

BRAVERY, BRUTALITY AND DEATH AT CAHERGUILLAMORE

By John D Gallagher

As one enters Grange Churchyard through the main gates, immediately to the right stands a stately monument, erected to the memory of IRA Volunteers who were shot by British forces at Caherguillamore on 27th December 1920. All five are buried in this Republican plot.

Time took its toll and the condition of the monument deteriorated over the years. However, in 2001, through funding secured by the Sean Wall Memorial Committee, the monument and its surrounds were completely refurbished and restored to their original splendour.

The five who died at Caherguillamore were: Captain Martin Conway, Lieutenant John Quinlan, Volunteer Edmond Moloney, Volunteer Daniel Sheehan and Volunteer Harry Wade. All were members of the 3rd Battalion of the East Limerick Brigade of the Old IRA.

To commemorate their memory and to mark the refurbishment of the monument, a ceremony was held in Grange on Sunday, December 23rd, 2001. It commenced with Mass, celebrated by James Canon Costello, Parish Priest of Bruff, assisted by Gerard Canon Wall, Kilmallock. Eddie Wade, TD, cousin of Volunteer Harry Wade laid a wreath. The Tricolour was raised by Captain Pat Quilty of Bruff. The National Anthem was played by the No 1 Army Band. Michael Noonan, former Minister for Defence, gave the oration.

On the last Sunday in December each year since its refurbishment, a wreath-laying ceremony takes place at the monument. This is preceded by Mass celebrated in the Church, which is usually attended by some members of the Oireachtas, County Council Officials and members of Óglaigh Na h-Éireann, together with relatives and friends of the Volunteers who died.

The Monument, now in pristine condition, proudly stands as a reminder to all of the bravery of those who, unselfishly, gave their lives in the cause of Irish Freedom.

In the early hours of 27th December, 1920 when the forces of the British Crown brutally and savagely shot these men, these same forces, comprised of regular

British military, RIC and Black-and-Tans, terrorised defenceless young women when, heavily armed, they stormed the Saint Stephen's night dance being held at Caherguillamore House. They inflicted the severest savagery on the many young men, mostly unarmed, who were in attendance. Further suffering was borne by many of these men in the days that followed. A number of accounts of the events of that night, the days that followed and later developments, are recorded.

I reproduce hereunder, with permissions, two detailed historical accounts of these events. These accounts tell the same core story – however, each may offer the reader some perspective or information that is not to be found in the other.

The first is an account taken from the author and historian, Thomas Toomey's *The War of Independence in Limerick 1912-1921*, published in 2010. The second account comes from the book, *Limerick's Fighting Story, Chapter Eleven*, titled "Savage Events at Caherguillamore", written by Patrick Lynch.

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

Coming up to Christmas 1920, the Volunteer organisation in the Bruff Battalion area had decided to raise funds for the purchase of arms. The Company Captain in the Grange area, Martin Conway, came up with the idea of organising a supper dance as a means of raising much-needed funds. Conway presented his plan to Sean Wall and Nicholas O'Dwyer, his senior officers, and although they both had reservations such as Conway's enthusiasm that they gave the go ahead. Conway then selected a group that consisted of James Moloney (Kilcullane), James Moloney (Ballycampion), Ned Moloney (Rahin), Bob Ryan (Lough Gur), Martin O'Dwyer (Herbertstown), William Leo (Holycross), John Quinlan (Grange), Conway himself and Paddy O'Donoghue who was a son of the caretaker of Lord Fermoy's residence.

The arrangements for the dance were planned in great detail; the musicians hired to play on the night were the Martin Brothers from Bruff. It was decided to hold the dance on St Stephen's night, 26th December, and admission was by invitation to a select group of approved people. To guard against a leakage of information, the exact venue was not made known. The venue chosen was the unoccupied residence of Lord Fermoy, at Caherguillamore. Supplies of food and drink were moved in to the house by the small group of organisers. To cover the holding of the dance at Caherguillamore rumours were spread of a céilí being held in the Herbertstown area. However despite the great precautions of the organisers the British authorities seemed to have a clear inkling of what was afoot. When questioned at the inquest into the events of

the night a District Inspector of the RIC stated that they had been aware of the event and its location as early as 20th December. A friendly RIC sergeant, believed to be Sgt Fred McGarry of Bruff, passed on a warning to a Sinn Féin shop-owner in the Bruff area to “for God sake call off the dance because the police and military know all the arrangements”. Despite this warning, it was decided that the event should go ahead. But to take precautions armed sentries would be placed on all approaches to the house. A number of sentries were appointed, and these would relieve each other at various stages so that in addition to carrying out military duties they would also be able to partake of the occasion. It was obvious that Conway and his planners were, at worst, only anticipating a raid by local RIC and Black-and-Tans and that a cordon of sentries would hold these up for long enough to allow people at the dance to get away.

From late evening of 26th December, small groups of young men and women began to move towards the points where they were to be met by chosen guides who would lead them on the last stage of the journey to Caherguillamore. By eight o'clock most of the revellers had arrived at Lord Fermoy's stately residence. In total, a gathering of approximately 140 young men and 100 young women paid their admission charge to Thomas O'Brien of Holycross and his fellow doormen.

Regardless of the precautions taken by Martin Conway and his organisers the police and military were planning a most extensive raid. It appears that they had received information that some very senior IRA figures including Sean Wall, the Commandant of the East Limerick Brigade, were expected to be in attendance at the dance. An insight into the extent and detailed planning of the British raid was given by Mickey Condon of Fanningstown, near Fedamore. Mickey Condon, who was then about 12 years of age, remembered that about nine o'clock on the evening of that Saint Stephen's day he and his brother were feeding pigs in an outhouse when a convoy of military lorries drove past and stopped just up the road at “The Tailor's Cross”, two miles from Fedamore. The occupants alighted and moved off across country on foot, leaving only the drivers and an NCO with the lorries. Similar convoys were, it appears, moving from other garrison centres such as Pallasgreen, Kilmallock, Hospital and Bruff.

The nature of the plan set in train by the British authorities was such that it was obvious that no escape was intended from Caherguillamore. In addition to the large numbers of military and police, it appears that they also had female searchers and bloodhounds in attendance. From the accounts of James Moloney of Ballycampion and Major Ged O'Dwyer, Martin Conway spent much of the time moving between his cordon of armed sentries ensuring that

they were alert and relieved at regular intervals. Sometime after midnight one of the sentries spotted what he thought were figures moving from the direction of Rockbarton House. The IRA sentry was not sure as to whether the figures were human or animal as Baring's of Rockbarton kept a large stable of horses. No chances were taken, so word was passed back to the house that all men "on the run" should get out. All others were told to hold their ground as it was felt that any raid would be a low key affair.

It was around this time that Harry Wade of Drombanna relieved Batt O'Brien of Holycross at one of the sentry posts. Wade was only a few minutes at his post when he had cause to challenge intruding figures. Before he could open fire, he was shot down, and it appears that he was to be the first casualty although another sentry, Daniel Sheahan of Grange, was also killed around the same time. In Sheahan's case at least he had opened fire before he was hit and seriously wounded. In Wade's case it seems, according to police testimony given by Sergeant James Keohane, he was armed with a rifle with nine rounds in the magazine, but it had not been fired when he was hit. It would also appear that the police opened fire without calling on Wade to surrender. Both Harry Wade and Daniel Sheahan, who were the first IRA sentries to come under fire, were seriously wounded but they lingered on and died in the hospital attached to the New Barracks in Limerick on December 27th. Sergeant James Horan went on to describe how another sentry, John Quinlan, was observed to be armed with a revolver and when they called on Quinlan to surrender he immediately ran for cover. Horan went on to state that the police then opened fire and killed the 35-year-old who had only recently returned from America. Meanwhile back at the house a number of men who were 'on the run' including the O'Dwyer brothers and Martin Conway had escaped over the kitchen garden wall and alighted on to a road outside. Another 'wanted' man Owen O'Brien had also managed to get away before the 'net closed'.

Before escaping from the house, Ged O'Dwyer had handed over his revolver to Ned Moloney, who was not 'on the run'. When the first of the Black-and-Tans reached the house and was entering the hall, Moloney opened fire and killed a 32-year-old Black-and-Tan from Penge in London, named Alfred Hogsden. Moloney then attempted to follow the escape route taken by Conway and the O'Dwyers, but he was shot dead on top of the kitchen garden wall. Meanwhile Conway and the O'Dwyers had been spotted by a lorry of police which had free-wheeled down the road, with its lights out, and they opened fire on the three men as they spread out. Both of the O'Dwyers were wounded, albeit not seriously. There is conflict, however, about the exact fate of Martin Conway – Ged O'Dwyer maintained that he was shot and killed as they

attempted to spread out. Other accounts state that he was not killed but mortally wounded and after he had escaped some distance he was captured by police using tracker dogs and brought back to the house where he was finished off when his identity was established. The *Limerick Leader* of 3rd January



Martin Conway and Ned Moloney.

1921 stated that Conway crawled four miles after being wounded and that he was killed when he shot one of the bloodhounds used to track him.

The information given to the author, by Ged O'Dwyer, is largely corroborated by the testimony of Constable H T Emsden who stated that as the party of police, of which he was a member, approached Caherguillamore House they saw three men jump up and run off and when they failed to stop after being called on, the police opened fire. According to Constable Emsden, they wounded one of the men but he managed to escape on a horse while the second man, whom he later discovered to be Martin Conway, was also hit and when they picked him up he was found to be dead from a bullet wound to the head. Emsden also claimed that when Conway's body was searched the police found a number of 'Dum-dum' revolver and rifle bullets in his pockets. In his Witness Statement, Nicholas O'Dwyer states that they had managed to escape past the inner cordon of sentries and had reached the edge of the road. They had a view of about 100 yards in either direction and were about to cross the road when suddenly one of his companions shouted 'look at the lorry' which was almost on top of them without they realising it. According to Nicholas O'Dwyer's account the three men scattered and made a run for it and that Conway made a beeline for a gap in the ditch and that it was when he was running out the gap that he was hit.

At the house, all hell had broken loose, and the death of Hogsden exacerbated the fury of an already inebriated police. Indiscriminate firing came from all directions and it would appear that some of the military and police were as much a danger to each other as they were to the unarmed young men and women seeking shelter in the house. There is strong evidence, also, that were it not for the intervention of Sergeant Hargaden of the Fedamore RIC and an unnamed Black-and-Tan other killings would have been carried out. In the case of the unnamed Black-and-Tan it appears that he

kicked the rifle out of the hands of Sergeant James Horan, a Mayo born member of the RIC, as Horan was about to pull the trigger on a prisoner at point-blank range. Although Nicholas O'Dwyer claims that he was not wounded this is at variance with the information received from his brother Ged who says that Nicholas received a bullet wound at the top of his ear. In his Witness Statement, Nicholas stated that he injured his arm fairly badly getting over a fence and that his injury eventually necessitated him visiting Jervis Street Hospital in Dublin where the possibility of amputating the arm was considered. Fortunately for him the injury began to improve, and his arm was saved.

All the male prisoners were forced to run the gauntlet of rows of police and military and nearly all the men were given severe beatings. Rifle butts, bayonets and even whips were used. This beating of the men captured at Caherguillamore is referred to by Captain Regan when he says 'there was a rough house for quite some time, several of the IRA being injured'. The pretext for the 'rough house' referred to by John Regan was the shooting of Constable Hogsden but from the evidence proffered at the Military Court of Inquiry it appears that the police had opened fire first. In the case of Harry Wade, it would appear that he was effectively shot at his post without being given the chance to surrender. Some others, apart from the O'Dwyer brothers, were wounded including one of the organisers, Bob Ryan of Lough Gur, who was shot in the shoulder before he was captured. Meanwhile Ged O'Dwyer, who was wounded in the hand and Nicholas who was wounded in the ear had managed to make their escape. Gerard ran through a stream for some distance, and this action threw the bloodhounds off his scent. He eventually knocked at a house in the Lough Gur area seeking refuge and the woman of the house, Mrs McElligott, invited him in, dressed his wound and gave him a meal before she put him to bed.

When the prisoners were eventually rounded up and identified, the process of questioning began. James Moloney of Ballycampion recorded that the older members of the Bruff RIC were used to identify and question the prisoners. In his own case, he was questioned very closely by Sergeant Fred McGarry and Constable Pat Mullins, both of whom he would have known.

All the girls at the dance were rounded up and taken upstairs. Among them was Mary Kate O'Donovan from Banogue, who had been involved in preparing the supper teas before the house was raided. Many years later Mary Kate would recall her memories of the night to her friend Pat Hayes of Croom and although she was normally the mildest of beings she was extremely bitter at what she had witnessed at Caherguillamore on that fateful St Stephen's night. The beatings and brutality were something she never forgot until she

died over 70 years later. Mary Kate O'Donovan was among almost 100 girls and young women in attendance. Other girls in attendance were Rita Connolly, Margaret Punch, Nora Dineen, Elizabeth Lynch, Nell O'Donnell, Mollie Hogan and a number of sisters of Martin Conway. All the girls were held overnight and released in the morning. In his memoirs, Captain John M Regan mentions that one girl asked him when they would be released as she planned to go to the races. Regan says that when he told her that he was also intending to go to the races she gave him a tip for one of the races. It is hardly credible that in the context of what had happened at the dance, and in the light of the savagery that the girls had witnessed, that a young woman could treat the matter so lightly as to give a tip for Limerick Races.

One of the most serious beatings was reserved for Doctor Michael O'Brien from Fedamore. O'Brien had a small medical kit with him and when this was discovered he was given very brutal treatment. In a press release later the police authorities attempted to make an issue of the fact that Dr O'Brien had medical instruments with him at the dance. Before he was beaten up, it appears that O'Brien was required to give medical aid to the mortally wounded Constable Hogsden. As a consequence of the beating he received, O'Brien's health broke and although he went abroad to try and recover he never did. He died in 1923 at the age of 30, and his remains are interred in the family grave in the picturesque graveyard at Cahernorry, near Ballyneety. Others whose health broke as a consequence of their treatment were Patrick Kinnane of Crean and Frank Neilan of Bruff, both of them were released early from prison.

Following the carnage, all of the bodies of the dead were taken to the Military Hospital in the Main Military (Sarsfield) Barracks preparatory to their removal for Requiem Mass in St John's Cathedral. Requiem Mass was celebrated by Father Connolly, Administrator of St John's, after which, the cortege of five horse-drawn hearses made their way in convoy to Grange Cemetery. Tom Fitzgerald of Arywee, in the parish of Fedamore could still recall, over 70 years later, standing in Ballyneety, on a cold crisp winter day, as the sad procession passed on its way to Grange.

Of the survivors, the first batch of almost 60 were tried and charged with unlawful assembly at a hastily arranged court held in a room at Limerick Prison on Friday 7th January. Nearly all of the men tried at this sitting were sentenced to relatively short jail terms ranging between three to six months on a charge of unlawful assembly. Of the 60 prisoners, 20 were given the opportunity of seeking bail, but it appears that they all waived this right and decided to go to prison.

On the following Tuesday 11th January 1921, 59 prisoners were tried by court-martial under Major Eastwood. When the court arrived at its verdict, all the men were sentenced to ten years penal servitude which was commuted to a term of five years. In total, between those sentenced to shorter sentences and those who were tried by court-martial a total of 138 men were jailed for attendance at the dance. On Thursday, 20th January, the 59 prisoners were taken in a number of lorries to Limerick Docks where they were loaded on to a Destroyer and taken to Portland in England to serve their sentences. Among those sent to jail in England were:



This monument is erected to the memory of
Captain Martin John Conway Lieutenant John Quinlan
Volunteer Edmond Moloney Volunteer Daniel Shreehan
Volunteer Harry Wade of the I.R.A.
Who were shot by British Forces At Caherguillamore
On December 27th 1920

Dr Michael O'Brien *Fedamore*
Tom Ahern *Ardnaree*
John Gavin *Holycross*
Frank Neilan *Bruff*
Richard Cleary *Ballinard*
Thomas O'Brien *Kilderry*
Hugh O'Donnell *Grange*
John Hynes *Glenogra*
James Moloney *Ballycampion*
Patrick Kennedy *Mohane*
Ned O'Brien *Holycross*
Thomas Hogan *Kilcullane*
John Mulcahy *Greybridge*
Daniel Burns *Bruff*
James Mortell *Ballygrennan*
John Ryan *Kilfinane*
Dick Fitzgerald *Brackvoane*
Thomas Hogan *Meanus*
Michael Hogan *Holycross*
John Donovan *Mortgage*
John Punch *Lough Gur*
Laurence Barry *Fedamore*
Batt O'Brien *Holycross*
Thomas Mulcahy *Greybridge*
Joseph Toomey *Ballyneety*
Charles O'Neill *Ballyneety*
Michael Hogan *Kilcullane*
John Donovan *Kilcullane*

Grange Churchyard Monument to IRA five who died at Caherguillamore – Shot by British Forces in December 1920.

Michael Mulcahy <i>Herbertstown</i>	William Leo <i>Ballingirlough</i>
Thomas Spillane <i>Herbertstown</i>	Joe Ryan <i>Lough Gur</i>
John Barron <i>Kilballyowen</i>	James Moloney <i>Kilcullane</i>
William Hogan <i>Bruff</i>	Denis Mortell <i>Ballyvolane</i>
John Whelan <i>Kilballyowen</i>	Joseph Keogh <i>Herbertstown</i>
Timothy Keogh <i>Herbertstown</i>	Denis Conway <i>Bruff</i>
John Moroney <i>Bruff</i>	James O'Toole <i>Ballyneety</i>
Laurence Moloney <i>Kilcullane</i>	Richard O'Donnell <i>Grange</i>
Edward Mortell <i>Ballyvolane</i>	John Spillane <i>Cahercorney</i>
Denis Houlihan <i>Holycross</i>	Patk O'Donoghue <i>Caherguillamore</i>
John Feeley <i>Fedamore</i>	Patrick Punch <i>Lough Gur</i>
Timothy Houlihan <i>Holycross</i>	Martin O'Dwyer <i>Herbertstown</i>
Patrick Burke <i>Grange</i>	Robert (Bob) Ryan <i>Lough Gur</i>
Robert Wright <i>Dunvullen</i>	John Leo <i>Holycross</i>
Patrick Hourigan <i>Holycross</i>	Joseph Costelloe <i>Manister</i>
William Hogan <i>Caher</i>	James Martin <i>Ballyvolane</i>

On Wednesday 23rd February a further two prisoners – Tom Conway from Carnane in the parish of Fedamore and John Mulcahy from Meanus, were tried together before a court-martial. Conway and Mulcahy were acting as sentries when they were captured. They were also sentenced to ten years penal servitude.

Looking back with the wisdom of hindsight, it is easy to apportion blame for what happened at Caherguillamore. Certainly the IRA should have called off the dance when they received the warning from the RIC Sergeant. Ironically, none of the senior IRA officers in the area, particularly Sean Wall and Nicholas O'Dwyer, whom the British had especially planned to capture, were involved in the planning of the event and neither does it appear that they had planned to attend. Sean Wall was not present at the dance and Nicholas O'Dwyer only called to the dance when in transit to another event. In fairness the organisers had taken all reasonable precautions against a small-scale raid, which is the worst that they had anticipated, but nonetheless the fact is that when they were aware that the military authorities knew of the dance it should have been called off. A very similar situation arose at Coachford in County Cork, in February 1921, when the IRA were warned that the Military was aware of their presence in an ambush position. The IRA refused to heed the warning, and it culminated in a total of seven men being lost through execution or death in a one-sided shootout. In the case of the Bruff Battalion – five of its bravest and best died in the savagery of that St Stephen's night.

The upshot of the dance at Caherguillamore was that the Bruff Battalion or the 3rd East Limerick Battalion practically ceased to exist. Some men such as the O'Dwyer brothers, James O'Connor and Dan Ryan of Grange among others succeeded in escaping and continuing the struggle, but as a unit, the battalion had been seriously damaged, and it was never again in a position to mount a major action.

Much speculation went on for years as to how the authorities came to be aware of the dance. Initially, a number of young women who were known to be friendly with members of the Crown Forces were blamed and ostracised for what happened at Caherguillamore. From the evidence given at the trial of Tom Conway and John Mulcahy, a District Inspector of the RIC stated that he had received information on 20th December. James Moloney of Ballycampion stated on the record that a Volunteer from the Grange area leaked the information inadvertently when he told his mother about the dance, and she happened to mention it to friends whom she was visiting in Cork, unaware that 'her friends' were informants for British Intelligence. The most likely source, however, is given by Ged O'Dwyer in later years when he stated that it was his considered opinion that loose talk in a public house was the source of the problem.

One grisly side issue to arise from the raid at Caherguillamore was that a number of peacocks were killed during the raid and that some of the Black-and-Tans who took part in the raid took to wearing a peacock's feather in their headgear as a reminder to the IRA of what had been done at Caherguillamore.

Taken From "Limerick's Fighting Story" (Chapter by Patrick Lynch)

On Saint Stephen's Night, 1920, the moon shone brightly on the highways and bye-ways of East Limerick. On the bye-ways, from the four points of the compass, young men and women made their way through the valleys and across the hill-sides. All were gay with the festive spirit and eager for the enjoyment of a night of music, song and dance. In normal times, the Saint Stephen's night dance in any part of rural Ireland would be looked forward to with pleasurable anticipation after the three weeks of Advent. But 1920 was not a normal year. During the six months before Christmas, the armed struggle for independence in East Limerick, as elsewhere throughout the country, had been gaining momentum. Men from every townland were on their keeping among their "friendly allies the hills". In every town and in many of the villages there were recently reinforced garrisons of regular British troops, RIC and Black-and-Tans. Members of the active

service units [*of the IRA*] visited relatives or friends infrequently and always swiftly and silently. Those were days and nights when men carried their lives in their hands. Occasions for dancing and jollification were few and far between.

So it was, then, that during the days of Christmas, eyes of brown and eyes of blue shone brightly under tossing tresses of auburn, raven or flaxen hair, and many a blush suffused already rosy cheeks as the word of mouth was passed from farmhouse to cottage around the town of Bruff that there was to be a dance on Saint Stephen's Night. Rumour had it that the dance was to be held at Herbertstown, but rumour was ever being a lying jade. On this occasion, however, she was being used as a decoy. The dance, surely, was to be held – but not, as had been given out – at Herbertstown, which was some miles away from the real location.

Caherguillamore House, the great rambling mansion of the Viscounts O'Grady, the kinsfolk of Lord Fermoy, was where the fiddlers and accordion players would set impatient Irish feet tapping in the high-ceilinged ballroom, where the mincing steps of the ladies of the ascendancy were wont to trip to the gentle measure of the minuet. The reigning Viscount had gone from Caherguillamore, in a retreat to climes that were deemed safe from the smoking muzzles of the rifles that were harrying forces of the Crown on most of the roadways of Munster. Amidst its deep woodlands, the big mansion presented its shuttered windows to deserted parks and avenues.

Day in and day out, the only evidence of life at Caherguillamore was provided by the caretaker, Tom O'Donoghue, and his family, and by the occasional visits of supervision from the Honourable Mrs Baring, wife of Colonel Baring, Master of the Foxhounds, who lived in the Rockbarton mansion some distance away. Mrs Baring was the daughter of Lord Fermoy and was to inherit the mansion and its surrounding Estate.

To the great house, too, from time to time, came Paddy O'Donoghue, the caretaker's son. Paddy was a member of the Bruff Battalion of the Volunteers, and it was through his co-operation and that of his father, that Caherguillamore House had been selected for the dance. The selection had been made by the members of the Bruff Battalion, and the function was being held to raise funds for the purchase of arms to equip the Battalion Flying Column. The decision to form battalion columns as distinct from the brigade columns had been taken in a number of districts including Bruff.

Having spread the rumour that the dance was to take place at Herbertstown, the organisers went ahead with their programme for Caherguillamore. Approximately 300 were expected to attend and as the charge for admission was to be four shillings it was decided to give a free supper to the dancers. For

this purpose, a number of sheep were obtained and slaughtered, and willing women helpers attended to the cooking and other catering arrangements. Practically at the eleventh hour, word was again passed through the countryside, giving notice of the change of venue. And in the bright moonlight the lads and lasses converged on Caherguillamore House, remote amidst its guardian trees and well off the main road.

Scouts had been posted on the surrounding roads although any kind of enemy action was deemed remote – as remote, indeed, as the very situation of Caherguillamore itself.

Inside the house, the dance went on. Young men and women took the floor gaily oblivious of the hundreds of British troops, RIC and Black-and-Tans, who were just then moving on foot along the roadways leading from Limerick city towards Bruff. In snake-like dark columns, they moved between the tall hedges, under the moon, marching mile after mile because travelling by lorries would give warning of their approach in the stillness of the night. Despite all the precautions, including the spreading of the rumour about the Herbertstown venue, the enemy had got word that most of the much-wanted Volunteer leaders and column members would be at Caherguillamore that night. Neither for the first nor the last time the British grapevine of information was proving its effectiveness. But if the troops and the RIC and the Tans marched without their customary transport, they did not leave the lorries behind. The operation was so well timed and co-ordinated that the lorries were following up – sufficiently far to the rear to eliminate the danger of warning noises, but not too far to be brought readily to the fore at the crucial moment.

Caherguillamore was approximately thirteen miles from the city, and most of the distance was covered on foot. A surprise attack was intended and a surprise it proved to be.

The witching hour of midnight came and went, and some of the dancers were sitting down to supper when word was passed from the scouts that all was not well. Almost half a mile from the big house, the captain of the local company of Volunteers, Martin Conway, conferred with a scout who was perturbed by sounds and movements in his immediate vicinity. James Maloney of Ballycampion Lower, Bruff, one of the Volunteer officers, was inside the big house when he was told that Martin Conway wanted him outside. Conway was a brave and a dedicated man. A thirty-year-old unmarried farmer of Holycross, Bruff, his all-round efficiency and painstaking devotion to duty were by-words in the ranks of the Volunteers. On that fateful night at Caherguillamore – he moved from scout to scout with characteristic thoroughness in an effort to ensure that the maximum security was maintained. His task and that of the men serving

under him was rendered difficult by the nature of the terrain. The big house was approached by a long avenue leading from the main road, and two lesser passages or laneways led to the rear. Woodlands were all round. But Martin Conway continued on his rounds of duty and, like his scouts, he was perturbed.

James Maloney, accompanied by a namesake, Ned Maloney, walked out along the half-mile of avenue towards the road. Despite their names, they were not family relations. Unlike Martin Conway, who had sent for them, they were unworried. The danger of enemy activity was very far from their minds as they walked down the avenue, their cigarettes glowing in the moonlight. Martin Conway's summons they took to be connected with some routine duty. On the way, they met the column medical officer, Dr Michael O'Brien, a native of Fedamore and a man who was as personally brave as he was professionally skilled. On the avenue, he was coming from the direction of the road, and he stopped to talk with the two Maloneys. Having concluded that all was well and that their presence was not required, after all, the three walked back towards the big house.

As they neared the building, Ned Maloney turned aside to attend to a call of nature. The other two walked on. It was the last time that any of his comrades was to see him alive. Thereafter, Ned Maloney of Grange was to be numbered among the gallant company of the dead.

Suddenly, the near-midnight stillness was shattered by volleys of rifle fire. A hail of bullets thudded into the walls of Caherguillamore House and poured through the wooden shutters and windows. Glass smashed and fell with terrifying noise as Verey Lights whizzed, zoomed and burst over the shrubbery and the trees. Volley after volley crashed out from the unseen military, police and 'Tans who were on every side. Inside the great ballroom, young girls shrieked in fright and sought refuge in the arms of their dancing escorts. Round after round of .303 was fired in through the windows. Again and again, the blunderbuss-nosed Verey Light pistols sent up high arcs of light to illumine the dread scene with a bizarre and even a nightmare effect.

Dr O'Brien and James Maloney were practically at the rear entrance to the house when the rain of lead and the crash of rifle-fire burst upon them. As they made for the back door, to get into the building, bullets whistled with a sinister sound all round them, and they heard the leaden hail cutting through the trees and shrubbery. They had scarcely gained the doorway when hell seemed to break loose with a renewed frenzy.

Recovering from the initial shock, the Volunteers in the house reacted rapidly in efforts to try to protect the scores of girls and to organise some kind of a defence once all realised simultaneously that they were being subjected to a large-scale attack. But it was useless. Taking full advantage of the well-

mounted element of surprise, and acting in accordance with a carefully prepared plan, the attackers closed swiftly on the house and burst through the front and rear doors and even through the windows. The cold steel of fixed bayonets and the brass of their rifle butts gleamed in the lamplight as they charged in on the 150 young men and more than 90 young women running hither and thither in the ballroom and adjoining corridors of the house.

Brutality ran rampant and naked at Caherguillamore that night. Bayonet and rifle butt were used with abandon on young men who showed signs of resistance or of anxiety to protect the screaming young girls who clung to them in terror. The girls were torn from their companions who were in many instances, knocked down by blows of rifles on the face or the back of the head. Some were savagely stabbed with bayonets intended for trench warfare and not for use on defenceless and mostly unarmed youths on the floor of a ballroom. Many of the boys at the dance had no connection with the Volunteers except perhaps, the most tenuous link of family relationship or the general sympathy to be found among all peoples in occupied countries for freedom fighters.

While the stark, brutal scenes were taking place inside the house, tragic episodes were occurring outside. Ned Maloney of Grange, who had turned aside from his comrades, fell in the first brunt of the assault. Little did he know – nor did his comrades know – as they walked from the house down the avenue for half a mile, cigarettes lighting, and retraced their steps on meeting Dr O'Brien, that the troops, RIC and 'Tans then surrounding the house, had them under observation.' The encircling movement had been carried out with a deadly cunning, aided by the invaluable local knowledge of the RIC from the nearby police stations. Those men, of course, due to their long service in the district and because of their regular patrol duties when Viscount O'Grady was in residence, knew almost every shrub and tree in the grounds of Caherguillamore.

Out on the roadway Martin Conway, the Company Captain, was waiting. Just before the attack on the house commenced he was joined by the two O'Dwyers of Grange – the brothers John Gerard and Nicholas O'Dwyer. They had left the house, with other Volunteers, on receipt of a message that "all those who were on the run were to clear out". The O'Dwyer brothers had not left together, but each had received the message separately and, after making their separate ways under cover to the roadway, found that their paths converged with that of Martin Conway. John Gerard O'Dwyer had just sat down to supper when he was told that he and others like him would have to leave without delay. A lieutenant in the Grange Company, he attempted to seek clarification of the order and was told: "We are taking no chances. All those on the run must clear out." He learned, too, that a force of British military was thought to have been seen moving down from the direction of Rockbarton House, which was the Baring mansion.

Martin Conway and the two O'Dwyers were holding a brief consultation on the roadway when a slowly moving military lorry, with a barely audible hum, came suddenly around the bend. The occupants of the lorry saw the three men on the road as soon as they themselves saw the moving vehicle. The lorry was between one hundred and one hundred and fifty yards away. The road was without shelter at that point. From the lorry, a voice shouted "Pull up! Fire!" Almost in the same breath, Nicholas O'Dwyer shouted "Spread out". And as the lorry pulled up, with a slamming of brakes, the three Volunteers spread out and made for the country in three directions. Rifles blazed from the suddenly halted vehicle as Martin Conway went one way and John Gerard O'Dwyer ran in a direction which happened to give those in the lorry a direct line on him. Nicholas O'Dwyer took an oblique path across the front of the barking rifles.

One hundred and fifty yards in from the road a bullet inflicted a mortal wound on the valiant and dedicated Captain Martin Conway. John Gerard O'Dwyer was shot through the hand, and another bullet cut a furrow over his brother's ear. Both succeeded in getting away. John Gerard stumbled on through the woods with the blood flowing and dripping to the ground from his wounded hand through which the bullet had passed. Behind him, he heard the baying of the blood-hounds which the British had been carrying in the lorry. There was, apparently, to be no escape from Caherquillamore House. So thoroughly were the plans laid that it was intended to use the hounds to track down any Volunteers who might succeed in getting out of the ring of steel thrown around the grounds.

O'Dwyer stumbled on. He knew now that he was getting weaker from his wound. But he knew, too, that the dripping blood from his hand would make the job of the dogs on the scent all the easier. Yet, while there was life there was hope. When he rolled into a deep-banked stream of rapidly flowing water, he realised that if he could hold out physically he would succeed in throwing the dogs off the scent. He staggered along in the stream for a considerable distance and when he eventually left it he walked on, with increasing difficulty, for more than a mile. Very near the point of exhaustion from loss of blood and the ordeal through which he had passed, he called to the house of a friend. It was with reluctance that he did so. Farmers and cottiers who harboured or otherwise aided the men on the run, even to the extent of trying to save the lives of wounded, had their homes burned over their heads by the forces of the Crown, whilst the heads of the households, including the fathers of young families, were, in many instances, taken outside their doors and shot dead where they stood – often on their bare feet after being roused in the middle of the night. John Gerard O'Dwyer was fully aware of the fate that was likely to befall the family to whom he called in his dire extremity.

But he need not have entertained fears about the bravery of the MacElligotts of Lough Gur. They answered his knock with a welcome that was replaced by alarm on observing his condition. He was made comfortable and, still growing weaker, he saw a bottle of whiskey being produced. Holding the glass to his lips, the twenty-years-old Volunteer, who was later to lead Ireland's army equitation team to victory in some of the most glittering capitals of the world, tasted whiskey for the first time. The MacElligotts attended, as best they could, to his wound and sent immediately for the local medical officer, Dr Kelly, who now resides in England and who lost no time in coming to Lough Gur that night.

As young O'Dwyer lay weakly in the MacElligott home, he wondered how his brother and Martin Conway had fared. He did not know that by then the baying bloodhounds and their masters had come upon the spot where the gallant Conway lay in great pain beneath the spreading trees. For most of four miles, he had crawled and stumbled in his agony before the bloodhounds tracked him down. Standing on his pain-wracked body, the uniformed veterans of the Crown fired into it the cowardly final shots that ended his life.

Back at Caherguillamore [*House*], the girls were roughly herded up the wide stairway to rooms where they were searched by women searchers who had been brought out expressly from Limerick for the job. At this period, almost every British regiment stationed in the country had a number of English-women, trained in the techniques of searching, attached to it.

In the upstairs rooms, the girls heard clearly the cries and moans of the young men who were being bayoneted, batoned and beaten with rifle butts as they were marshalled into the huge kitchen on the ground floor.

The Commander of the attacking forces, Colonel Wilkinson, decided to carry out interrogations in the ballroom for the purpose of endeavouring to identify volunteer leaders and others who were "on the run". As each man was ordered to proceed, in turn, from the kitchen to the ballroom, he had to run the gauntlet of two long lines of RIC, Black-and-Tans and regular military. And as he tried to make his way between the lines of green-blue, khaki and black, he was beaten on the body, the head, and the limbs with the rifle-butts of those on his left who struck from the front and those on the right who struck from the back.

Young men fell to the floor of the passageway, crying out in extreme pain, as rifle-butts thudded into their bodies and heads. From the floor, they were forced to rise again and stagger and stumble onwards as heavy hob-nailed boots kicked them in the ribs and stomach. Moans and shrieks rang through the corridors of the great house and in the upstairs rooms the young women sank to their knees to recite the Rosary. Some of them, managing to look down over the bannisters,

saw the badly battered body of a young Volunteer, Harry Wade of Cahernorry, Ballyneety, being carried out. With Martin Conway and Ned Maloney of Grange, Harry Wade was joining the ranks of the dead that night at Caherguillamore.

One young Volunteer officer spat out most of his teeth which had been broken by a blow from a rifle butt and then stumbled beneath further buffeting to the place where Colonel Wilkinson and his brother British officers were conducting their “interrogation”. He was James Maloney, who was later to become Commandant of the Bruff Battalion. Another blow knocked him to his knees and Sergeant Honan of the Royal Irish Constabulary placed the butt of his loaded rifle on the floor and said to Maloney: “Did you ever look down the barrel of a loaded gun?” Maloney was compelled to place his eye to the muzzle of the loaded weapon whilst the sadistic sergeant of the RIC placed his own finger on the trigger. But even in the midst of brutality the gallantry of some fighting men asserts itself in extraordinary ways. As the sergeant of the Royal Irish Constabulary forced the Volunteer officer to place his eye to the barrel of the loaded rifle, a Black-and-Tan, who was standing beside him, violently kicked the stock of the weapon from the police sergeant’s hands and barked “Stop that! Do you want to blow the man’s head off?”

During the initial stages of the attack, some of the Black-and-Tans had come up to and fired on Volunteer sentries who returned their fire. In this exchange of shots, one of the ‘Tans was killed. He was Constable Alfred C Hogsden of London, who had joined the Black-and-Tans only seven weeks before. Prior to that, he had spent fifteen years in the British navy. The death of one of their number, despite the fact that several Volunteers had been killed, was like a match to a powder keg, when the ‘Tans and RIC learned of it. Once again they wreaked savage and spiteful revenge on the 120 young men cornered in the kitchen and ground-floor passageway leading to the ballroom.

In a bout of particularly destructive vandalism, these allegedly disciplined “police” and military tore and smashed the banisters from the big staircase and, using the pieces of timber as clubs, they bludgeoned the defenceless men.

All through the night, the girls imprisoned in the rooms upstairs prayed as they listened to the curses and swears and beatings that went on, on the floor below. Not until 10 o’clock on the following morning were these young women released. By that time the dead Volunteers had been taken to Limerick in a lorry whilst the others, some of them very severely wounded and all with blood-smearred and unbandaged faces and heads, were loaded into other lorries and taken in convoy to Limerick, where they were imprisoned at the New Barracks (now Sarsfield Barracks). The citizens of the Shannonside city who witnessed their passage, in the lorries, along the streets never forgot the awful procession of vehicles bearing over one hundred blood-stained and obviously suffering young men.

Military, RIC, and Black-and-Tans took part in the attack on Caherguillamore, and the RIC personnel from the Limerick city police stations were reinforced by the garrisons from Bruff, Fedamore, Croom and Pallasgreen.

The five Volunteers who were killed in the encounter were: Martin Conway, the Company Captain, and the Vice-Commandant of the 3rd Battalion of the East Limerick Brigade; Daniel Sheehan, of Caherguillamore; Harry Wade, of Cahernorry, Ballyneety; John Quinlan, of Grange Lower, Bruff, a Lieutenant of the local Company; and Ned Maloney of Grange.

They were buried in the Republican Plot at Grange and their funeral was the occasion of a huge public demonstration at which the trades and other organisations turned out in strength to swell the thousands of mourners paying tribute to the memory of the fallen.

Amongst those who were severely injured by beatings and bayoneting were Denis Conway, of Bruff; Joseph Ryan, of Lough Gur and his brother Bob who was later elected a Dáil Deputy for East Limerick, and John Garvan.

At the New Barracks, the prisoners spent the night of December 27th lying on the floor of an old church into which they had been kicked on their arrival. On the morning of the 28th they were taken out into the barrack yard and subjected to further interrogation – this time in the presence of members of the RIC, from a number of the rural areas, who had been brought in to assist in the identification of “wanted” men.

Dr Michael O’Brien, the column medical officer, and Paddy O’Donoghue, the son of the caretaker of Caherguillamore House, were singled out for very special attention and, after prolonged interrogation, were taken to another part of the barracks and again savagely beaten. Another who was given an added beating apparently in an effort to break his will and extract information from him, was Tom O’Brien, of Holycross, Bruff. But the beatings failed in their purpose. Subsequently, all the prisoners were transferred to the Limerick jail and were court-martialled before a tribunal presided over by Major-General Eastwood. Many were given sentences of ten years imprisonment and were sent to prison in Portsmouth and Dartmoor. Others received lighter sentences – in some cases of as little as six months. Those were sent to the convict prison and military post on Spike Island in Cork harbour. A number of those sentenced were not members of the Volunteer movement but had merely been present at the dance. All were held until the general amnesty following the signing of the Treaty.

References and Notes:

- (1) *The war of Independence in Limerick 1912-1921*; Thomas Toomey 2010
- (2) *Limerick’s Fighting Story*; Mercier Press