



HEADLINES FROM HISTORY

'Striking terror into people'



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During the War of Independence, the Royal Irish Constabulary (RIC) was put under immense pressure by the Irish Republican Army (IRA), particularly from 1920 onwards. In Westmeath, the force abandoned many rural barracks, which were often hard to defend and vulnerable to attack.

As the RIC retreated from the countryside, its ability to monitor and counter the IRA was diminished for the remainder of the conflict. For example, the RIC Inspector General's report for August 1920 admitted that in Westmeath, 'the scarcity of police' meant that many incidents and developments 'were not reported at all.'

By that year, the upper echelons of the British army in Ireland had come to the realisation that the RIC could provide little reliable information about the IRA and its activities.

Daring and dangerous

In Westmeath, the British army attempted to fill the gaps in its local knowledge through the use of intelligence officers. A central figure in these efforts was Captain Claude Tully, a military intelligence officer for the British army's 13th Infantry Brigade, headquartered in Athlone's Victoria Barracks. Tully regularly accompanied British army raiding parties and, to judge from contemporary accounts, he developed a network of contacts in the region, from whom he gathered information.

Frank O'Connor, a Coosan-based officer in the IRA's Athlone Brigade, described Tully as 'a very daring man' who 'went around on a motor cycle with two guns - revolvers - strapped to him, and was reputed to be a first-class shot with either hand'. Contemporary documents and later recollections from members of the Athlone Brigade are replete with similar descriptions of Tully, who, according to local rumours, wore chain mail or some type of body

armour.

In O'Connor's account, Tully 'struck terror into people wherever he went' and files in the Collins Papers show that, in November 1920, Athlone-based IRA officer Seamus O'Meara sent a dispatch to Michael Collins in which he claimed that Tully was 'the worst in the Barracks'. A number of contemporaries describe Tully as threatening to shoot prisoners and there is at least one account, described below, of Tully using a civilian as a human shield when travelling with other officers. Tully's activities made him a prime target for the IRA and O'Meara later claimed that Collins ordered the Athlone Brigade to assassinate the British officer.

Tully, however, would prove to be a shrewd adversary. Unlike high-profile figures such as RIC Sergeant Thomas Craddock and Brigadier-General Thomas Stanton Lambert of the 13th Infantry Brigade, both of whom were shot dead by the IRA's Athlone Brigade, Tully was never negligent when it came to his personal security.

Although he made many motorcycle journeys through the countryside, Tully did not have a regular travel pattern, thus frustrating IRA efforts to lay an ambush. Thomas Costello recalled that: 'We laid ambushes for him, in all about 15 times, but he always succeeded in evading us by returning by another route.' In urban areas, Tully rarely travelled alone and was usually accompanied by other officers - a practice that stymied at least two IRA ambushes.

Targeting the IRA

On one occasion, according to Anthony McCormack, a captain of the IRA's Tang Company, Tully attempted to create a trap for his pursuers. The IRA regularly blocked the roads around Athlone through digging trenches or by using trees and carts. It was an effective means through which the disrupt the activities of the Crown forces.

McCormack stated that Tully placed a bomb in one road-block, presumably primed to explode if the IRA or civilians later attempted to remove the blockage. However, a local saw what was happening and told Bill Casey, a member of the Athlone Brigade's flying column. Casey, who was also a veteran of the

British army, ensured that the bomb was removed safely.

Tully seems to have been an effective intelligence officer. Anthony McCormack, a captain of the IRA's Tang Company, was arrested by the Crown forces in January 1921 and taken to Athlone's barracks, where he was interrogated by Tully. McCormack later recalled that he was 'astonished' that Tully already knew the whereabouts of an IRA arms dump used by the Tang Company.

Michael McCormack, an adjutant in the Drumraney Battalion of the IRA's Athlone Brigade, also encountered Tully after being captured by the Black and Tans in late April 1921. He recalled being taken to Ballymore RIC barracks and then to the army barracks in Athlone, where 'there was a big number of prisoners'.

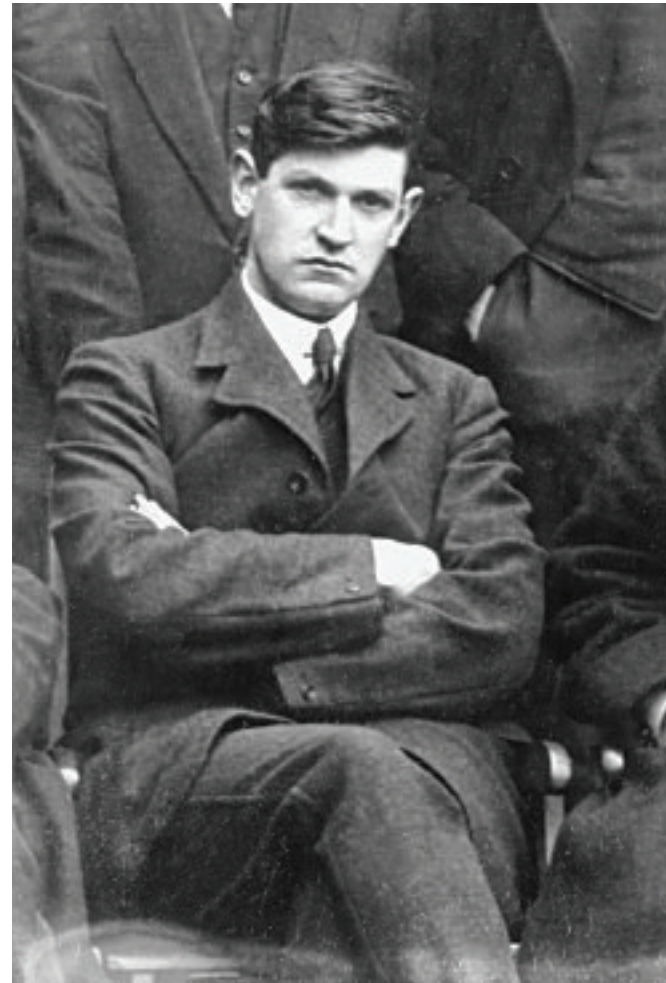
After being held in Athlone for about three weeks, Michael McCormack was brought before Tully for interrogation. On this occasion, Tully focussed on national rather than local issues, asking the prisoner if he would 'accept anything less for the country than a Republic' such as 'a status of that of Canada or South Africa'.

McCormack, who replied that only a republic was acceptable, believed that 'Tully was really sounding the prisoners to find out what their feelings regarding a settlement were.'

A clear shot

According to Michael McCormack, the closest that the IRA came to killing Tully was in July 1921 near Drumraney Church. Three IRA volunteers in the area (not including McCormack, who was still incarcerated) encountered a 'large motor car halted on the road, containing a number of British Military Officers including the famous Captain Tully'. Their car had been stopped by an IRA road-block. McCormack stated that the British soldiers had a hostage in the car, a man named William Moran, whom they were using as a means to discourage an IRA attack on the vehicle.

On seeing the hostage, the three volunteers withdrew to 'the old school beside Drumraney Church', which was located on higher ground. After some time, Tully departed the vehicle and walked in the direction



IRA officers in Athlone kept Michael Collins informed of local activity by the British Crown forces

of the old school, giving the IRA volunteers a clear view of the intelligence officer. One of them fired at Tully 'and apparently hit him as he fell backwards, but he was quickly up again and under cover'.

For the next twenty minutes, the IRA and the British officers exchanged gunfire until both sides withdrew without suffering casualties. McCormack concluded that Tully's survival unscathed despite seemingly being hit by a rifle shot 'tends to confirm the belief which then existed that he always wore some type of armour'.

It is not surprising that Tully was repeatedly targeted by the IRA. British army intelligence officers

such as Tully were vital sources of information for the Crown forces. However, the system was dependant on individuals and was vulnerable to disruption in the event that those officers were killed.

In Dublin, for example, the IRA targeted individuals in the intelligence gathering section - the 'G' Division - of the Dublin Metropolitan Police (DMP), causing immense damage to that organisation. If the Athlone Brigade had managed to kill Tully, or otherwise remove him from active service, it would have undermined the Crown forces in the region. In a later article, we will follow other aspects of the often brutal intelligence war in Westmeath between 1919 and 1921.

