

NAME OF LACKELLY

A LEGEND

THE name of Lackelly has become a legend in the history of Limerick's contribution to the Fight for Freedom during the notorious Black and Tan regime.

Here, in the summer of 1921 the combined columns of the East, Mid and portion of the West Brigades under Comdt. Donnchadh Hannigan were engaged for eight or nine hours in extended battle with the enemy forces. The I.R.A. forces lost four men in the struggle but as dusk fell on the scene the enemy retreated leaving forty military cycles after them. A graphic story of the episode is told in the statement of the late Amos Reidy, Newcastle West, who took part in the engagement and recalls among other details the weird and tragic scene as the four victims were interred in the dead of the night by their sorrow stricken comrades.

Only a short time before the freedom fighters had lost five men in Shraharla following which the column proceeded to Knocklong district where they were billeted all round the area for the night. Amos Reidy and three others were in bed in a farm house in the townland of Lackelly when the woman of the house raised the alarm and told them there was shooting down the road, leading to the house. Dressing immediately they went out and went towards the firing they heard about quarter of a mile away. "On our way," Amos Reidy recounts, "we met a scout who informed us that five or six of our men had been killed down the road."

By this time other members of the column had joined the group

which now numbered 17 men and was under the command of the late Michael Colbert. Taking cover in some long grass and tall rushes near the Cork-Dublin railway line they saw military crossing a gate immediately in front. They next saw a number of their own men coming into the same field accompanied by Comdt. Hannigan, who had no boots on. When on Hannigan's order they went into an adjoining field fire was opened on them by a section of the military located in a double ditch opposite "We made for the cover of the railway fence in this field on our bellies," Amos Reidy records, "I had almost succeeded in reaching cover when the buckle of my right legging was shot off. At the same time I received a slight flesh wound."

Having reached cover Michael Colbert's section opened fire on the military in the double ditch opposite. Shortly afterwards a hostage carrying a white flag appeared to the left of the ditch but the I.R.A. men ignored the flag and continued to fire. The hostage disappeared immediately and after firing was continued for about an hour it was discovered the military had withdrawn. It appeared that another section of the column had got behind the military occupying the double ditch and driven them to retreat to a farm house about 400 yards away. The I.R.A. section then advanced towards the double ditch where they discovered the bodies of

four of their men who had been killed and 40 bicycles which had been abandoned by the enemy. Before their retreat the Tans from the double ditch had been guarding the cycles and dead men. These four victims, it transpired later, had got up early that morning and were talking to a girl on the road when they were surprised by the military and shot dead before they could open fire. It was the shooting of these four men that had given the original alarm.

Shortly afterwards the men of the column saw an officer with field glasses appear outside a farm house holding the woman of the house in front of him as a screen. He scanned the countryside but fire was not opened on him in case the woman would be shot. When the officer returned to the house the military inside opened fire on one or other of the I.R.A. sections located in the vicinity. Having repeated this operation five times the officer came out for the sixth time, glasses in hand but this time without the woman. It was his last appearance as one of the West Limerickmen shot him dead. During the exchange of firing round the farm house several cows were shot dead. Eventually, in the gathering dusk, the enemy succeeded in withdrawing from the farm house, taking their dead and wounded and leaving behind the 40 cycles and four dead I.R.A. men.

"The story I have related," Amos Reidy adds in his statement, "refers only to the section to which I became attached when the fire was first heard in the morning. I cannot relate the happenings to the other sections or how they fared in the fighting which took place that day. I do know, however, that during the course of the encounter reinforcements of military and Tans were rushed from Tipperary town and other places.

The statement goes on to recall the sad scene as the bodies of the

four dead men, each placed across two rifles, were carried to the Cross of the Tree, while others of the column followed in the rear with the forty captured cycles. At the cross-roads under the supervision of Comdt. Hannigan the dead men were placed in two pony traps. Thus in the darkness of the night the funeral cortege, escorted by comrades on the captured cycles, started off for Loughgur by way of the main road to Knocklong and Elton village. Others followed on foot and there was a brief halt at Elton where a brother of Tom Howard—one of the dead men—met the funeral in the village. The cortege then resumed its journey to Loughgur where the bodies were taken to the house of a man named Ryan.

Recounting the final scene and the last tributes to the dead volunteers, Amos Reidy relates: "Next day the four bodies were washed and wrapped in white sheets which were sewn. At dusk that evening the combined columns were mobilised and marched to Ryan's house which was up a boreen. The four bodies were then carried out on shutters, the funeral proceeding up the boreen about a hundred yards, beyond Ryan's house and into a garden where an open grave had been tagged and the bodies were placed in the open grave. A priest was present and recited the De Profundis and a decade of the rosary. The grave was then covered by local volunteers. The burial took place in the dead of night. We could not fire the usual volley over the grave. When the grave was closed Hannigan delivered an oration in which he exhorted the men to avenge our dead. I only knew one of the dead men personally and he was Tom Howard of East Limerick. The enemy during the scrap appeared to have used explosive bullets, which may account for the fact that the head of one of the victims cracked open when it was being placed on a pair of rifles.