the dining table laden with solid silver trays, dishes and cutlery, he refused to sit down at the table.

An Incident during the Civil War



An incident occurred near here on the road to Rathbarry in the Autumn of 1922 during the height of the Civil War. The National Army was winning back control of West Cork from the anti-treaty forces and were led by an officer who was a native of this area. Michael Collins had been killed in an ambush at Béal na Bláth a short time previously and it is said the National Army soldiers and their officers were in a very vindictive mood, burning and destroying houses and property belonging to suspected anti-treaty supporters. A lorry full of soldiers was on patrol near the village of Rathbarry where they held up two cyclists. After questioning the two men as to their whereabouts, they released one of them. The other man they suspected of having information on the killing of a National Army soldier in an ambush on the Clonakilty- Rosscarbery road a few days before the Béal na Bláth ambush. When he would not give any information to the soldiers, they beat him with rifle butts to within an inch of his life. He never recovered from his ordeal and died soon afterwards. Some say the man they released was later followed by the soldiers and he too was subjected to a severe assault and died as a result of his injuries.

A Story of Two Wars



During the War of Independence, it is said the house of a prominent Loyalist who lived in this area was raided for guns and ammunition while he was away on business in England. The cache of a rifle, a shotgun and two revolvers along with ammunition and a pair of field-glasses was later hidden in a dug-out or hiding place in a roadside ditch in this locality. A local man, Denis Lee from Ballinroher, claimed his uncle, who was in the IRA, knew the location of the dug-out and told him where to find it – this would have been about twenty years ago. Denis spent many a summer's evening searching the mile long quiet country road for visible signs of this hiding place but to no avail. As well, local folklore would have us believe that this same hiding place was first constructed for use for the Rebellion of 1798 and used to store muskets and pike heads for the rebel Irish. This had a ring of truth about it since this road linked up with Desmond's forge at Ballymacowen (Deasún Gabha Ó Bearna Crois Eoin) where pikes were forged for the Rebellion, and the ancestral home of Tadhg an Asna's family - the O'Donovan Asna homestead in Ballincourcey. Tadhg was the leader of the United Irishmen at the Battle of the Big Cross which is situated on the road between Clonakilty and Ballinascorthy near the village of Shannonvale. This battle took place on 19 June, 1798 and is the only Rising recorded in the whole of Munster in that year. In recent times those events and places have been fairly well documented in articles in historical journals and other publications. About two years ago, Martin Cunningham from Ballincourcey who lives at the entrance to the road which is commonly called 'The Carrickcannon road' did a thorough search of both sides of the road and found the hiding place that had proved to be so elusive over the past hundred years. It was very cleverly constructed having its opening or entrance at road level similar as with an under-road gully and was bone dry. It measures about five feet in length, about two and a half feet in width, two feet in height and having one large slab of stone for a roof. Local folklore would have it constructed around 1798, or before, which is over two hundred and twenty years ago. What a tangible link to two important rebellions in Ireland's history.

An Informer



A Protestant farmer lived near here in the townland of Clogheen and was suspected by the IRA of being a spy. A watch was kept on the police barracks in Clonakilty town over a period of time but this man was never seen to enter or come out of the barracks. However, one day an IRA lookout, noticed a woman dressed in a hooded cloak coming out of the barracks. He thought there was something unusual about her since she was wearing a pair of men's shoes. He decided to follow the woman. She arrived at the home of the suspected spy and removed her cloak. It was the suspected man who was later apprehended by the IRA and shot dead.

Nicknames

Two of the most famous freedom fighters from this part of West Cork had unusual nicknames. The first one, James or 'Spud' Murphy is said to have acquired his from his hiding from the British forces in a field of potatoes or 'spuds' as they are more commonly called. The second is John 'Flyer' Nyhan, so called it is said for his fleetness of foot playing hurling and football. 'Flyer's' most daring exploit would appear to have occurred during the Civil War. He was in a pub on St Stephen's Night, 1922, in the village of Ring drinking with a few friends. Suddenly, the building was surrounded by a lorry-load of Free State soldiers from the barracks in Clonakilty, two miles away. The soldiers burst in the door, firing their rifles. 'Flyer' was hit several times but he managed to shoot out the light and in the darkness and confusion escaped out the backdoor. It is said several bullets could not be removed from his body and he carried those with him to an early grave in January 1934. A Free State soldier, who was a native of Thurles in Co. Tipperary was shot dead in the incident.

Civil War Song



During the Civil War, the Free State army was better armed and equipped with weapons far superior to the weaponry of the anti-treatyites or irregulars as they were more commonly called by Free State supporters. The irregulars had to revert to being a guerrilla army and as had happened in the War of Independence, had to adopt 'hit and run' tactics. When the British left their barracks in the West Cork garrison towns of Kinsale and Bandon, it is said they were ordered to leave behind military equipment such as armoured cars, lorries, guns, bombs and ammunition for the incoming Free State troops. As well, it is said that the ranks of the Free State army was filled with ex-Black and Tans and British soldiers all wanting and being encouraged to pursue their careers in the new Irish National army. This gave rise to a line in a song written about an incident that occurred in Bantry town between the Free State army and anti-treaty forces in which three (if not more) of the anti-treaty force were shot and killed. The opening lines of the song go 'It was down in the town of old Bantry where most of the fighting was done, it was there that a brave Irish soldier was shot by a Black and Tan gun'. It is believed that the song was written by a close relative (Willie the schoolmaster) of Donal McCarthy from Drinagh who fought on the anti-treaty side and was one of those killed on that day. I cannot remember the exact title of the song but it was popular for a while back in the 1960s when singer Seán Dunphy made a recording of it.

Civil War Incident



In nearby Rosscarbery, an incident occurred during the Civil War which it is claimed, caused much ill-feeling among the community there. Though almost one hundred years have passed, people still whisper when relating about the events that happened back then. It appears that a number of anti-treaty fighters were holding a meeting in a 'safe' house near Rosscarbery when suddenly it was surrounded by Free State soldiers and the occupants taken into custody. Those captured included two anti-treaty men whom the Free Staters believed were involved in a number of ambushes which resulted in the deaths of several soldiers. The reality was that those anti-treaty men would now be charged with murder and faced with the death penalty, would probably be shot or hanged. The question being asked on the anti side was - who informed on the meeting and so quickly since it had barely started? The obvious answer was that somebody close to the anti-treaty men or someone connected to the house was the informer. It would have been very unpalatable to consider that one of their own would have informed on them so the finger of suspicion fell on the actual owner of the house since he had leased it out at the time to a third party. This man was approached by the anti's and interrogated but he strenuously denied any knowledge or involvement in the passing on of information to the Free-Staters. Realising that shooting the man would be extreme under the circumstances since it was possible he was telling the truth, they settled for a less severe penalty. They procured a block of wood, stripped off his boot and stocking and with a hatchet, chopped off the big toe of his right foot. It is said the man was lucky he didn't bleed to death and afterwards he walked with a pronounced limp. His family were afterwards – and are to this very day known as the O'----- 'Boccocks'.

Person 2 interviewed: James O’Keeffe (also my Grandad), Courleigh, Clonakilty.

False Chimney

When my uncle was building a new house around 1919/20 he told the builders who were local men and also, like him, members of the IRA, to build a false, second chimney for the main fireplace. This was to be a secure hiding place for their guns and ammunition. The military and police suspected that they were members of the IRA and raided the house on many occasions but they never found anything.

Person 3 interviewed: Mrs Mary O’Connor, Granagoleen, Clonakilty (a neighbour)

These stories were told by Mary to Diarmuid Kingston a few years ago.

Barbaric treatment of women



I remember my mother telling me that during ‘The Troubles’ there were these two girls from different families, one living in the town and the other girl on the outskirts of the town of Clonakilty. The first girl was on very friendly terms with one of the policemen who were stationed in the barracks. Her parents owned a small farm – I think it was in the townland of Kilgarriffe - on which

they grew potatoes and vegetables for the shops in the town. As well, every morning they delivered fresh milk and vegetables to the RIC barracks at the top of Barrack Hill. One day, the family had a visit from one of the top men in the local IRA. He warned them that if they did not stop supplying the police with their milk and produce, their cows would be shot and poison spread on their vegetables. The people were left with no choice but to agree to stop supplying the police. Their daughter was warned to stop talking to the policeman she was friendly with and nobody would come to any harm. She did not heed this advice but remained on friendly terms with the policeman. Late one night a knock came to the door. It was two members of the local IRA. They grabbed hold of the daughter, took her into the parlour and cut off all her hair with a pair of sheep shears.

The second girl lived in the town and had been doing a line for a couple of years with another policeman who I think came from Waterford. There was a lot of talk going around that they were going to get married shortly. You see all these RIC men that were there before the Black and Tans came on the scene, were all Irish-born and Roman Catholic. The IRA knew they had to get these men to resign from the force – ‘to turn in their jacket’ – so that the country would become ungovernable and law and order would break down, and they could then take over. One night, this girl had a visit from two IRA, it was said they were the same two men that had called to the first girl, and like in that case, took the girl into a room and cut off her hair with a pair of scissors. They warned her that worse was to follow if she did not give up seeing the policeman. She was a very strong and stubborn girl, not only did she continue to meet the policeman, she also brought her case to court and claimed damages against the state and the ratepayers. It is said she was awarded £200 in compensation which was an awful lot of money back then. It was a big embarrassment for the local IRA men at the time since it showed them up in a very bad light as the case was widely published in the newspapers. She never did get to marry the policeman but married someone else some years later. It appears the policeman was transferred to another county, but I heard a different story from old people when I was young. This policeman liked going for country walks after his days work. One evening when walking very near here, he was held up by armed IRA men, taken over to the graveyard on top of the hill alongside Sonny Hurley’s place and shot dead. His body was rolled in a carpet or heavy blanket and was pushed into a tomb. I am inclined to think that this is the true story.

The Missing Black and Tan



All the Hurleys from Kilkernmore were joined the IRA –with Sonny spending some time in prison in Cork and someplace else up the country. I think Sonny’s Christian name was James. Tim and Jack were active in the Kilkerranmore company as well and so was their sister Cathy who joined the

Cumann na mBan. Some years after the War of Independence had ended, Sonny fell in for the home place in Kilkernmore while Jack and Tim went to live with a close relative – I think maybe an uncle -that lived in the Barryroe area and never married. Cathy married a farmer at Ahawadda, Timoleague named Andrew Walsh who had been arrested for attending and promoting feiseanna before the real Troubles began. The relative that Tim and Jack went to live with in Barryroe was a farmer named Batt Whelton . Earlier, he had been a member of Barryroe IRA Company and he was one of the ambush party that shot and killed three policemen near Ahawadda in May 1920. I heard as well that when Lord Bandon was kidnapped in 1921, he was held in Wheltons for some nights before being moved to an O’Leary man’s place further south from his place. Though they belonged to Kilkernmore Company, It is said that the three Hurley brothers were involved in guarding and moving Lord Bandon from place to place . Anyhow, after all that, Jack Hurley went farming with his uncle while his brother, Tim, went off and bought a tractor, a plough and a thresher and became in todays terms – an agriculture contractor. Tim Hurley told me the following story and I have no reason to disbelieve him. They lived with Batt Whelton on the farm in the townland of Currihy which was down the road behind Grange pub. Grange pub was a little more than half-way on the main road from Ring to Lislevane in Barryroe parish. The man that owned Grange pub at that time was the C/O of Barryroe IRA Company who was James Moloney. Across the road from Wheltons place lived a family by the name of Shannon, I think they were Protestant though I am not sure of this. At the boundary of their place, there was a laneway or bohreen running down to a large area of bogland that was known locally as Dunworley Bog. In earlier times it appears some of this bog was cut for turf but since it was prone to tidal flooding from the sea coming in at Dunworley bay, its high salt content did not lend itself to having glowing turf sods in the fireplace. As a result, much of the bog remained in its original state. Tim told me that one night they were on patrol with the Barryroe Company down in the village of Courtmacsherry when they came under fire from the British military that had their headquarters in the hotel. After some exchange of fire, things quietened down and the company started to retreat from the area. Tim was one of the last members to move back but then saw a Black and Tan walking up the street , who very clearly thought the coast was clear to head for the nearest pub for a pint. Tim and a couple of his comrades stepped into an alleyway near the pub and when the Black and Tan was abreast of them they held him up and made him prisoner. What to do with him was their next problem. So they took him to Batt Wheltons. After a discussion with Jim Moloney, it was decided to shoot the Tan. So they marched him down Shannons lane, out into the bog until it was getting soft underfoot and there shot him and buried him. One hundred years later, his body is still there in that bog. Tim didn’t know his name or where he came from but it is sad to think that there today lie the remains of a person that is completely forgotten about.

Tim told me that there may well be another person buried in that bog from accounts that he had heard from comrades of his. He said he was not involved and had nothing to do with it and did not know the person except that he or she came from the Timoleague area. This person was found guilty of spying for the British by the Timoleague IRA Company and ordered to leave the country. To make matters worse, the spy was also a member of the local IRA and had informed on them. The RIC men that were stationed in the barracks were all Catholics and every Sunday morning they were escorted to church by the military that were garrisoned in Timoleague Castle. They always left after the final blessing and before the priest’s parish notes on events for the coming week. The local companies of the IRA got together and devised a plan to ambush the soldiers when they were escorting the RIC men back to their barracks. On the Sunday morning of the proposed attack , most unusually, the police and military waited on until the whole ceremony was over. They then intermingled with the hundreds of people that came onto the streets after Mass. The IRA had to call off their planned engagement since many innocent civilians could have been killed. According to Tim Hurley, the

likelihood of this person being allowed to leave the country was very questionable. Though he did say he could be wrong, his belief was that there was a second body buried in Dunworley bog.