

The Kilmichael Ambush by Bláithín O'Connor

Background

The Kilmichael ambush occurred on November 28th 1920 in the midst of the War of Independence. Through the centuries of British occupation, several attempts to achieve independence had taken place, including the 1798 Rebellion, the Fenian Rising and the 1916 Rising, none of which had succeeded militarily or politically but all of which had helped to keep the desire for self-determination alive in the psyche of the Irish people.

The 1916 Rising had, however, caused a change in public opinion after the leaders of the Rising were executed in Kilmainham Gaol. Before then, most Irish people would have been satisfied to achieve Home Rule where an Irish government in Dublin would deal with internal affairs while the parliament in England would continue to control external affairs. This process had finally been about to begin when World War 1 commenced and the British postponed all arrangements until the war was over.

During the Rising (and in the direct aftermath of it) the people of Ireland largely resented or even rejected the rebels for causing such a commotion in which roughly 300 civilians were killed. Once the executions took place over an extended period of time and the ideals and beliefs of the leaders spread, people began to reevaluate the rebels' actions and to better understand them. The idea of Home Rule was discarded in place of a desire for total independence, as could be seen in the significant drop in support for the Irish Parliamentary Party/ the Home Rule Party in the 1918 elections and the rise in support for Sinn Féin which won 73 seats in the election. Thus Sinn Féin (a Nationalist Party) had a mandate to seek self-determination and so they abstained from taking their seats in Westminster. This process led to the War of Independence and the eventual creation of the Irish Free State.

The War of Independence lasted from January 21st 1919 to July 11th 1921. There was a time of increased activity on both sides during the second half of 1920 with the British bringing in the Auxiliaries and the Black and Tans. The Auxiliaries were former British soldiers with military experience from World War 1. They were paid well by the British government to join the fight in Ireland and there are many accounts of them terrorising innocent civilians. They were well equipped and well trained, meaning they were a formidable force for the poorly armed IRA to challenge. Even the British Prime Minister, Lloyd George, claimed the British "had murder by the throat" in his speech at the Guildhall in London on the 10th of November 1920, but he had cause to rethink that statement in the next two weeks when Michael Collins orchestrated the assassinations of 12 British intelligence officers in Dublin and Tom Barry successfully ambushed, and killed, 16 auxiliaries at Kilmichael.



Monument at Kilmichael

Who?

The Kilmichael Ambush was carried out by thirty six members ,armed with rifles and a few pistols with 35 rounds of ammunition each, of the IRA led by Tom Barry the leader of the West Cork Flying Column. The Flying Columns were unlike any of the other IRA units. They were not tied to any location, were always on the move and drew some of the best men from the other units in the area. The columns were the ones that carried out most of the attacks and saw most of the action during the War of Independence.

Tom Barry was born in Killorglin, County Kerry in 1898. He was the son of an RIC officer Thomas Barry and Margaret Barry and had 13 siblings. He joined the British Army in 1915 and served in Mesopotamia, now known as Iraq. Barry served as a sergeant in the army before returning to Ireland in 1919 after being demobilised. Barry became a member of the 3rd West Cork Brigade in 1920 and from there became the commander of the West Cork Flying Column. He was known as one of the most active and successful commanders during the War of Independence with his most famous attacks being the Kilmichael Ambush and the Crossbarry Ambush.

The patrol that the Flying Column ambushed included eighteen auxiliaries from the Number Two Section, C Company, Auxiliary Division, Royal Irish Constabulary. This division had been stationed in Macroom for several months and had been known to have shot and killed an innocent civilian in the past. Among the auxiliaries that Barry ambushed, three had been awarded Military Crosses (one of the highest decorations for soldiers) and another had a Distinguished Flying Cross. At least eight of them had ground combat experience and three had flown in the Royal Flying Corps and RAF.

Thus, at first glance, they would appear to be a formidable force but after looking at their medical records that were released years later, questions arose as to how some of them were even considered for further active service. Five had made it through World War 1 without any injuries, five had been wounded and/or gassed during the war but had no clear long-term consequences, four were deemed to be only fit for sedentary duties after the war and one was technically deaf and unfit for frontline duties. Even so, each member of the ambushed party was experienced in warfare and was better equipped than the men of the Column.

Of those involved in the ambush, 16 of the auxiliaries and three members of the IRA were killed. Another one of the auxiliaries, Cecil Guthrie, was shot dead two days after he fled the site of the ambush. The three Irish that were killed were Michael McCarthy of Dunmanway, Jim O'Sullivan of Knockawaddra and Pat Deasy of Bandon.

Pat was sixteen years old and had been sick for two days previously, causing Barry to relieve him of his position for the ambush and ordering him to go back to the Bandon area. Pat Deasy had, however, followed the column until they were three miles from the ambush site when he was noticed. He was given back his position after pleading with Tom Barry and served in the No. 2 section of riflemen. He died of his wounds at a house near the ambush site. Barry described him as "Quiet and serious beyond his years, he was still a merry boy and a favourite with all the Column."



Tom Barry



A group of Auxiliaries in Ireland during the War of Independence

Where?

The Kilmichael Ambush took place on a lonely stretch of road between Macroom and Dunmanway near the village of Kilmichael. Tom Barry described the ambush area as “a bogland interspersed with heather and rocks.” This was not good terrain for a typical hit and run type IRA ambush to take place due to the lack of ditches and cover but Barry never wanted for there to be a line of retreat and the Column had to attack somewhere between Kilmichael Cross and Glean Cross which was a few miles south. The Column could not attack on the Macroom side of Kilmichael because enemy reinforcements could arrive quickly and it could not select a position past Gleann since it was not guaranteed the auxiliaries would travel down that road as they had taken different routes from the cross the past four Sundays. The road between Kilmichael and Gleann was the only one the auxiliaries were certain to travel.

Barry gives a detailed description of the ambush sections in his book ‘Guerilla Days in Ireland’. The ambush party was positioned at various points around a large bend in the road with ditches on either side of the road but a number of rocky eminences. The point was one and a half miles south of Kilmichael and only one house was visible, a hundred yards south of the ambush site. The sections were as follows:

1. The Command Post was at the eastern edge of the ambushade, facing where the lorries would come from. The Volunteers hid behind a small wall of stones that had gaps in many places. It was a good enfilading position according to Tom Barry but provided little cover.

2. The No.1 Section which consisted of ten riflemen was positioned on the back of a large rock covered in heather, which was ten feet tall and roughly ten yards from the command post. The section would have a good field of fire from moving up the crest of the rock.

3. The No.2 Section of ten riflemen were at the western entrance to the ambush site, about 150 yards from the No.1 Section. They were stationed upon a rocky eminence from where they could fire at both the first and second lorry. Seven men were placed where they could fire at the second lorry if it had come around the bend before shots were fired at the first lorry and three were placed if the lorry had not reached the bend yet.

4. Seven men from the No.3 Section were positioned at the opposite side of the road to the rest in order to prevent the auxiliaries from finding cover and firing positions on that side of the road. This was a risky move by Tom Barry as it meant they could easily shoot their own comrades but the Flying Column could not afford to have the auxiliaries take up firing positions as the Flying Column would lose a long range battle. The auxiliaries had much more experience and training than any of the IRA.

5. The other six men of No.3 Section were placed sixty yards north of the ambush site in case of there being a third or even fourth lorry. They were twenty yards back from the roadside so they could fire on a stretch of two hundred and fifty yards of the road that approached the ambush position.

6. Two unarmed scouts were posted one hundred and fifty and two hundred yards north of the No.2 Section, to signal the approach of the lorries. Another scout was placed a few hundred yards south of the Command Post to ensure they were not attacked from the Dunmanway direction.



Picture of the ambush site

When?

The Flying Column left for Kilmichael at around 3 or 4 am on Sunday the 28th of November 1921 from Ahilina. They marched cross country for miles through the pouring rain to the site of the ambush. They arrived at 8.15am. The Column was in its positions by nine am where they stayed for the next several hours. The men had nothing to eat except a "large bucket of tea" which was provided by the household near the site.

The mens clothes were all drenched and as Tom Barry stated in an interview with RTÉ 'the day began to freeze'. It was intensely cold to a point where the clothes the men wore had become stiff and near frozen. Still, they did not leave their positions.

After hours of waiting with no sign of the enemy, Barry decided to wait ten more minutes before resigning the Column. It was in that ten minutes that the scouts signalled the approach of the lorries at 4.30pm.

Mere minutes before the lorries arrived a group of volunteers from the local IRA came past them with no idea of the operation that was about to take place. Barry stepped out into the road and hurried them on quickly into the gate of the house near the ambush site. They had just disappeared from sight when the first lorry came around the bend.

Upon seeing Barry, who was dressed in an IRA officers uniform that the auxiliaries had likely never seen before and carrying stolen British arms, the lorry slowed. It was then Barry threw a Mills bomb into the lorry and began the attack.

What Happened?

Barry was the one to initiate the ambush. He stood in the middle of the road as the British trucks came around the bend and beckoned for them to stop. The first truck which was already going slowly due to the bend, almost seemed like it was about to stop fifty yards from the Command Post but kept crawling forward slowly. When the truck was thirty-five yards from the Command Post, Tom Barry threw one of his two Mills bombs which had been captured in an ambush at Toureen.

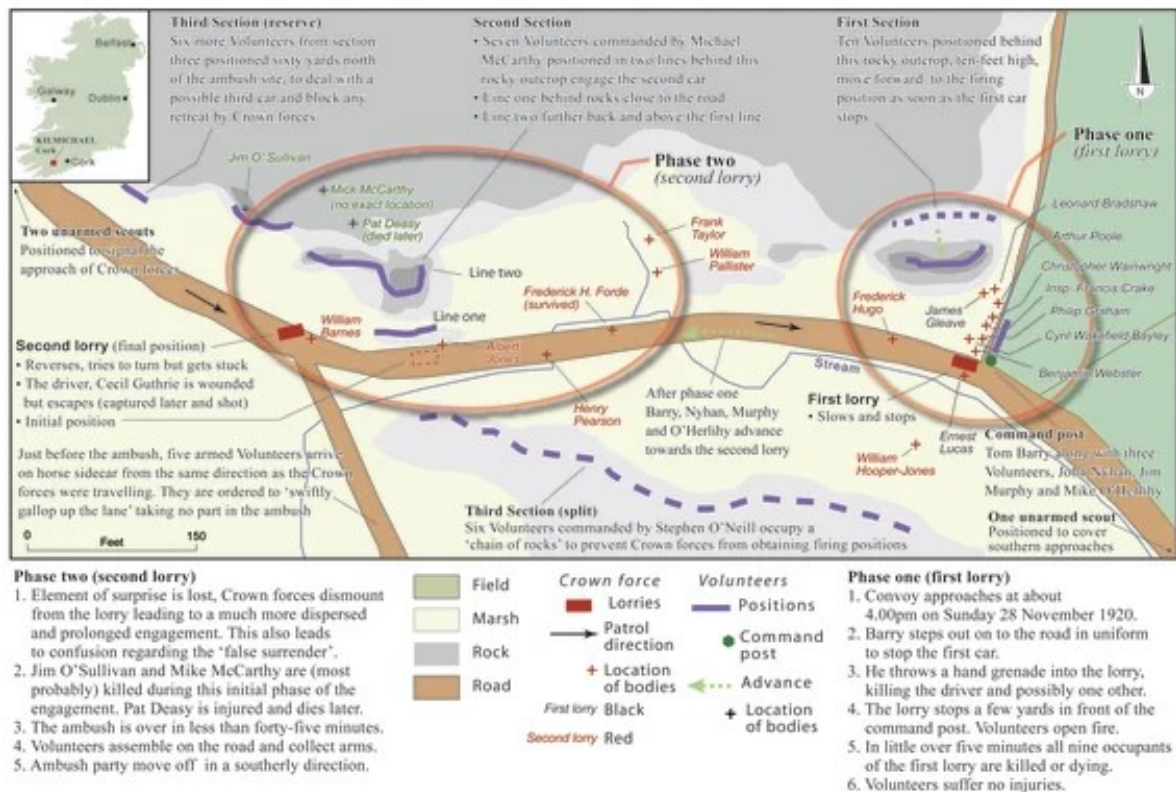
The Mills bomb exploded when it landed on the uncovered driver's seat, killing him instantly. The whistle was blown to signal the order to start firing and the ambush commenced. The ten riflemen in the No.1 Section opened fire on the first lorry and the auxiliaries returned it with revolver fire. Barry described the fight as hand-to-hand and "Revolvers were used at point blank range, and at times, rifle butts replaced rifle shots." He stated that "So close were the combatants, that in one instance the pumping blood from an Auxiliary's severed artery struck one attacker full in the mouth before the Auxiliary hit the ground." Within ten minutes the auxiliaries from the first truck were all either "dead or dying" including the officer in command of the patrol Inspector Francis Crake.

The driver of the second lorry, Cecil Guthrie had tried to reverse and turn back but the truck became stuck and the auxiliaries were forced to flee the truck to find cover. Those in the second truck lasted longer than those in the first as they had a few brief moments to find cover. The opposing forces were engaging each other at a distance of 25 yards while Barry and the three riflemen from the Command Post made their way down behind the auxiliaries after the first truck had been dealt with. In Tom Barry's book he recalls hearing several of the auxiliaries shouting "We surrender" with a few even throwing their rifles down. On Barry's command the IRA stopped firing but when two of the IRA men stood up from their hiding place the auxiliaries allegedly drew their revolvers and shot them. It was then Barry gave the order "Rapid fire and do not stop until I tell you". The men did as they were told and there was no British soldier left moving after a number of minutes. Sixteen auxiliaries, the largest number of casualties the IRA ever inflicted in a single event, lay scattered along the road to be found the next day.

One of the two auxiliaries that were not killed at the ambush site, Cecil Guthrie was later captured by the IRA as he tried to flee and was subsequently shot with his own revolver. The only survivor was too traumatised to remember much of the event.

After the ambush was over and Pat Deasy had been borne away Barry had to drill the men on the road as they were so badly shaken. Many had never seen or taken part in something such as this before, and even Barry said "It was a bloody fight, it was a bitter fight, it was a savage fight." The close quarters tactics used in the ambush were brutal and also highly risky. The IRA could not afford to lose any of its few experienced fighters and it was much more common for ambushes to take place from safe distances from where they could quickly retreat. Kilmichael, however, provided none of these safeguards. "There was no line of retreat." from Kilmichael but Tom Barry had chosen

to go for a place where there could only be close combat as “There are no good or bad shots at ten yards’ range”.



A map of the ambush site.

How come the IRA were able to ambush the Auxiliaries?

Obviously a lot of careful planning went into the ambush, but what allowed for the IRA to be able to plan an ambush on one of the most formidable forces in Ireland in the 1920s in the first place?

It turned out to be down to a number of reasons:

The Auxiliaries had been in the country four or five months and not a single attempt to engage them was made. Barry states in his book "Strange as it may appear, not a single shot had been fired at them up to this point by the IRA in any part of Ireland to halt their terror campaign.". This led to them becoming careless among other things.

At the beginning it had been mandatory for patrols to consist of four trucks. They cut this back to two and often went out without armoured car support. They went in groups of eighteen, the bare minimum.

They had become complacent and even worse, predictable. Believing the local population was too scared of them to try anything, the auxiliaries used the same roads again and again. It was here that the local population played a large part in the war without ever firing a gun; silently observing the British and finding patterns in their behavior, then feeding this information back to the IRA.

Hence Tom Barry planned an ambush that has been studied by professional soldiers as well as guerilla fighters. His book 'Guerilla Days in Ireland' has even been used by the British Army itself when teaching soldiers about guerilla warfare.

The False Surrender

When referring to the Kilmichael Ambush there is always one question asked. Was there really a false surrender or not?

In his book, Tom Barry says that the Auxiliaries had surrendered and that some had even thrown their rifles down, but once the IRA showed themselves they drew their revolvers and began to fire at them. Tom Barry then gave the order to fire until he told them to stop. While the IRA fired on them, there had been more shouts of surrender but Tom Barry "Having seen more than enough of their surrender tactics, shouted "Keep firing on them, No.2 Section. Everybody keep firing on them until the Cease Fire." This command came when all the Auxiliaries appeared to be dead or dying on the road.

Though none of the men from the Flying Column that were present at the ambush ever contradicted Barry, and several even mentioned a false surrender in their accounts of the events, some people still doubted the idea. One such person was Peter Hart, a Canadian historian who studied modern Irish history. In his book "The IRA & Its Enemies" he concluded that:

"British information seems to have been remarkably accurate. Barry's "history" of Kilmichael, on the other hand, is riddled with lies and evasions. There was no false surrender as he described it. The surviving Auxiliaries were simply "exterminated"."

Hart's book contained other points along the same lines, using "sources" who wished to remain anonymous that had allegedly been there at the ambush.

The only problem with that though, was the fact that only one of the men, Ned Young, from the ambush was still living at the time Hart conducted his interviews and was ninety seven years of age and had suffered a stroke. Young's son has signed an affidavit that his father was unfit for interview.

Hart's account caused many debates and was proven mostly inaccurate by many other academics including historian Meda Ryan. In her book "Tom Barry : IRA Freedom Fighter" she dedicates a chapter to the inconsistencies and falsities in Hart's account. She explains each inaccuracy with ample detail leading to the overall conclusion that Hart's account is not properly factual.

Questions still remain about what happened at Kilmichael. Maybe there really was a false surrender or maybe some of the Auxiliaries tried to surrender while some of their comrades continued to fire. All that is certain is that it must have been chaos down at Kilmichael in the gathering dusk and that it would have been next to impossible to tell what was really going on. We will never know for sure what happened at Kilmichael and that is acceptable. It is when people specifically try to find or "create" evidence that undermines those who played such important roles in our history that it is not okay. They are all long gone at this point, there is no reason to try to tarnish their reputation now.

In my personal opinion however, I do believe that there was a false surrender at least to some extent at Kilmichael. There is no other way I can see that caused Pat Deasy to die of his wounds if he did not stand up, since he would have been shot straight in the head if he had been shot while in position. The riflemen that were shot were also positioned on top of a rocky eminence and would have been mostly shielded by the rock face. I find it hard to believe an Auxiliary would have had the time to carefully aim up at the rock while in the midst of a close quarters battle with someone on the ground.

It is irrelevant anyhow whether there was a false surrender or not, for it is probable that Tom Barry never intended on taking any prisoners in the first place. There had been no talk of surrender before the ambush certainly. To Tom Barry these Auxiliaries were the best of the best and if you didn't kill them, they would be sure to kill you. The outcome of the event would have been the same whether a false surrender took place or not.

The Aftermath

Kilmichael had three main effects on the War of Independence:

1. It led to increased activity and violence in the war. The British soldiers were outraged by what had happened at Kilmichael and took their revenge on the local population. In the immediate aftermath of the ambush British forces set fire to many houses in the locality leaving all either severely damaged or destroyed. In Kilmichael Bar an innocent man was taken outside by the Auxiliaries and shot the day after the ambush. Martial law was also introduced by the British government in most of Munster. Another event that can possibly be linked with this retaliation by the British was the burning of Cork which occurred a week after Kilmichael. Large portions of the city were burned including the City Hall and the Free Library.

2. The political effect Kilmichael had was important. While the British and Unionist papers called it a “massacre” and “another hideous outrage” even the British Prime Minister could not deny that Kilmichael “was of a different character “ from what they had seen in the past. The ambush forced the British to realise that this was not a weak rebellion, it was a war and that political action would be needed to end it. They would need to come to an agreement if it was to stop and that could only be reached through negotiation and compromise.

3. The Kilmichael ambush served as a major morale boost for Irish forces and people around the country. The Auxiliaries had been in the country for months at this point, terrorising the local civilians. Kilmichael changed that. It showed people that the Auxiliaries could be taken on at close quarters and defeated. Kilmichael proved, as was Barry’s intention, that the auxiliaries were not invincible. To know that a force such as the Auxiliaries could be beaten must have been inspiring for other IRA units across the country.

Kilmichael also put the Auxiliaries around the country on edge. They still continued their reign of terror in Ireland but they had to be more careful now. Even though attacks on them were few, there was always the chance that they could be one of the few that were ambushed or shot. No one ever wants to be the one that gets shot. Due to this, Auxiliaries no longer paraded around the locality completely carefree and without caution.

“The Boys Of Kilmichael” have entered republican folklore as heroes and are well remembered as being part of the largest and most notorious ambush of the War Of Independence. A large stone monument was erected in commemoration of the event at the 50th anniversary of the ambush. This monument was visited by those in the local area at the centenary of Kilmichael which passed mere months ago. No official commemorations were held at the site due to Covid restrictions but commemorative posts were widespread on social media.



Destruction caused by the Burning of Cork

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