

Kilmichael Ambush

Contributed by Brian P. Hegarty Jr.

On November 28, 1920, (93 years ago this month), the flying column of the West Cork Brigade ambushed a police patrol near the village of Kilmichael, just south of Macroom. Three volunteers and 17 Auxiliary cadets, members of an elite anti-IRA force were killed. Only one Auxiliary survived.

Who were the Auxiliaries? They were ex-WW1, the most experienced British military soldiers/officers in Ireland. They were also the highest paid. They were based in Macroom. They raided villages to intimidate the local population away from supporting the local IRA. They basically had free reign.

Who were the 'Boys of Kilmichael?' "The 'boys' ranged in age from 16 to 35 years old, the average being 24. All were literate, unmarried, and practicing Catholics. Most lived with their families until they went on the run, to prison and to war. They formed, in other words, a fair cross-section of West Cork society, where most men performed some sort of manual labor. As a group, though, they were more likely to have jobs, trades, and an education than was typical of their peers."

The Kilmichael ambush delivered a profound shock to the British system, coming only a week after 'Bloody Sunday' assassination of a dozen army officers in Dublin. What Kilmichael showed, which was a wakeup call to the British is that the IRA could beat British Officers in the field; the guerrillas were a military threat. Martial law was imposed wherever it was necessary, and County Cork headed the list.

In West Cork, and in Ireland as a whole, Kilmichael became the most celebrated victory of rebel arms. Tom Barry, the flying column commander, became a folk hero and a revolutionary celebrity, crowds of people would swarm Barry's Kilmichael fame even reached beyond the borders of Ireland. It awakened people of India and Egypt where the British had colonials. The Germans studied the ambush in the Second World War and Barry's memoirs became 'required reading at military academies including Sandhurst and WestPoint. And myth has it that when the Japanese captured Singapore, they marched in singing 'the boys of Kilmichael.'

Who was Tom Barry? Thomas Barry was born in County Kerry. The youngest of eleven children Tom Barry was born on July 1st 1897. He worked as a clerk in Bandon until 1915, then joined the British army and during World War 1 served in the Middle East. When he heard about the Easter rising in Dublin he decided to return home to Ireland. On returning he enrolled in a business college. Barry did not adjust easily to civilian life. He sought out Volunteers and tried several times to join the Bandon IRA, but they and other units refused to have him. But times were changing. It was not until late summer of 1920 and the onset of guerrilla warfare was making new demands on the West (3rd) Cork Brigade. The brigade needed men who could shoot a rifle and teach other to do the same. He was finally given a post of Brigade training officer and later, flying column leader. Incidentally, it was also no coincidence that Barry was suddenly recruited immediately after Tom Hales, the founding commandant of the west 3rd Cork Brigade, was captured and replaced by Charlie Hurley. (Things, timing.... seems to fall into place.)

The Kilmichael Ambush: All the positions were occupied at 9 a.m. The Column had no food. There was only one house nearby and although these decent people sent down all their own food and a large bucket of tea, there was not enough for all. The men's clothes had been drenched by the previous night's rain and now it was intensely cold as they lay on the sodden heather. The hours passed slowly. Towards evening the gloom deepened over the bleak Kilmichael countryside. Then at last at 4:05 p.m. a scout signaled the enemy's approach

Just before the Auxiliaries in two lorries came into view, two-armed IRA volunteers responding to Barry's mobilization order, drove unwittingly, into the ambush position in a horse and side-car, almost shielding the British forces behind them. Barry managed to avert disaster by directing the car up the side road and out of the way.

The Auxiliaries were persuaded to slow down by the sight of Barry who had placed himself on the road in front of the concealed command post (with three riflemen), wearing an IRA officer's tunic given to him by Paddy O'Brien. This confusion was clearly part of the plan by Barry to ensure that his adversaries in both lorries halted beside the IRA ambush positions. Section 1 (10 rifleman); Section 2 (10 rifleman) lay concealed on the north side of the road. Section 3 (6 rifleman) of the IRA force was on the south side of the road to prevent the enemy taking positions on that side. The other six riflemen were positioned as an insurance group ready to engage a third lorry if it appeared.

As the first lorry slowed almost to a halt when Barry threw a Mills Bomb in to the lorry and section 1 immediately opened fire. A savage close-quarter fight ensued between the Auxiliaries and a combination of IRA from section 1 and Barry's 3-person Command Post group. According to Barry's account, some of the British were killed using rifle butts and bayonets. This close quarter engagement was over relatively quickly.

While this part of the fight was going on, a second lorry also containing nine Auxiliaries had driven into the ambush position near to IRA section two. The soldiers in lorry #2 had an advantage over their lorry #1 counterparts in that they knew an attack was underway. The soldiers dismounted to the road and exchanged fire with the IRA, killing Michael McCarthy. Barry brought the command post soldiers who had completed the attack on the first lorry to bear on this group. Barry claimed that these Auxiliaries called out surrender and that some dropped their rifles but opened fire again with revolvers when 3 IRA men emerged from cover, killing Jim O'Sullivan and mortally wounding Pat Deasy. Barry then ordered "Rapid fire and do not stop until I tell you." Barry stated he ignored a subsequent attempt by the remaining Auxiliaries to surrender, and kept his men firing at a range of only ten yards or less until he believed the Auxiliaries were dead.

The account described here in section 2 and lorry 2 is a matter of controversy. Peter Hart disputes the 'false surrender' and states Barry deliberately kept his men shooting until all Auxiliaries were dead.

After the ambush: When the ceasefire order was finally given there was an uncanny silence as the sound of the last shot died away. Sixteen Auxiliaries were dead, and one seriously wounded. Volunteers Michael McCarthy of Dunmanway and Jim Sullivan of Rossmore also lay dead, and Pat Deasy was dying. The lorries were set ablaze. The column was ordered to drill and march for five minutes. They then halted in front of the rock where Michael McCarthy and Jim O'Sullivan lay, where they presented arms as a tribute to the dead Volunteers. Just 30 minutes after the opening of the

ambush the column moved away to the south, intending to cross the Bandon River upstream from the British-held Manch Bridge. The Boys of Kilmichael carried the captured enemy rifles slung across their backs. It started to rain again, and the men were soon drenched. The rain continued as the IRA marched through Shanacashel, Coolnagow, Balteenbrack and arrived in the vicinity of dangerous Manch Bridge. The Bandon River was crossed without incident and Granure, eleven miles south of Kilmichael, was reached by 11pm. The engagement at Kilmichael was the first between the IRA and the previously invincible Auxiliaries and one of the most important battles of the Tan War. The British establishment could not comprehend how 18 battle-hardened officers fell in combat against what they previously dismissed as 'rabble'.

The British had 30,000 troops in Ireland. They could withstand losing 18 soldiers. What changed from the past is they were up against committed fighters, who knew the terrain better than the British. Additionally, the IRA had the help and aid of their countrymen which made it difficult for the British to obtain intelligence, especially in Munster.

The Kilmichael Ambush was a turning point of the war as the Auxiliaries, previously thought "invincible," were defeated by an IRA column – a fact which had a very negative impact on British morale.

Because of the Kilmichael Ambush all the 'Boys' were excommunicated from the Catholic Church by the Bishop of Cork. After some time, calm heads prevailed, and this order was later rescinded.

So.....
Forget not the boys of Kilmichael,
Those gallant lads stalwart and true,
Who fought 'neath the green flag of Erin
And who conquered, the Red, White, and Blue.....