



Mrs. Harry Daly, of Ballinlee, Bruff . . . helped convey the news of the raid and killings to Brigadier Sean Wall.

Maureen Browne recalls a Christmas tragedy of forty-five years ago

Their lives they gave their friends to save — at Caherguillamore

CAHERGUILLAMORE HOUSE, near Bruff, Co. Limerick, lies gaunt and empty to-day, just another lonely ruin, but on St. Stephen's Night, 45 years ago, it rang to the laughter and music of one of Ireland's most daring and tragic dances.

Shortly after midnight, the dance was broken up by gunfire, in which five men died to save their friends and many were wounded. From there things moved quickly and within 48 hours, 138 of those who had attended the dance were behind bars, sentenced to terms ranging from three months in Spike Island to 10 years in Dartmoor.

Mothers, fathers and sweethearts in nearly every part of East Limerick were plunged in mourning and the key men of the 3rd Battalion of the East Limerick Brigade of the I.R.A. transported to English gaols.

Money for Rifles

The story of the Caherguillamore dance began in the early days of December, 1920 when Capt. Ernie O'Malley of the Irish Republican Army, General Headquarters in Dublin, visited Limerick. The men of the 3rd Battalion of East Limerick which comprised companies from Bruff, Grange, Meany, Manister, Banogue and Lough Gur, were anxious to form a fighting column and Capt. O'Malley guaranteed them rifles if they could get money.

decided that the only way to get the necessary money was to hold a dance by secret invitation. Admission was fixed at 4/- and it was hoped to raise about 150. It was a dangerous method, even for men like these who lived with danger and laughed at death each day. There was a 9 p.m. curfew after which it was illegal to be out and many of the organisers of the dance were wanted men for whom the R.I.C. had been combing the countryside for months.

A Secret

The exact location of the dance was not given but rumour was allowed to spread that it was Herbertstown. The Captain of each company was told who to invite and the invites were directed to Holycross, where they would be met by a Volunteer, who would guide them further.

It was arranged to hold the dance at Caherguillamore House, the unoccupied home of Lady Fermoy, herself a Guillamore of Bruff, and from Holycross the people were directed from

Volunteer to Volunteer along the route and only the last knew, or was supposed to know, exactly where the dance would be held.

The Martin brothers of Bruff were engaged to play and sentries were put out fearing a surprise attack. About 140 men and 100 ladies attended the dance which started at 9 p.m. and around midnight supper was served.

What followed is described by one of the organisers of the dance, who was later sentenced to 10 years penal servitude in Dartmoor.

"About 2.30 a.m. I was dancing when a scout tapped me on the shoulder and said that the Battalion Vice-Commandant, Martin Conway, wanted me on the Cahir road as a shot had been heard. My two particular friends, James Benny Moloney, of Kicallain, and Ned Moloney, of Grange, accompanied me and on the way we met Johnnie Moroney, of Bruff

The Raid

The Cahir road was about a quarter of a mile from the house, and when we got there we failed to contact Conway, but met Dr. Michael O'Brien, who suggested it was a false alarm.

"We ambled back towards the house, and in the courtyard parted from Ned Moloney, who was later found shot.

"Suddenly voices were fired in the darkness, and we heard shots from all directions, we threw ourselves on the ground and rolled into the house, just as all hell broke loose. The building was riddled with machine-gun fire, bullets smashed through the windows and the girls were screaming."

When the raid started James Moloney of Meadagh, Bruff, was cutting sandwiches with Nicholas O'Dwyer of Bruff, an officer of the Battalion and a wanted man.

"All the men on the run were told to get out immediately and Nicholas left, but I decided to finish the job. When I made for the door, I was met by a veritable barrage of shots. I tried to get out a window but couldn't force it. There was complete consternation, and just then the Tans burst into the kitchen.

"Some of the girls ran to them and caught their rifles to prevent them firing, which I think saved many lives. The military broke up the furniture and started a fire in the grate in case anybody was hiding up the chimney."

Red with Blood

It was a pitifully short battle with 300 armed Tans and R.I.C. against 240 helpless men and women, less than a dozen of whom were armed.

The men and women were segregated and the women put in an upstairs room, while the men were forced to run the gauntlet by the R.I.C. They were compelled to run down a corridor, between two rows of the policemen who battered them with butts of rifles, revolvers and bayonets. The men who were not wounded in the first vicious attack were forced to run a second gauntlet, until Caherguillamore House ran red with blood.

A Bruff man whose two brothers and sister were also at the dance, and who later did penal servitude in England, recalls how the men were kept in a room for hours.

"The Tans came into the room and picked out six men to be shot. After a while they came back for six more and I was in the third six, but by this time I guessed they were bluffing as it was unlikely they were going to shoot us all. They actually wanted us for an interrogation presided over by Colonel Wilkinson, during which we were asked for our names, addresses and who invited us to the dance.

No Escape

"Before the dance started I remember asking Nicholas O'Dwyer how we would escape if there was a raid. O'Dwyer's words were 'There is no escape and no way out.'"

For the majority it was true. Johnny Quinlan of Grange, Ned Moloney of Grange, Davy Sheehan of Grange and Harry Wade of Cahernory, had been shot at their posts, when they gave the alarm. They died to warn their friends. Bob Ryan of Holycross, Bruff, later T.D., was wounded by rifle bullets in the chest. Before Ned Moloney died, he brought down a Black and Tan named Hogsden.

The Tans then held a brutal inquisition, and trying unsuccessfully by beatings to get information about suspected Sinn Fein organisers, and compelled the trapped men to sing "If You Broke Your Mother's Heart, Faith You Won't Break Mine". Outside, bloodhounds were set on the trail of the wanted men who had escaped.

Major J. G. O'Dwyer, now living at Ballylough House, Ballysimon, was then a lad of 21 on the run. A Lieutenant in Conway's Battalion, he left the building and headed towards the Grange-Fedamore road keeping under cover as best he could.

Shot dead

"The night was very bright and in the vicinity of the Fedamore road I met my brother, Nicholas, and Martin, Conway. We crossed the road and had reached the other side of the wall when a lorry of Tans came very silently around what is known as Scanlan's Bend, which was about 200 yards from where we were. There seemed to be little to do except wait for capture, but the senior officer present said: 'I am for it,' so we did.

"We split up, and I ran down the right-hand side of what was known as Buckle's Field. My brother ran down the middle of the field and Martin Conway went to the left. There was about a 100 yards between us. I felt a bullet go through my hand, but got over a hedge out of view and that night got shelter in a friendly house near Lough Gur."

Martin Conway was wounded, dragged himself along for a short distance but was followed and shot dead.

A bullet ploughed a furrow over Nicholas O'Dwyer's car, but he too escaped.

Meanwhile the women in Caherguillamore had been separated from the men and put in an upstairs room.

Mrs. Harry Daly of Ballinlee, Bruff, then Nora Dianen, explained how they were kept in the room all night. The women searches were called discovered some men who had impersonated women and they were taken down to join the men.

"During the night the Tans came up and brought us a tankard of milk and some cake but of course we did not drink it," she said, her voice growing disdainful.

Marked man

Mrs. Daly described how she, Elizabeth Lynch, Nell O'Donnell, Denis Conway and Dr. M. O'Brien travelled to the dance by devious routes in a trap and car to avoid the sentry at Bruff Barracks. She said that Dr. O'Brien who was Medical Officer to the Flying Column was a marked man the night of the dance and after beating him the Tans threw the water in which he had washed their wounded comrades in his face.

At daybreak the women were released. I went to Bruff, and told what had happened to James Bond, who conveyed the news to Brigadier Sean Wall.

A Martin Houghan of Grange was then allowed to go to Bruff for a priest and spiritual aid was rendered by Rev. D. Barry and Rev. J. Conway, curates at Bruff.

Dan Byrnes of New Line, Bruff, who was sentenced to 10 years penal servitude described how no medical aid was rendered and the men were piled into lorries, the dead underneath and the dying on top and taken to the New Barracks, Limerick, and later transferred to Limerick Gaol, where they were court-martialled before Major-General Eastwood.

Fifty-eight were sentenced to 10 years penal servitude in England in the prisons of Portland and Dartmoor, while 80 others got varying sentences from three months to six months, mostly served in Spike Island.

It was later discovered that the British had sound information about the dance. The main convoy had marched through the fields from Limerick, while others had converged from Bruff, Fedamore, Croom and Hospital.

The dead were reverently buried by their countrymen in Grange Cemetery where a memorial is erected to them. The others who had been condemned to penal servitude were released at the Amnesty on February 12, 1922 when the treaty had been ratified by the Dail.

A small price

The story is now 45 years old and many may think it is best forgotten. But surely it will always be remembered at Christmastime, when old men tell, and recall, the tale to their grandchildren on winter evenings.

It will always be remembered by the men and women who met and lost their sweethearts there.

It will always be remembered because it is a story of bravery and heroism and a reminder of the days when men thought death a small price for a dance and a chance to strike a blow for freedom.

It will always be remembered in the snatch of an old and half-forgotten song, a verse of which runs:

"Did you not hear with falling tear the tramp of armed men.

Five sentries stood outside to warn those within; Those sentries brave the alarm gave through some lay in their gore. Their lives they gave their friends to save at Caherguillamore."



Major J. G. O'Dwyer . . . got a bullet through the hand.



Mrs. H. O'Donnell, of Holycross, Bruff, then Rita Connelly . . . was kept in a room all night with the other girls and released at daylight.



Mr. Willie Hogan, of Bruff, uncle of Olympic Games boxer, Willie Stack. His sister, Mollie, and brother, Richard, also attended the dance, and Willie was sentenced to ten years' penal servitude in England.