

CROSS OF THE TREE AMBUSH

From 'Limerick's Fighting Story' 1948

WHEN KILMALLOCK WAS occupied by British regular troops, following the destruction of the police barracks, Lieutenant Browne, an intelligence officer attached to the machine-gun corps, became notorious in the locality for his activities against the IRA, and against civilians known to be sympathetic towards the movement. A number of unsuccessful attempts were made to shoot him; one at Riverfield, Kilmallock, and another at Ballingaddy, Kilmallock. The spot chosen for the second attempt referred to was in close proximity to Ballingaddy Roman Catholic church, and was abandoned following the intervention by the clergy who feared that the church might suffer as a reprisal.

What is now known as 'Cross of the Tree ambush' was yet another unsuccessful attempt on Lieutenant Browne who appeared to bear a charmed life. As the name suggests, the location of that attempt was a crossroads, in a green space in the centre of which flourished a tree. IRA intelligence learned that Lieutenant Browne with his escort would pass the cross one day in December 1920, and accordingly, preparations were made to ambush the party. The small number of men detailed for the operation fired upon Browne and his escort the moment the lorry in which they were travelling came into view. The British returned the fire and the exchanges became hot and heavy. When the engagement had been about a quarter-of-an-hour in progress the attackers were subjected to an unexpected hail of machine-gun fire, and it was then observed that Lieutenant Browne

had managed to get beneath the lorry, from where he was raking the IRA position with a machine-gun.

Plans were hurriedly re-arranged by the attackers, with a view to capturing both Browne and his machine-gun. The necessary fresh dispositions of the attacking party were suggested by Seán Riordan of Ballintubber, Kilfinane, an ex-soldier of the British army in which he held the rank of sergeant-major. Riordan, who had fought through the Great War in France and who had only joined the East Limerick flying column a few days previously, would probably have succeeded in his purpose had not heavy British reinforcements suddenly arrived upon the scene. These include an armoured car and four Crossley tenders loaded with troops.

The position of the little IRA party appeared hopeless, and there seemed no chance of escape for the men of the column, heavily outnumbered and out-gunned as they were. It was then that the value of Seán Riordan's military training became apparent as he ordered the men to fall back and retreat before the superior numbers of the enemy whilst at the same time he issued instructions as to the method which offered the best prospects of escape from the trap. He first saw that each man of the column was in such position as offered favourable chance of a get-away, before he made any move himself, and then with the most conspicuous bravery he personally covered the retreat of the others in the direction of Garryspillane. Fighting every inch of the way, he continued to engage the very large British force until every one of his comrades had got away unscathed. Although he received mortal wounds in the intestines in the course of the action he nevertheless managed to evade the enemy and reached Garryspillane where he immediately collapsed. His comrades placed him in a bed of straw on a horse and cart and conveyed him all the way to Shraharla, where he was sheltered for about five days, until secretly removed to Kilmallock Union Hospital. Despite an immediate operation by Dr Trevor McNamara, who removed the bullets, the valiant soldier died next morning.