

West Cork : Stories of the Revolution, 1916 – 1923

My story begins in 1920 in the week leading up to the Kilmichael ambush at a house in Ahilnane, Enniskeane, County Cork. The house was owned by Jack and Margaret O'Sullivan. Jack and Margaret had four children, Eileen, Mary, Con and Margaret. One of their daughters Margaret went on to marry Denis Collins of Edencurra, Dunmanway, County Cork. Denis and Margaret Collins are my grandparents.

A group which became known as the 3rd West Cork Brigade Flying Column which consisted of around 36 young Irish men under the leadership of Tom Barry gathered at the O'Sullivan's safe house in Ahilnane for training. Their mission was to attack the Black and Tans on the road between Macroom and Dunmanway.

Ironically, Tom Barry received his training in the British army and fought in the British army during world war one. It was not until after the leaders of the 1916 rising were shot that Tom Barry and many more left the British army and returned home to join their fellow Country men and fight for Irish freedom.

While training here they used a large tree standing behind the house for target practice. The bullet marks would remain to be seen on this tree for many years to come. The tree fell many many years later during a storm and several bullets were found in the tree. During this time the volunteers were fed by the local people of Ahilnane and surrounding area.

The Black and Tans were mostly British soldiers brought into Ireland by Lloyd George's government in London after 1918 to implement British rule in Ireland. The attitude of the Black and Tans could be best summed up by one of their divisional commanders:

"If a police barracks is burned or if the barracks already occupied is not suitable, then the best house in the locality is to be commandeered, the occupants thrown into the gutter. Let them die there – the more the merrier. Should the order ("Hands Up") not be immediately obeyed, shoot and shoot with effect. If the persons approaching (a patrol) carry their hands in their pockets, or are in any way suspicious-looking, shoot them down. You may make mistakes occasionally and innocent persons may be shot, but that cannot be helped, and you are bound to get the right parties some time. The more you shoot, the better I will like you, and I assure you no policeman will get into trouble for shooting any man."

Lt. Col. Smyth, June 1920

On the evening of the 27/11/1920 the night before the ambush the then Parish priest of Ballineen Fr. O'Connell came to the O'Sullivan house in Ahilnane and heard the volunteer's confessions and gave them his blessing. In the early hours of the 28/11/1920 the men left Ahilnane under the cover of darkness and marched to Kilmichael. They arrived in Kilmichael at 8:00am and took up their positions. At 4:05pm an IRA scout signalled the enemies approach. At the end of the ambush sixteen Black and Tans lay dead and one seriously wounded. Three volunteers were dead Michael McCarthy of Dunmanway, Jim O'Sullivan of Rossmore and Pat Deasy of Ballinadee. The bodies of the three men were carried to a neighbouring house and buried a few days later in Castletownkennigh. (See Fig. 3 and Fig. 4).

Just 30 minutes after the opening of the ambush the column moved away to the south and ended up at a house in Granure Ballinacarriga eleven miles from Kilmichael at 11:00pm. This house subsequently became known as the far away camp at Granure and is mentioned in the Rebel song The Boys Of Kilmichael.

**The battle being over at twilight,
And there in that glen so obscure.
We threw down our rifles and bayonets,
And made our way back to Granure.
And high over Dunmanway town, my boys,
They sang of the brave and the true.
Of the men from Tom Barry's bold column,
Who conquered the red, white and blue.**

The column remained here for a number of days. They were fed by the local people and given protection by members of the Ballinacarriga volunteers. The column dispersed and would not meet again until prior to the Crossbarry ambush which took place on the 19th of March 1921.

A number of years later a plaque was erected at the entrance of my great grandparents house in Ahilnane to mark the place the 3rd West Cork Brigade Flying Column left the night before the Kilmichael ambush. (See Fig. 1 and Fig. 2). In 1995 a book called The Wild Heather Glen was written about the Kilmicahel story of grief and glory and in this book there is a detailed account of the time Tom Barry and the Flying Column spent at my great grandparents Jack and Margaret O'Sullivan's house.



Fig. 1



Fig. 2



Fig. 3

Cuimneacán Cill Mhíil

AR NA TÓZÁILZ AZ AN bPÓBAL COITCEADH I GEUINNIE AR
MÍCEÁL MAC CÁRTAIZ, LEAS CEANN FEADMA
PAIZÓE TÓIK DÚN MAONBUIÓE

PÁDRAIZ UA DEISIZ, ZADISEAC
CÉ CILL MÍE SIMEÓIN, OROICEAD NA BANNDAN
SÉUMAS UA SÚILIOBÁIN, ZADISEAC
CHOC A MADRA, ROSMÓR, BAILE ACAD FÍNNIN,
DO ZUIZ AZ CAZ CILL MÍEIL 28th LÁ SAMMA 1920
AZUS FOS I GEUINNIE AR

DIARMUID UA MAZSAMHA, CAPTAIN AN PAIRIC, INIS CEIN
DO MARBUIGEAD MÁRZA 5th 1921.
TRÓCAIRE DE DÁ N-ANAM.

ERECTED BY THE GENERAL PUBLIC TO THE MEMORY OF
VICE-COMPT. MICHAEL M. CARTHY, EAST GREEN, DUNMANWAY
LIEUT. PATRICK DEASY, KILMACSIMON QUAY, BANDON
LIEUT. JAMES O'SULLIVAN, KNOCKAVADDRA, ROSSMORE, BALLINEEN
WHO FELL AT THE BATTLE OF KILMICHAEL ON NOV. 28, 1920
ALSO TO THE MEMORY OF CAPT. JEREMIAH O MAHONY
THE PADDOCK, ENNISKEANE, KILLED ON MARCH 5, 1921.



Fig. 4