



# HEADLINES FROM HISTORY

## The decline of the flying column



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In the latest of our articles focusing on the War of Independence and Civil War in and around Athlone, we follow the declining fortunes of the Athlone Brigade's flying column between October 1920 and February 1921.

### Ambush at Auburn

The Lough Ree and Parkwood ambushes of October 1920, which we discussed in earlier editions, were followed by the Auburn ambush on 2 November. That day, two lorries of Auxiliaries and Black and Tans were travelling from Longford in the direction of Athlone when they came under fire from an Irish Republican Army (IRA) unit. The ambush took place near Glasson at the bottom of a very steep hill, along which a boundary wall provided cover for the attackers.

According to Michael McCormack, an officer in the Drumraney Battalion of the Athlone Brigade, the ambush party comprised about 25 volunteers. They were mostly from the Drumraney Battalion and were armed with only 'four rifles', shotguns, revolvers and hand-grenades. The grenades were probably made by local members of the IRA. McCormack later recalled that the battalion made 'bombs out of paint-cans' that were 'filled with gelignite and nuts and scraps of iron'. Two riflemen were placed on either side of the road with orders to aim for the drivers of the vehicles. The driver of the lead vehicle, an English recruit named Sidney Larkin, was killed in the first volley. McCormack stated that one of the IRA volunteers, 'an ex-British Army man', threw 'three hand-grenades into the lorries'. None of those grenades exploded, however, and the occupants of the lorries returned fire before driving away as the ambushers fired a second volley. Apart from Larkin, the Crown forces suffered no other fatalities.

An IRA volunteer named Seamus Finn was killed during the fighting. Michael McCormack stated that Finn was shot dead when the Crown forces returned fire, although Thomas Costello, one of the Athlone Brigade's commanding officers, later claimed that Finn was accidentally 'shot by our own men' after leaving his position and entering the line of fire. It is not clear how Costello, who was not a member of the ambush party, obtained that information.

### Limited resources

Before the end of 1920, the Athlone Brigade went through one of its periodic reorganisations. The brigade's flying column split up with detachments going to each of the battalions in its area. The decision to split the column was likely an attempt to spread the most committed IRA officers throughout the region rather than concentrating them in one unit. The reorganisation, therefore, had the dual aims of encouraging the individual battalions to become more active and also to ensure discipline among those battalions. For example, Seamus O'Meara, who commanded the Athlone Brigade for much of 1920, and James Tormey were enraged when a group of volunteers, including some of the flying column, stole alcohol and cigarettes from a public house near Tubber.

Yet the break-up of the flying column compromised the already limited fighting capability of the Athlone Brigade and it would not attempt any more attacks on the scale of the Parkwood, Lough Ree and Auburn ambushes: in 1921 plans to ambush the Crown forces at Drumraney, Moate, Killucan and Tubbrit, on the Athlone to Ferbane road, came to nothing. Occasionally, flying columns from other counties ventured into Westmeath but the intelligence wing of the British army's 5th Division made no mention of active columns in the county from January to July 1921.

IRA activity in the Athlone area continued to be driven by the small corps of officers, especially James Tormey. The case of Tormey demonstrates how an IRA officer could lead activity in a region. Tormey had served with the Connaught Rangers during the First



A segment from a memorial card for Patrick Sloane, shot dead by the Crown forces in January 1921 (photo provided by Eamon Doyle).

World War, fighting at Gallipoli after joining the British army in 1915. He was only fifteen at the time, having lied about his age when enlisting. Tormey, as we have seen in earlier editions, commanded the Athlone Brigade's flying column at Parkwood and he had been a member of the unit that shot dead Thomas Craddock, a sergeant in the RIC. On another occasion in 1920, he had narrowly avoided capture by the Black and Tans. The Athlone Brigade contained few officers with Tormey's blend of training and experience, leaving its command structure highly vulnerable to disruption. That vulnerability would be exposed by Tormey's death in February 1921.

### The Tormey's

A contributory factor in James Tormey's death was the arrest of his brother Joseph by the Crown forces in November 1920. Joseph Tormey was arrested under the terms of the Restoration of Order in Ireland Act, which was introduced in 1920, and incarcerated in Ballykinlar Internment Camp, County Down. On 14 January 1921, Joseph and another Westmeath volunteer, Patrick Sloane (Sloan in some accounts) from Moate, were shot dead by a camp sentry. An eyewitness, John Macken - an officer of the IRA's Mullingar Brigade who was imprisoned in Ballykinlar from January to December 1921

- stated that they were shot 'for talking across the barbed wire to prisoners in the other camp.' This was confirmed in the subsequent military court of enquiry, which also concluded that the sentry had contravened regulations by opening fire - a fact that was not made public at the time.

Thomas Costello recalled that the death of Joseph made James Tormey 'very impatient and he laid an ambush at a place called Cornafulla on the Athlone-Ballinasloe road' on 2 February 1921. In the ensuing gunfight between his small group and an RIC patrol, supplemented by Black and Tans, Tormey was shot dead. His comrades later removed Tormey's corpse and brought him to the monastic site at Clonmacnoise, where he was buried. Soon after, the Crown forces returned to the area so as to obtain information and deal out retribution. Captured volunteers were beaten by Black and Tans and Bernard Gaffey, an officer in the Athlone Brigade, died later in 1921 as a result of the injuries caused by his interrogators. During these raids, the Crown forces discovered that James Tormey had been killed and they began searching local cemeteries for his grave, which they eventually found. They reopened the grave and brought Tormey's body to Athlone, reportedly sitting on the corpse and singing as they drove through the town.

The funeral mass was held in Athlone. All shops in the town were closed and 'thousands' of people lined the footpaths to watch the 'immense cortege' take the body to the graveyard in Mount Temple. Yet the police and military still felt the need to make an ostentatious show of force as, according to the Westmeath Examiner, 'Lorries containing Crown forces fully armed joined the cortege at the military barrack gate, a Union Jack being hoisted in one of the lorries.' After the burial, all males in the funeral party were searched and questioned. There was little logic in these actions by the Crown forces other than a desire to provoke the population. With Tormey's death, one of the most active and - from the point of view of the Crown forces - effective IRA officers in Westmeath had been removed from the scene.

