



HEADLINES FROM HISTORY

Ambush on Lough Ree



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In a previous article, we discussed the arrival of the Auxiliary Division of the Royal Irish Constabulary to Athlone on 16 October 1920 and the first attack by the Crown forces on the offices of the Westmeath Independent - those events sparked a period of violence in and around the town.

'known to be bad'

On the day after that first attack on the town centre and the Westmeath Independent's offices, local IRA officers decided to strike back against the Crown forces. An opportunity presented itself when a patrol of British soldiers left Athlone barracks about 7.30am and commandeered a motorboat belonging to James J. Coen, a businessman and councillor.

The soldiers planned to use this boat to search a selection of islands on Lough Ree whose inhabitants were, in the words of a later military report, 'known to be bad'. That report included a narrative account of the ambush, compiled by officers involved in those events and presented to Brigadier-General Thomas Stanton Lambert, the senior officer in Athlone Barracks and the commander of the 13th Infantry Brigade of the British army's 5th Division.

The patrol, which included Captain Claude Tully, a military intelligence officer who was a long-time target for the local IRA, was heavily armed and carried two Hotchkiss machine guns. In total, there were around fifteen officers and soldiers in the group and it was inevitable that their movement through the centre of Athlone would be noticed.

According to Frank O'Connor, who would join the IRA ambush party later that day, a resident of the Strand named James Norton witnessed the Crown forces boarding the boat. It was a dark morning and Norton could not

properly see their uniforms, leading him to believe that the boat was being boarded by a contingent of 'Black and Tans' rather than British soldiers.

Norton informed Lily Mulvihill, a member of Cumann na mBan, who contacted O'Connor. He passed the information to George Manning, a member of the Athlone Brigade's flying column and one of the unit that had shot dead Thomas Craddock of the RIC two months earlier.

According to O'Connor, Manning had been 'in hiding in the woods at Coosan at this time as were a number of others and some of the column.' This group decided to ambush the patrol on its return journey.

The British soldiers, meanwhile, spent a fruitless day searching islands on Lough Ree, paying particular attention to Inchbofin and Inchmore, on which, to quote Lambert, 'any arms or literature had been well hidden'. In Lambert's account, the 'motor boat returned from the lough to the river' in the afternoon and 'had passed the beacon and was just opposite the Athlone Yacht Club Hut...' when the ambush began.

'Open fire'

By then, the IRA had been in place for a few hours. They had put scouts on local high points, with runners relaying information back and forth, providing advance notice of the boat's approach.

Around 3.30pm, the ambushers got their first clear view of their enemy. They had expected to see a party of Black and Tans but 'the deck was crowded with soldiers'. The IRA volunteers maintained their position, listening for a whistle blast - the signal to open fire - and watching as the boat, in the words of O'Connor, 'got into the narrows of the river and broadside to us'. Then the whistle sounded.

In the first volley, the leader of the military patrol, Major C.F. Adams, was badly wounded by a shot to the shoulder. His servant, who had been brought along on this military operation, was shot in the wrist. One man was knocked overboard but he quickly 'scrambled back'. Other officers and soldiers were also wounded during that first volley of IRA gunfire, while



By 1920, Coosan had long been a republican stronghold. During the War of Independence, it was home to numerous active members of the IRA and Cumann na mBan. In this photo, we see a group of Irish Volunteers at a training camp in Coosan during 1915 - Back row: left to right, Peter Malyann (Athlone), Dick Fitzgerald (Kerry), J.J. Burke (Dublin), J.J. O'Connell (Sligo), Paul Galligan (Cavan) Larry Lardner (Athenry), Terence MacSwiney (Cork), Sean Kearns (Kerry) Front row: left to right, Mick Spillane (Killarney), J. Morley (Ballaghaderreen), Michael O'Buachalla (Maynooth), Billy Mullins (Tralee), Mick Cronin (Cork), John Brennan (Roscommon) and Mick Allis (Limerick). Photo provided by Athlone Public Library, with names provided by Dr John Keane.

the boat's engine was put of action. Although the patrol was now a floating target, Captain Tully 'brought the two Hotchkiss guns and all available rifles into action'.

The Hotchkiss guns could fire at the rate of 450-500 rounds per minute and this suppressing fire forced the IRA to remain hidden, though Frank O'Connor claimed that 'their fire was going over our heads', causing no casualties among the IRA.

According to Lambert's report, the IRA's 'fire became more erratic' and this relative lull gave one of the British army officers, a lieutenant named Cannon, enough time to restart the boat's engine. Cannon steered the boat, which had been hit about forty times, away from the ambushers. Frank O'Connor recalled that the IRA followed along the bank but, 'as the boat sped down the river,' their fire was increasingly ineffective. The military patrol, despite sustaining multiple casualties, made it to safety.

'nervous tension'

Although Lambert later claimed that three of the ambushers were badly wounded, there were no serious casualties among the IRA. Nor did the

Crown forces capture any volunteers despite launching a large sweep of the area. Bridget Reynolds, a member of Cumann na mBan from Coosan, used her local knowledge to guide some of the ambushers away from a military search party.

Lambert's report stated that the IRA had deployed 150 volunteers in the ambush but this is a ludicrously inflated figure, perhaps an effort to impress his superior officers. The local IRA in October 1920 did not have the ability, either in terms of volunteers or weapons, to deploy 150 men in an ambush.

The Athlone Brigade's recently-formed flying column, for example, contained about fifteen members and they had only ten service rifles between them. According to Frank O'Connor about '40 to 50' volunteers took part in the ambush and they had 'nearly 20 rifles' along with an unspecified number of shotguns. His figures tally with those provided by other participants in the ambush, such as Thomas Costello and Seamus O'Meara.

In the aftermath of the ambush and the previous day's attack on the offices of the Westmeath Independent,

Athlone's citizens feared that more violence was in the offing. During the subsequent week, many families left Athlone, seeking temporary shelter in the countryside or in the nearby towns of Moate and Roscommon.

During this period, a delegation of Athlone's civic leaders attempted to meet with Brigadier-General Lambert, since he was the leading British military figure in the area. Lambert initially refused to meet with the delegation, believing that - to quote a letter to his superiors in the 5th Division General Headquarters at the Curragh - while there was 'a good deal of nervous tension in the town and its neighbourhood', he might gain an 'advantage' by keeping the town's delegation waiting for a few more days.

Lambert could have met with the town's delegation and sent a signal to all local branches of the Crown forces by ensuring that his soldiers maintained their discipline. Instead, he decided to exploit those tensions, a decision that would have tragic consequences as, days later, the Crown forces carried out reprisals in Moate and Athlone during which a civilian named Michael Burke was fatally wounded.

