

THE BATTLE OF HOLYCROSS

By de Lacy

Preamble by Tommy Hourigan

Dear Reader, before you opened this book, you may have known something about the events that unfolded at Caherguillamore on the 26th/27th December 1920 as well as the Grange Ambush event which occurred in November of the same year. Before arriving at this page, you may have read the detailed accounts earlier of those events and marvelled at the bravery of local IRA Volunteers who fought Crown forces in the pursuit of Ireland's freedom. A number of those brave men sacrificed their lives for the cause. Irish people owe them and many like them an eternal debt of gratitude and remembrance.

But, were you aware of the "Battle of Holycross" which occurred in 1942, in which local men out-manoeuvred and 'overcame' a squadron of professional troops, the decisive action having taken place within Conway's corner field? Let me hasten to add that Ireland's freedom was not under threat in any way and no blood was spilled by either side by virtue of armaments; though, upon reading what follows, you may concede the possibility of minor engagements in anger, with perhaps a consequential body bruise or two, not to mention many bruised egos on one of the participating sides.

Of course, the event arose from well organised Irish defence manoeuvres involving army troops and reserve/LDF troops (Local Defence Force). However, given the likely soldierly instincts of all involved, none would have wished to be on the 'losing' side.

It must have occurred to the locals who participated in the manoeuvres that the Conway field and the Cregan house involved had featured in real action during "troubled-times". Captain Martin Conway, who died at Caherguillamore in 1920, lived in the said house at the time, and the windows of his family home were on occasion riddled by Black-and-Tan gunfire, in the hope that Martin would be shot. On some of those occasions, Martin, having been warned of oncoming enemy troops, was in the said corner field behind the roadside wall, his revolvers at the ready, in case of engagement.

Fast-forward from 1920 to 1942....

The Battle of Holycross (by de Lacy)

The following article was published in *The Dawn* in 1989.

The manoeuvres of September 1942 involved about 30,000 army troops and around 40,000 reserve or LDF troops. The scenario was roughly an invasion of Munster by the 1st Eastern Division and the defence of the province by the 2nd Division LDF and sundry command troops. The largest concentration and movement of troops in Ireland since 1923.

News reached Bruff Coy [*Company*] at the approach of an enemy motor squadron (four armoured cars, Ford 1936) as well as reconnaissance cars



Conway's corner field— scene of historic Battle of Holycross.

armed with LMGs [*Light Machine Guns*] and motorcycle scouts, moving from Limerick towards Holycross where it eventually bivouacked in Conway's corner field. A motor squadron would have numbered about eighty, all ranks.

Bruff Coy [*Company*] assembled at the courthouse, and later the bulk of the Coy moved to Jimmy Twomey's at Camass. Those remaining in the courthouse were surprised by the arrival of an armoured car, which had passed up the Palatine Road, undetected by the two look-out men posted on the top of the Water Tower at Teampline (shades of Brian Boru and Clontarf).

Before Bruff Coy moved west to Camass, word was put out that they were going somewhere else, in the best military tradition of deception in war. After leaving Camass, the Bruff men would go by a circuitous route to Goat Island. There, the District Leader (Battalion Commander), Captain Liam T Purcell issued orders to Coy Leader, Captain Bob Cotter, and he in turn gave his order to his junior officers, and when all this was going on, two intrepid motorcycle scouts, Volunteer Alfie

Shanahan and District Staff Officer Tadgh Creed set off from Bruff on a reconnaissance mission towards Holycross. At this stage, they were dressed in 'civvies' and having left their motorcycle near Ardanreag, continued the rest of the way in a noisy pretence of drunkenness. They were ignored by the sentinels of the motor squadron and allowed to pass on to Lar Hogan's house [Cregan's], where they gained admission and from an upstairs window they had a grandstand view of the disposition of the motor squadron.

Several members of the Holycross platoon were at this time being detained as prisoners of the motor squadron in Lar Hogan's house, now the Cregan family home. Not only did Alfie and Tadgh get a good view of the motor squadron deployment but they were able to discuss the situation with the Holycross 'prisoners'. About this time, a Lieutenant, one of the regulars, was evidently taken prisoner. The Lieutenant (an umpire) who was the tallest officer in the army was escorted to Bruff Barracks by Alfie Shanahan, not the tallest man in the military.

The two intrepid scouts re-joined the company HQ near Goat Island and reported what they had seen to the officers of the Bruff District, who finalised their attack plan on the basis of this fresh information.

After nightfall, the unit set off via Ballygrennan, Ballincoloo and Kilballyowen and on towards Holycross, across country in the dark led by scouts, Volunteer Dinny Cronin and the late Val Mickey Sullivan acting as "point". From the Ballingirlough area, the final approach was launched, elements from Bruff moving in from east and south. A detachment from the Athlacca group moved in from the west via Rockbarton and covering the north at the same time.

Within the perimeter of the squadron, a relaxed atmosphere would have pervaded the scene. Arrival at a quiet country crossroads, scarcely even a hamlet, promised a tranquil bivouac for the night. Duty officer, orderly sergeant, guard commander, guard, stand to... and sentinels all properly deployed, all armed and issued with live ammunition. All relaxed and confident – what



Historic house on left hand side of road, home of Maureen and Austin Cregan. It was the home of Martin Conway, IRA Volunteer at the time of his murder by the British in 1920. The field on the right hand side, opposite the house, was the scene of "The Battle of Holycross" in 1942.

could happen in this rustic place. Gavin's pub, just across the road and Bruff of the ten pubs not too far away, prospects looked good. Those lucky members of the squadron, not numbered amongst the duties mentioned above, were relaxing in their canvas bivvies or already abroad in the shallow fleshpots of Tullybrackey, Ballynanty and Lower Grange.

All around Conway's spacious lawn, stealthy crouching figures were moving forward, stalking their prey. Tension and excitement were running high. Noiselessly they moved in, and on a prearranged signal, well-planned pandemonium was loosed on the hapless motor squadron. The first 'casualties' were the squadron sentinels. Each one, having been carefully located, was quickly overcome and the rounding up of the remainder swiftly followed. Volunteer Joe Naughton described how he and his comrades approached to within arms-length of a squadron sentry who was smoking a cigarette; it was an easy, if somewhat dangerous task to disarm the sentries, whose first reaction was a split second of fright, at once replaced by fury and rage at having been so easily and efficaciously overcome.

Anger and consternation were the immediate reactions of all the squadron members – no doubt, some blows were exchanged, and many veterans of the attack force swear to this day that shots were fired, perhaps by the irate squadron personnel. No one denies that feelings ran high, elation on the part of the local troops and seething chagrin on the side of the professionals.

Four armoured cars, mounting Vickers medium machine-guns, eight scout cars ('bug chasers') each mounting a light machine gun, about forty rifles and half as many revolvers and automatic pistols, and all with ammunition to match. What a prize for the Bruff District LDF! The heroes of old of Grange and Caherguillamore must have looked down with approval and pride at their worthy successors. You see, it was like a local minor team taking on and beating a neighbouring county All-Ireland team. That was the ratio.

Interestingly enough, the entire attack force was unarmed. This arrangement was probably in the interests of safety. It may have taken some of the realism out of the action for the attackers, but the wise judgement of the leaders was vindicated in the end.

Early next morning, when the Local Defence people were being reorganised on the road near the "Ink Bottle", a minor if somewhat unpleasant incident occurred. Enough of that now. It can be seen, in retrospect, as a measure of the strength of feeling prevailing on one side. The local defenders can look back with satisfaction on a job well done, and indeed to this day, they speak with benevolent humour of the Officer Commanding and his unlucky motor squadron.