

Drawing of the Grange Ambush layout—positions occupied and the manner in which the fight developed.

THE GRANGE AMBUSH

By Pat Murnane

The following is an account of the Grange Ambush, which took place on 8th November 1920 in the vicinity of the bridge at Lower Grange.

A number of sources are used for reference including *Limerick's Fighting Story*, originally published by *The Kerryman* in the 1940s. The statements that were given by some of the ambush participants to the *Bureau of Military History* from 1947 to 1957 are also used.

A thorough research of available sources indicates some differences in various accounts of certain events of the day. Such differences are relatively minor in nature and should not detract in any way from the bigger picture of a planned ambush of British forces and a huge amount of bravery and military skill displayed by all members of the various participating IRA units and a number of local Volunteers.

It is inevitable that accounts recorded well after an event – especially war – will not always be fully synchronised in the detail. The stresses and strains that occur prior to, during and after the heat of battle must be enormous, and it would be unrealistic to expect combatants to recall every detail with absolute precision. It must also be acknowledged that the witness statements were taken more than thirty years after the event.

I was pleased to be invited to write this article as the subject matter has always been captivating for me, partly owing to the fact that my father and an uncle served with the IRA and were both present and in action on the day. In addition, I was instrumental in planning and organising the provision and erection of the commemorative plaque in November 2011, which is placed on the stone wall entrance to the former Croker Estate, a few hundred yards from the scene of the ambush.

The primary IRA offensive took place on the Limerick side of the bridge, directly opposite O'Neill's house as it was then – the home of Tony Barry and family in more recent times.

The Ambush

In October of 1920, the East Limerick Flying Column was resting in the vicinity of Lough Gur, an area which was under the command of the 3rd Battalion, East Limerick Brigade, IRA. Martin Conway, Vice Officer of the 3rd Battalion and Commanding

Officer of Grange Company, advised that there was a suitable ambush position in Lower Grange, and so, this location was selected for ambush of enemy forces.

At a meeting held at the home of Bob Ryan, Captain of the Lough Gur Company, the decision was taken to go ahead with an ambush. The following, in addition to Bob Ryan, were in attendance at the meeting – Donnchadh Ó hAnnagain, Officer in Command of Column; Martin Conway, Holycross; Sean Forde, Bruff; David Cremmins, Bruff; Eamonn Treacy, Bruff; Seamus Moloney, Bruff; John Clifford, Fedamore; Dick O’Connell, Caherconlish and James Moloney, Kilcullane. On a rough location map of the proposed ambush, the leader outlined the intended set up with the bombers, rifle and shotgun men and road blocks etched into position.

In the early morning hours of November 8th, Donnchadh Ó hAnnagain paraded his men outside the gate to Lough Gur House, the home of Count de Salis and then set out for Lower Grange. About fifty men of 3rd Battalion East Limerick IRA paraded at five am on a cold, bleak morning. They were armed with twenty-one rifles and twenty-one shotguns plus a small quantity of explosives. It had been decided to ambush the convoy at Grange Bridge, a point about eight miles from Limerick and about four miles from Bruff. They set out and occupied positions around John O’Neill’s house. The ambush location was about four miles from the big British Garrison at Bruff, to the south. They were expecting two British lorries at nine am, coming from the Limerick direction, but, as it transpired, eight lorries and at least one armoured car arrived at noon from the opposite direction.

It was a joint action involving the flying columns of both the 3rd Battalion – East Limerick Brigade and the 4th Battalion – Mid Limerick Brigade, supported by men from the local companies of Bruff, Grange and Holycross in the East Limerick Brigade and from the Fedamore and Ballybricken Companies of the Mid Limerick Brigade. Donnchadh Ó hAnnagain had overall command of the combined columns, and most of the ambushers were placed in houses and behind walls on both sides of the road.

Other IRA units had taken up positions away from Grange to intercept enemy reinforcements that might come from Hospital, Fedamore, Bruff or Limerick City.

Approaching Lower Grange Village, the British became suspicious, and they sent one lorry ahead as a decoy. This was bombed by the IRA and raked with small arms fire. At that point, a British armoured car appeared with an officer mounted on the running board firing a revolver and the armoured car’s machine guns firing at the IRA at close range. The IRA account named the officer on the running board as Lt Watling, believing they wounded him and that he died in hospital at Bruff that night. The IRA men involved in this attack were Tomas Malone, Maurice Meade (from Elton) and Dave Murnane.

Bombs and gunfire greeted the military and in the consternation and din, Martin Conway, Jim Murnane and Seamus Moloney tied two farm carts together with a ladder across the road to prevent the lorries escaping.

A greater danger threatened from the close proximity of additional lorries that had come to a halt at the Bruff side of the engagement.

Following the IRA's engagement with the soldiers in the lorry and armoured car, Ó hAnnagain immediately ordered a retreat. The east offered the best line of retreat as an open bog lay to the west, and enemy lorries were positioned to the north and south, making all of these retreat options too dangerous.

The IRA personnel withdrew safely in an easterly direction, all surviving to fight another day. Having originally set out to ambush two lorries travelling from Limerick to Bruff, they had to deal with a more difficult situation, a much larger British force coming from the opposite direction.

Billy Burke and Tom Fogarty, among the group that operated from Clancy's house, were wounded. They were conveyed to safety by the Grange Company.

Ambush Drawing

The book titled *Limerick Fighting Story – From 1916 to the Truce with Britain*, edited by Colonel JM McCarthy, contains a drawing of the Grange Ambush, which purports to show how the opposing forces were organised on the day of the engagement as well as the direction and route of the IRA retreat.

According to the drawing, IRA forces were deployed on both sides of the road in almost equal numbers. The men on the left (going in Limerick direction) would appear to have been spread out from the river to the then Gate Lodge (gated entrance to Croker Estate). On the opposite side of the road, men were located on the Limerick side of the river, some in the vicinity of the now Barry family home. At the Grange side of the river, men were located at the Clancy/Bulfin properties. The drawing also indicates that the major British offensive on foot came from the Bruff direction, across a field towards the river. The IRA retreat lines eastward are clearly indicated.

The deployment of IRA men must have reflected the expectation of a British convoy travelling from the Limerick direction. Therefore, the Irish forces were not positioned strategically to ambush a British force of much more strength than anticipated and coming from the opposite direction.

Statement (19-10-1951) by Donnchadh Ó hAnnagain, Land Officer, Department of Defence

The following is extracted from Document No WS 600, Bureau of Military History, 1913-21 (Roinn Cosanta). The Statement was made by Witness, Donnchadh Ó hAnnagain, Brigadier, East Limerick Brigade; O/C East Limerick Flying Column. The extract from the statement relates to the ambush of Crown forces at Grange in which the witness was the Officer in Command.

On 10th [8th] November, 1920, we took up a position at the village of Grange on the Limerick-Bruff Road, expecting a convoy of enemy transport of which we had

received information that it was likely to pass that way. After several hours waiting, the enemy approached, but in the opposite direction to that which we expected of them. Unfortunately, a shot was fired prematurely and probably accidentally by one of our men, and this precipitated the fight, much to our disadvantage in the position we occupied. The British were supported by an armoured car. I had a very poor knowledge of the district and decided to withdraw. We were hotly pursued by the enemy, but we returned fire and retired in good order. We had one wounded, but in the circumstances were then unable to calculate the enemy casualties. I was subsequently informed that they had five wounded.

**Statement (6-7-1956) by Edmund Tobin
Ballinalackin, Garryspillane, Co Limerick**

The following is extracted from Document No WS 1451, Bureau of Military History, 1913-21 (Roinn Cosanta). The Statement was made by Witness, Edmund Tobin, Battalion Quarter Master; Brigade Quarter Master. The extract from the statement relates to the ambush of Crown forces at Grange in which the witness participated.

We moved with the Column to Kilkilane [*Kilcullane*] a place between Herbertstown and Lough Gur. After a few days of rest, we took up ambush positions at the village of Grange, which is situated on a left-hand bend on the road from Bruff to Limerick. In a public house – situated on the right-hand side of the road as one looked towards Limerick – which was owned by a man named Clancy, four men – Billy Burke, Phil Fogarty, Owen Keeffe and another man – were placed, all riflemen. The windows in the gable end of this pub commanded a good view of the bend which was approximately in the centre of the village.

On the same side of the road but nearer Limerick was a high wall surrounding the grounds of a large farmhouse owned by a man named O'Neill. In the wall was a large wooden door which gave access to the front of the farmhouse. The pub and the farmhouse were separated by a small bridge over a river and were about 200 yards apart. Inside the wall on the Limerick side of the bridge, we erected a platform to enable us to see over the wall which was about ten feet high. The platform adjoined the gable end of O'Neill's farmhouse which faced Clancy's Pub. To erect the platform we rolled a number of porter barrels across the bridge from Clancy's and through the big doorway, closing the door later. When we had the barrels in position, we placed planks on them. Morgan Portley – an officer of the Mid Limerick Brigade – and I got on the platform to open the attack with bombs.

Behind the big door, which was a few yards to the left of the platform, Martin Conway in charge of six men was placed with instructions to open the door at a given signal and push out a horse cart into the road as a block or barrier. Away back behind Conway were posted a further six men armed with shotguns to cover the doorway

in case the enemy would try to retreat through it. In extended formation around the bend and on the right side also, were posted the Lough Gur Company with a number of Mid Limerick men all armed with shotguns, in the charge of Bob Ryan.

Across the road from Clancy's Pub on the left-hand side of the road and on the Bruff side of the little river were Donnchadh Hannigan and Sean Ford in charge of a number of the Column men. They all had rifles. Around the bend on the left-hand side but a short distance nearer Limerick than the shotgun men on the opposite side were posted the remainder of the Column men, all with rifles too. All of the Column men were well experienced by this time and had several engagements to their credit.

Before leaving me, Hannigan and Ford told me not to attack any lorry coming from the Bruff direction as there may be prisoners on it, but within half an hour, they were back to me again to tell me that they had just received a signal from a hill beyond Clancy's which, as I have said, was on the Bruff side of the ambush position – saying there was one lorry approaching from Bruff which was not carrying prisoners. They told me to open the attack on the lorry. As Ford left me, he said, "Give it the bombs Ned and we will finish it off".

They returned to their positions and we waited. What a surprise for Morgan Portley and me, looking from our position on the platform to a bend in the road from Bruff to see one, two, three, four lorries and I think one armoured car included among them, with more behind. I had to think and be quick about it. I was going to let them pass. Portley said, "What will we do?" As he did so, an accidental shot went off, fired by one of our men on the other side of the road. There was no mistaking the sound of that shot; it was that short, sharp bark of Peter the Painter. Because of that shot I decided to attack. Without answering Portley, I pulled the pin and he did likewise. We peeped over the top and let fly. The two bombs went right into the first lorry. After the explosion, it swerved to the left and stopped. In a matter of seconds, the enemy's machine guns and rifles were spraying the area with bullets.

I turned to look for Martin Conway at the door. In my rage, I forgot to tell him not to open the door. He had it open and him and his men were retreating past O'Neill's house. I jumped off the platform and I was about to lay my hands on my rifle which was standing at the gable end of O'Neill's house when I saw a British Officer and one soldier coming in through the gate, but thanks to the quick action of the six men covering that door with their shotguns – I only knew one of them, his name was Murnane of Lough Gur – they let bang and down went the two men in the doorway. With that the retreat was sounded by one of our men in charge on the other side of the road. As I was in charge of the men on our side of the road, I got my whistle and gave the signal to retreat to the men on the right-hand side. As I looked across the river, I saw Billy Burke. By the way he was using

his leg I knew he was wounded. I also saw Phil Fogarty as he came out from the back of Clancy's; one of his hands was very dead-looking.

I had to make some attempt to get away myself, but I had a haversack with about 300 rounds of .303 ammunition, the weight of which was too much for me to jump over a wire fence at the back of O'Neill's house as Morgan Portley had done. I went to the front of O'Neill's, but the enemy were firing a machine gun on it. All my own men were gone too far to call on them to cover that doorway; I was like the boy on the burning deck. During a lull in the firing I got safely across the farmyard and over a low wall where I got down to draw my breath, travelling about ten yards at a time and using all the military training I had learned from the little field-exercise-books. I had gone about 100 yards across a big field and was about to take it easy thinking the enemy had ceased fire – the weight of the ammunition was telling on me – when all of a sudden it started up again; the bullets were going into the ground all around and very close to me. I surmised they were by this time firing from O'Neill's hay-barn. First to the left and then to the right and lying down flat for a while, I kept going for another 100 yards. The land was very flat; I hardly knew where I was going by the time they eased off firing. All the men of that section situated on the right-hand side of the road had by now gone out of sight. I saw a fence to my right where I took cover and had a smoke and there I decided that the only thing to do was to go back to the house which I had left early that morning – Moloney's of Kilkilane [*Kilcullane*]. [*He reached Moloney's house safely*]

**Statement (14-1-1957) by Morgan Portley
Kishikirk, Caherconlish, Co Limerick**

The following is extracted from Document No WS 1559, Bureau of Military History, 1913-21 (Roinn Cosanta). The Statement was made by Witness, Morgan Portley, Company Captain, Ballybricken, Co Limerick, Battalion Adjutant. The extract from the statement relates to the ambush of Crown forces at Grange in which the witness participated.

On a cold, bleak morning, about the first week in November 1920, the members of East and Mid Limerick Flying Columns took up positions at Grange. Donnchadh Ó hAnnagain, O/C East Limerick Flying Column, took charge of operations. Sentries and outposts were placed at Bruff and Limerick sides of the main body of Volunteers. I was placed in John O'Neill's yard inside the wall, standing on a table so that I could look out over the high wall. I had eight bombs and had instructions from the O/C to open the ambush by bombing the first lorry.

The approach of the enemy was signalled by the sentry on Grange Hill (*about 1 mile south of the ambush position*). When the lorries approached within half a mile of our position, it was discovered that there were from 8 to 10 lorries of British troops. Commandant O'Hannigan approached my position and said: "We

will let them pass". A few minutes later, when the first lorry was within 200 yards of my position, Commandant O'Hannigan again approached me and said: "Fire into them; we will make it an unsafe road for them".

I waited until the first lorry, which appeared to be a four-ton Leyland with high sides, was right opposite me. After releasing the spring, I dropped the bomb in the middle of the lorry. There were between 30 and 35 men in the lorry and they were all standing up. Immediately the soldiers saw the bomb they started throwing themselves out at both sides. The bomb exploded with terrific force. When I looked over the wall again, the officer in the second lorry was standing in the middle of the road, about 30 yards away, shouting orders to his men. The men in the second lorry, who were lucky enough to get clear, were taking up positions on both sides of the road. I pulled the pin out of a second bomb and threw it as far back towards the officer's position as I could. There was another explosion, and, almost immediately, the enemy started firing from their positions at the side of the road. Splinters of stones from the top of the wall were now hitting me in the face, and as I was out of range with bombs, I did not throw any more. I peeped over the wall again and the British officer was moving across the road shouting orders to his men. He certainly gave great encouragement to his men and showed complete disregard for his own safety.

The East Limerick Flying Column on the west side of the road opened rifle fire after the explosion of the first bomb. This rifle fire had little effect on the enemy owing to the promptness with which the British officer got his men down to the prone position at both sides of the road and the fact that only one lorry of troops came right into the ambushade. Another factor which made the rifle and shotgun fire of our men ineffective was that our men were behind stone walls and they could not, without unduly exposing themselves, direct their fire low enough to hit a man in the prone position, while the enemy kept up a continuous fire, raking the tops of the walls at both sides of the road. After the first burst of fire all the Volunteers on the north side of O'Neill's house (*Limerick side*), including East and Mid Limerick Flying Columns, found themselves in useless positions. Those of us who occupied O'Neill's yard and a few men in nearby houses were the only ones in contact with the enemy.

After about ten minutes, the enemy brought an armoured car onto the bridge over the Camogue River and from there poured heavy machine-gun fire into our positions. The bullets were ricocheting off the walls of O'Neill's house and before I stepped down off the table, I saw that our men were retreating across the fields on the eastern side of the road. Evidently Commandant O'Hannigan, realising that he could not inflict any further damage on the enemy, had given the signal for retreat. I heard a blast of a whistle previously but did not know that it was the signal for retreat.

There was a high wooden gate leading from O'Neill's yard to the road and I saw one Volunteer officer open this and fire out into the road with a shotgun. I thought it a

brave act to stand in the open gateway to fire out at the enemy, but at the same time, very foolish, and I shouted at him to close the gate. I had hardly the words out of my mouth when a British officer fired point-blank at me through the open gateway but, fortunately, missed me. I had six bombs left in my haversack, and if he chanced to hit one of them, I and everybody near me would be blown to pieces. However, as he turned around, he was apparently wounded by a shot from one of our riflemen and fell to the ground. All were now retreating. I went to the rear of the yard where I stayed for a few minutes watching the open gate. No further attempt was made to follow us up, so I retreated across the fields to find my companions lined up about 800 yards away. On my way back, I found a bag containing 160 rounds of .303 ammunition belonging to the East Limerick Flying Column, which I brought back with me. I saw the lorry I had bombed before I retreated and could see that large pieces of wood



The O'Neill home (now Tony Barry family home) involved in the Grange Ambush.

were blown out of the side next to me. I was sure there must have been a number of casualties as the soldiers appeared to be packed tightly in a standing position in the first lorry.

Two Volunteers who occupied Bulfin's house received slight wounds and were conveyed to safety by members of the local Grange Company. Before the ambush commenced, I secured a table which I placed against the high wall to enable me to see over the wall. I was, therefore, the only member of our party in O'Neill's yard who could actually see the target before throwing the bombs. The other men near me stood on the ground and had to throw their bombs over the high wall without seeing the target or the result.

The ambush was planned for lorries coming from the Limerick side and when outposts reported lorries coming from the opposite direction, Commandant O'Hannigan decided to attack them only at the last moment. As they approached our position, he had first decided to let them pass, but subsequently changed his mind when he considered that it was after midday and that it would be unsafe to remain in the position any longer waiting for lorries from the Limerick side. He decided to make a sharp, quick attack in order to make the Kilmallock-Limerick road unsafe for enemy movements.

The East and Mid Limerick Flying Columns retreated until they reached Coole Cross about one mile east of the ambush position. There we all sat on the fence and talked about our experiences. It was generally agreed that our positions were not good enough to meet the large enemy forces encountered, particularly when we were pre-

pared to meet them coming from the opposite direction. We undoubtedly had inflicted a number of casualties and there was general satisfaction in our organised retreat.

Statement (4-11-1955) by Seán Clifford

Fedamore, Kilmallock, Co Limerick

The following is extracted from Document No WS 1279, Bureau of Military History, 1913-21 (Roinn Cosanta). The Statement was made by Witness, Seán Clifford, Captain Fedamore Company; Battalion O/C 4th Battalion Mid-Limerick Brigade. The extract from the statement relates to the ambush of Crown forces at Grange in which the witness participated.

In November 1920, members of Ballybricken, Caherconlish and Fedamore Companies, under the Battalion O/C, Dick O'Connell, took up ambush positions on each side of the road in the village of Grange, to ambush a convoy of lorries carrying military, RIC and Black-and-Tans. A few of our men were placed in the Post Office. The attacking party numbered about thirty men. Five or six of these had rifles; the others had shotguns. We were in our positions about five am.

Sometime in the afternoon, the convoy – which, to our surprise, numbered seven lorries – arrived. As they came into the ambush position, they were fired on by the ambush party. The enemy brought the lorries to a halt and returned our fire. The engagement had only lasted ten minutes when the lorries were started up again and driven off, in the direction of Limerick. The attacking party then withdrew, suffering one casualty. At least one of the enemy was wounded.

The Fedamore Company were armed with three rifles, two revolvers and twelve shotguns on the occasion. Fr O'Carroll, now Canon WJ O'Carroll, Parish Priest of Rathkeale, was our Battalion Chaplain and took part in the ambush, and heard our confessions previous to the attack.

The Memoirs of Maurice Meade – “A Forgotten Freedom Fighter”

Meade hailed from Elton, Co Limerick. His memoirs seem to indicate a chequered history, including service in The Royal Irish Regiment, with whom he saw action in France, fighting the Germans in 1914. He was captured and was a POW (Prisoner of War) for a period. Apparently, he was one of the German POWs recruited by Roger Casement into the Irish Brigade and volunteered for service in Egypt. Subsequently, he was arrested by British military police on the charge of treason and was sentenced to death, but following the King's pardon he was sent home to Ireland.

Apparently, David Tobin and Donnacha Ó hAnnagain took him into the local East Limerick Flying Column of the IRA, and he remained with the column until the truce in 1921. He was considered to be a great addition to the column because of his experience as a soldier, and he took an active part in almost all of their major engagements.

According to Meade's memoirs: The 1st Battalion – The Royal Fusiliers were

escorting an RAF convoy from Fermoy to Oranmore. Lieutenant Allan and thirty other ranks were ambushed at Grange, near Bruff. As the IRA was expecting only two lorries, they had to retreat when eight arrived. The first British lorry was blown to bits by two bombs thrown by David Tobin (Glenbrohane). Three IRA men were wounded. Meade saw a British officer killed by David Clancy and (Meade) managed to get hold of the man's revolver and Sam Browne belt, which he wore until the end of the truce. The IRA units then managed to make a fighting retreat.

Maurice Meade made his statement to the Department of Defence on 23rd September 1953 – Document No WS 891 (not produced here).

The British Perspective

According to the British Regimental Archives: “On the morning of November 7th [sic], while escorting an RAF convoy from Fermoy to Oranmore, Lieut Allan and 30 other ranks were ambushed at Grange, near Bruff. The rebels, however, were speedily dealt with, and a quantity of arms, ammunition and two prisoners were taken. Unfortunately, Flying Officer Watling and Bandsman Bailey were wounded, the latter seriously.”

In the IRA account of the engagement, there is no record of any prisoners having been taken by the British.

Unveiling of Memorial Plaque and Commemoration Ceremony

On Sunday 13th November 2011, about 200 people attended a ceremony at Grange, Co Limerick to commemorate an action that took place in 1920. The event was organised by the Sean Wall Memorial Committee. As I said already, I was heavily involved in the whole venture. Guests included the Chairman of Limerick Co Council, former Ministers, TDs and County Councillors.

Michael J Noonan, Secretary of the Sean Wall Committee, introducing the ceremony said “There is much talk these days about our loss of sovereignty, maybe a lot of it is just in financial terms, maybe more... In those conversations, rarely is the gaining of our sovereignty discussed in any great detail. A generation is passing from us that could bear witness to the pain, grief, bravery and fortitude that was required in the birth of our nation”.

Several relatives of those involved also attended. The oration was by the author and historian, Tom Toomey. Tom concluded his speech by saying – “Today as our country faces a position of unparalleled financial danger such that our entire economic survival is threatened, let us hope that our leaders, be they political, economic, civic or clerical, will show the same courage and sense of purpose as those brave young men who fought here over ninety-one years ago”. Tom also mentioned an interesting note – “One very unique fact about the Grange Ambush was that the Curate at Fedamore, Fr Carroll, actually took part in the action. What was unique about this was that Fr William Joseph Carroll, Chaplain to the Mid Limerick Brigade, had been awarded the Military Cross for Bravery in 1918 by the British Army”.

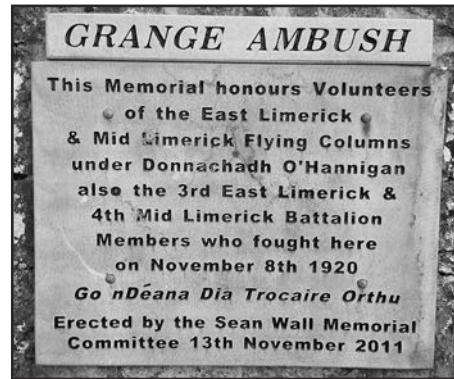
A memorial wreath was laid by the Chairman of the Sean Wall Committee, Mr Dennis Barrett. Prayers were recited by the Parish Priests of Bruff and Fedamore. 'The Last Post' was sounded and the National Anthem was played by Cian Ó Seachnasaigh, a young piper from Newcastle West Pipe Band.

The War of Independence in Limerick 1912-1921 (Thomas Toomey 2010)

In what follows, only the quoted text is taken from Thomas Toomey's book. Having read this article thus far, the reader may have stored a question or two to which the answers may not have surfaced yet or perhaps have remained somewhat unclear.

From what direction were the British expected? From Limerick or Bruff? In his Witness Statement, Donnchadh Ó hAnnagain, Officer in Command at Grange, stated that the enemy came from the Bruff direction, the opposite direction to what had been expected (*Limerick*).

"Ged O'Dwyer was in charge of a party of three men, armed with shotguns, who were placed on a rocky outcrop about one mile south-east of the main ambush position. About three o'clock, O'Dwyer and his men saw a convoy of not two but eight lorries, coming from the Bruff direction. Very significantly, the lorries were accompanied by an armoured car which the ambushers were not geared to cope with. This information was immediately transmitted to O'Hannigan at the command post."



Memorial to the Grange Ambush.

"Without hesitating, O'Hannigan decided, that because of the disposition of his forces, he had no choice but to take on the much larger convoy before he could contemplate withdrawal from the ambush position. To add even further to the troubles of the ambushers a man on the eastern side of the road, south of the river, had exposed himself and was spotted by the convoy. On seeing this man the bulk of the convoy halted and only one of the lorries and the armoured car continued on towards the bridge and the post office where the ambush command post was situated."

Thomas Toomey's book, based upon research over decades, deals with a burning question, ie why was it that there were no apparent British casualties from the bombs lobbed by the Irish from within O'Neill's property on to a lorry which held thirty to thirty-five men? "Morgan Portley, Ned Tobin and Dave Murnane lobbed a number of grenades into the body of the military lorry from the shelter of O'Neill's wall. When those grenades exploded, the IRA was convinced that it had wrought tremendous casualties among the soldiers in the lorry. This was not the case as the grenades carried five second fuses and it appears that the bomb throwers had not allowed for this and the soldiers

on the lorry got enough time to throw themselves out of the line of the explosions.”

“The driver of the lorry, AC 2 Hill was mentioned for conspicuous gallantry because he picked up one of the grenades and threw it back at the IRA – *A History of the Royal Air Force and the United States Naval Air Service in Ireland 1913-1923*.”

“The armoured car, with Lieutenant Watling standing on the running (Book Footnote No 800) board, drove through into the centre of the ambush and Watling led a charge into O’Neill’s farmyard. Dave Murnane, Maurice Meade and Tomas Malone opened fire on him and he fell – apparently dead. When Watling fell, O’Hannigan ordered the IRA out on the road to drive the attacking soldiers back across the bridge and up towards the rest of the convoy. This action gave an opportunity to the IRA men on the western side of the road and south of the river to extricate themselves while the British forces regrouped.”

Was Watling killed? “Like the IRA, British casualties at Grange were surprisingly light. Lieutenant Watling whom the IRA were convinced was killed was seriously wounded in the head but he eventually made a full recovery. He was listed among compensation claimants in the newspaper accounts of February 1921.” “He made a compensation claim for £2,000 for serious head injuries.” (Book Footnote No 803).

“The IRA were at a loss to understand where the convoy had come from but it seems from an examination of the records of the RAF that it was actually an RAF convoy travelling from Fermoy to Oranmore in Galway that had driven into the ambush position.”

“In an ironic sense the Grange ambush was a personal triumph for O’Hannigan because he showed the ability to extricate his men from an extremely tricky situation.”

In the realm of ‘what if’, one might wonder about an outcome in the event that the throwing of the grenades had been delayed after the pins were withdrawn, or indeed if the IRA man who exposed himself, had remained in cover. Those are questions to which definitive answers will never reveal themselves.

Conclusion

The British force present was much different from what was expected – eight lorries of men and an armoured car instead of two lorries. It would have been a major achievement for a small group of poorly armed and trained men to have dealt with two lorries; but to have been confronted by a much larger force coming from an unexpected direction and to have retreated without fatalities was remarkable – all the more so, having inflicted casualties on the enemy.

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References and Notes:

- (1) *Limerick’s Fighting Story*, edited by Colonel JM McCarthy
- (2) *The War of Independence in Limerick 1912-1921* by Tom Toomey (2010)
- (3) <http://www.cairogang.com/incidents/grange/grange.html>
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