



HEADLINES FROM HISTORY

Civil War in Glasson



IAN KENNEALLY
Historian and Author

The Irish Independent was the first to carry the news. On Saturday August 26, 1922, it reported that, a day earlier, an anti-Treaty IRA unit had ambushed a car containing members of the National Army as it passed through Glasson. According to the Independent's Athlone correspondent, who sent a message via telegraph to his Dublin head office, at least two people had been killed. During the following days more details on the Glasson ambush became publicly available through newspaper reports and inquests. In this article, we explore those details.

The road
At about 10.40am on Friday August 25, 1922, a Ford motor car left Custume Barracks, Athlone, for Longford. It contained four members of the National Army: Captain Carroll, Captain Rattigan, Lieutenant Seán McCormack and a soldier named Alfred Hayes, who was the driver. McCormack sat in the front passenger seat alongside Hayes, while Carroll and Rattigan occupied the back seat. All of them were dressed in plain clothes and two were lightly armed.

By travelling in plain clothes, the men may have hoped to avoid drawing the attention of their anti-Treaty IRA enemy. Only three days earlier, Michaeln killed when his small convoy was attacked by the anti-Treaty IRA at Béal na Bláth in West Cork. By then, the Irish Civil War had entered what is often referred to as its guerrilla phase. Since the outbreak of the war

in June 1922, the National Army had succeed in winning control of most urban areas. In response, the anti-Treaty IRA leadership decided in mid-August to reorganise its forces into small active service units which would engage in hit-and-run attacks against the National Army. On the morning of August 25, one such unit was waiting on the Athlone side of Glasson, ready to ambush any National Army forces who passed their position. The bulk of the unit was hidden behind the village's schoolhouse wall, directly opposite the old Royal Irish Constabulary (RIC) barracks.

Approaching them was the motor car containing Carroll, Rattigan, McCormack and Hayes. It was travelling along the 'Low Road', which, as explained to me by historian Aengus Ó Fionnagáin, was the main road from Ballykeeran to Glasson, via Wineport, until the late 1970s. (What is now the N55 was unsurfaced until around 1960.) Their journey was uneventful until, after turning the corner at Deerpark, they could see carts carrying loads of hay, five in total, approaching from Glasson. The road, according to contemporary reports, narrowed at that point and Hayes had to slow the car as it moved past the carts.

The ambush
As the car passed between the fourth and fifth loads of hay, at the corner by the old RIC barracks, the anti-Treaty unit fired at least two shots, narrowly missing a young boy who was leading one of the carthorses. The occupants of the car ducked as it made the turn into Glasson while a woman named Boyd, who had been startled by the first two shots, rushed outside her house where one of her children was lying in a pram. At that moment, a 'further volley rang out from behind the loopholed wall opposite the barrack corner'. Boyd was 'hit in the breast and muscle of the left arm'. Two other people, both



civilians, were hit by gunfire during that volley or during the next few seconds. Patrick Murtagh was sitting in a horse-and-cart talking to John McCormack who was standing on the road. McCormack was shot in the leg while a bullet entered the right side of Murtagh's torso.

Around the same time, according to a subsequent inquest, Lieutenant Seán McCormack stood up in the car, turned to his comrades and called out: 'I am wounded.' Carroll pushed McCormack back into his seat and shouted at Hayes to continue driving. The ambushers kept firing as the car moved through Glasson and, at the Tubberclair side of the village, it suddenly slowed down. Carroll again ordered Hayes to increase speed but he replied: 'I am not able: I am wounded'. A few moments later the car came to a stop and both Carroll and Rattigan jumped out of the vehicle. They attempted to help Hayes and McCormack but could see that the anti-Treaty IRA unit was approaching. Carroll and Rattigan fled into a local field, later claiming that they were under constant fire from the ambushers who pursued them for 'about one mile and a-half'. Both men escaped without injury.

The anti-Treaty unit then split into smaller groups. One group brought Murtagh to a local dispensary run by a

doctor named Glancy. They must have realised the seriousness of Murtagh's wounds since they also asked the doctor to send for a priest, who arrived minutes later. Murtagh died after receiving the last rites. A short distance away, locals could see the burning wreck of the motor car which had been set on fire by one of the anti-Treaty IRA groups. Before burning the car, they lifted McCormack, who may already have died from his wounds, and Hayes, who was incapacitated, out of the vehicle.

The aftermath

When news of the ambush reached Athlone, a contingent of National Army troops departed Custume Barracks for Glasson. On the way, they encountered Carroll and Rattigan, who had found refuge in a local house. They then found McCormack lying dead by the side of the road and discovered that Murtagh had died in Glancy's dispensary. Both bodies and the grievously wounded Hayes were taken in a military ambulance to Athlone. In total, five people had been shot. Mrs Boyd and John McCormack were lucky to have received relatively minor wounds. Lieutenant Seán McCormack, who was from Moate, had received a bullet wound to his left shoulder from which he bled to death. He was 16 years old.

Murtagh, a 42-year-old egg-dealer from Wineport, also died from loss of blood. Albert Hayes, from Tullamore and aged about 20, remained alive but his wounds would prove fatal. According to Dr Glancy, Hayes had been shot in the back: 'The spinal cord was affected, and his legs were paralysed'. He died within days of the ambush.

Before he died, Hayes made a sworn statement in which he claimed to recognise one of the ambushers: 'I know a man in the party by his voice. He worked in Tullamore and I saw him in different places. His name was 'Thomas Berry.' Hayes' statement was not accepted as evidence during the inquest because it was deemed to be too tenuous. Yet Hayes was correct in his belief that Berry was one of the anti-Treaty IRA ambushers. Thomas Berry confirmed this fact in his later application for a military pension. Also, Berry claimed that he remained 'on the run' until 1924 so as to avoid being the target of retribution from McCormack's brother Joseph, who was a captain in the National Army. So it was that, in the same week in which Michael Collins was killed, three midland families were left to mourn the latest casualties in a war whose outcome was yet unknown but whose legacy was being shaped with every fatality.

