

The Crossbarry Ambush

Contributed by Brian P. Hegarty Jr.

On February 15, 1921, the IRA mounted an abortive ambush of a troop train at Upton, in which six civilians and three IRA men died. Charlie Hurley was shot in the face.

Charlie Hurley, leader and commander of the 3rd West Cork Brigade, had intelligence that British troops were on this train going to Upton Station, county Cork. His scouts did not get to him in time to let him know that civilians and troops were intermingled on the train and that the train picked up additional troops in Kinsale. So, the attack went wrong, they were grossly outnumbered and under gunned.

Several other volunteers were captured. The British succeeded in breaking an IRA volunteer under interrogation and discovering that the West Cork Brigade had its headquarters in Ballymurphy. In addition, the British learned that Barry's column had recently returned to this area after several days waiting for an ambush on the Kinsale to Bandon road. The British commanders, as a result planned a major operation to capture the IRA column, mobilizing about 1,200 troops, to converge on the area from several different directions.

Crossbarry Ambush

On March 19, 1921, The Third West Cork Flying Column of the IRA, under Tom Barry, achieved a significant victory at Crossbarry. Barry soon proved himself as a very able commander, fighting for Irish independence, carrying out many ambushes and assaults on occupation forces that carried out strict reprisals for such attacks and harassed the local population on a continuous basis. The 3rd west cork flying column operated with a single leader and drew its volunteers from the local population. By the time of the Crossbarry ambush the 3rd west cork flying column had 104 officers and men split into 7 sections with each section having a section commander.

The British relied heavily on intelligence and sources had located the whereabouts of the column and sent a reconnaissance plane to investigate. The British set out quickly to encircle the column. At 1am approximately 1200 to 1300 British troops left various locations in cork to entrap the flying column. At 2:30am while billeting, Barry received reports that lorries and lights were seen two miles east and west of their location and dogs were barking to the south. Tom Barry calculated that the Flying Column could not sustain a 'stand up' fight with the enemy. Barry quickly concluded that they were surrounded and needed a quick break out of the encirclement. Some of the British troops dismounted and proceeded on foot to raid the surrounding country homes. It was one of these raids 3 miles north of Crossbarry in which the British came across the wounded Charlie Hurley who was recovering from a bullet wound he received the previous month at the Upton ambush. Hurley was killed at 6:30 am by officers of the 1st Essex division. By this time Barry had his column in position to ambush the British troops to the west as reports suggested they were closer than the other encircling troops and could be engaged on their own.

Look to the map to describe the scene. (Flor Begley, an Intelligence Officer, brought his bagpipes and was instructed to play traditional Irish war songs in the farmyards among the main ambush force.)

When all positions were in place Barry gave two main orders.

No volunteer was to show himself until fighting had begun.

No section was to come to the aid of those fighting unless ordered, even if they themselves were not engaged, as the enemy was approaching fast from all directions and would infiltrate the column if this were to happen.

Communication between Barry and his Sections was made by runners.

Statistics vary depending upon which side you're on:

The IRA claim 39 British soldiers were killed (including 5 officers) and up to 47 wounded against 3 IRA dead and 3 wounded.

The British claim 6 IRA dead and 10 of their soldiers were killed and 3 wounded.

Conclusion:

This was a victory for the IRA. The ambush was decisive in showing how independent fighting elements backed by a local population were extremely hard to gain intelligence on and then IRAs ability to mingle with the population and move around the area in which they knew the train very well was superior of that to the British.

Prime Minister Lloyd George of Great Britain had singled out Kilmichael and Crossbarry ambushes in communiqués leading up to the truce.