

Tom Barry

Contributed by Brian P. Hegarty Jr.



As commander of the 3rd West Cork flying column Tom Barry was one of the great architects of modern guerilla warfare in Ireland's fight for freedom. His victory at Kilmichael became the most celebrated victory of rebel arms against the English. Tom Barry, the Column Commander, became a folk hero and a revolutionary celebrity. Barry's, and Kilmichael's, fame even reached beyond the borders of Ireland. It jerked the people of India to a new appraisal of their position. Egypt stood amazed. The German army studied the ambush in the Second World War and Barry's memoirs became required reading at military academies, including Sandhurst and WestPoint. Perhaps the most impressive of all, it had been reported that

when the Japanese army captured Singapore, they marched in singing 'The Boys of Kilmichael'.

In October 1920, Michael Collins ordered the formation of the flying column. The order stated, "these flying columns would consist of first-rate troops as the work required of them would be very exacting." The 'flying column' was a small and highly mobile group of dedicated Volunteers severely commanded and disciplined. Constantly on the move, their paramount objective was to merely exist, to strike when conditions were favorable and to avoid disaster at all costs. They could be assembled rapidly and demobilized depending on tactical requirements. The column that Barry organized, under the command of the Third West Cork Brigade, was one of the most successful in Ireland, distinguishing itself at Toureen, Kilmichael, Crossbarry, Rosscarbery and in many other actions. In November 1920, when he was only 22 years of age, Barry selected and led a company of 36 inexperienced Irish Volunteers against a unit of highly trained British Auxiliaries at Kilmichael and wiped them out.

Born 1897, in Co Kerry, as the son of an RIC man he spent his youth in Rosscarbery and Bandon. It was a sense of adventure that inspired him to join the British army in 1915 before his eighteenth birthday. He joined not to secure home rule for Ireland, or to fight for the freedom of small nations, but just to see what war was like. "I had no National Consciousness," he recalled. While in Mesopotamia, he read about the rebellion in Dublin, the 1916 Rising, and the accounts of the shelling, arrests, and executions. For him, reading the 1916 Proclamation, was as important as the Gettysburg address is to Americans. He returned to West Cork after being away for four years in the British army.

Through his association with the Hales', founders of the Volunteers in West Cork, Barry slowly became involved in the Volunteer movement. At first, he was kept at arms-length due to his service in the British Army, his family ties with the RIC and his Irish brogue (with a touch of English accent, probably due to being away from Ireland for all those years). He simply was not one of the 'local' lads and had to earn the trust of the Volunteers. The capture and torture of Tom Hales, Brigade O/C and Pat Harte in July 1920 opened an opportunity for him. His war experience and demeanor found favor with the Brigade officers and was appointed training officer. Charley Hurley, now commander of the 3rd West Cork Brigade, promoted Barry in October 1920 to Flying Column O/C 3rd West Cork Brigade which set him on an unprecedented challenge. He was motivated and had something to prove. He would now have absolute command. His decisions would be his and his alone without interference. He would take full

responsibility, would be subject to no authority and would have to take the blame for any failure or disaster.

So, who were these Volunteers? Unlike the enemy, the West Cork IRA Volunteer had no experience of war. Where the British used to roads for military travel the Volunteers had an advantage of knowing the terrain. The members were untrained in the use of arms and were backward even on ordinary foot-drill. They had no tactical training, but they had a great desire to become efficient Volunteers. They were practically unarmed. Even in the middle of 1920, the whole brigade armament was only thirty-five serviceable rifles, twenty automatics or revolvers, and thirty rounds of ammunition per rifle and ten rounds for each automatic or revolver. The Volunteers had no transport, signaling equipment or engineering material, machine guns or any other weapon whatever, except a small supply of explosives and some shotguns. They had no money and were an unpaid Volunteer force. They had no barracks to which they could retire, no stores to supply them with food. They had no propaganda department to put forth their objectives or to deny enemy slanders. Each brigade stood alone; without hope of outside enforcements should disaster threaten it. Within the whole national movement, the unit made its own war, glorified in victories, and stood up to its own defeats. This was the force that was to attempt to break by armed action the British domination of seven centuries of occupation. The rebels grew from local organizations where those before them had failed because of lack of unity. The final success of the War of Independence can be attributed to the close-knit structure of the local brigades and the unquestioning cooperation of the people.

Though only 23 years old, Barry's warfare experience and innovative techniques helped Barry organize ambushes and raids with positive results. His ability to plan and make split-second decisions whether in the height of battle or during a raid, allowed his men to trust him completely. The decision to stage an ambush at Kilmichael, confronting the dreaded C Company Auxiliaries in Macroom, was brave.

Kilmichael ambush was a turning point in the War of Independence. It boosted IRA morale; it also gained Barry greater respect as a Commander. A member of the flying column, Jim Kearney said, 'Any man who would stand on the road before an on-coming enemy; men would die for him'.

The several ambushes that Barry organized were all unique. He never suggested 'a retreat' to his men. He fought to win. In open countryside like Kilmichael, or trapped at the waters edge in Burgatia, or fighting their way out of the Crossbarry encirclement, all required the mind of a military genius. Another one of his Volunteers said 'He was a tradesman and soldering was his trade. He could take men and make solders of them.'

Because of his innovative military successes, Michael Collins sought Barry's presence in Dublin in May 1921 and in London during the Treaty negotiations. Later, disagreeing with the treaty terms, he became the first prisoner of the Irish Civil War on June 28, 1922, when the Irish War broke out between Pro-and Anti-treaty factions. In the 1930's he spent a term as IRA Chief of Staff; in 1949 he addressed huge crowds in New York, Chicago, Pittsburgh, and Boston – his voice rang out, "My one aim is to unite the Irish people – one race". His lifelong wish was to end the partition of people of Ireland.

Barry was a strict disciplinarian, ruthless when the need arose, but also kind – kind to the men who planned and fought with him, and kind also in later life to those in need; to old soldiers having difficulty making ends meet.

Ar dheis Dé go raibh a anam dílis (May his faithful soul be at the right hand of God).