The Irish Volunteers in Kilkenny in 1916

(This article was written by P.J. Hennessy and Jim Maher from notes left by Tom Treacy, Jim DeLoughry, Jim Byrne V.E.C. and Peter DeLoughry)

ON MARCH 5, 1914, the Irish National Volunteers were first formed in Kilkenny as a result of a meeting at the Parade, and in the City Hall, Kilkenny, at which Sir Roger Casement and Thomas McDonagh attended, and were the principal speakers.

About July, 1914, there was a strong move by the Redmondites and A.O.H. men in the Irish National Volunteers in Kilkenny to get full control of the organisation and oust the I.R.B. and Sinn Féin members. World War I broke out and recruiting for the British Army was openly advocated and encouraged by these Redmondites and A.O.H. men.

A crisis arose in the Irish National Volunteers and early in September, 1914, the matter came to a head at a full parade of all the city companies in the Market Place, Kilkenny. On that occasion about 650 men paraded, and they were addressed by Rev. Fr. Rowe, St. Mary’s, James’s Street, and Rev. Philip Moore, St. John’s, who favoured the policy of the Redmondites and A.O.H. Their views were vigorously opposed by Peter DeLoughry of Parliament Street, supported by Pat Corcoran, Patrick Street, and Ned Comerford, Wellington Square, who put the case of Sinn Féin, and the I.R.B. to the meeting.

The parade was moving toward a riotous state when Peter DeLoughry called on all those who stood for their point of view to fall out and line up near the poultry shed in the Market Place. Twenty-eight men broke ranks, and walked to the poultry shed, while over 600 others stayed where they were and indicated that they supported the Redmondite policy. Tom Treacy took charge of the twenty-eight men at the poultry shed, and marched them out of the Market Place through a most hostile demonstration. He marched the men to what was then known as the Banba Hall (now Kyteler’s Inn, St. Kieran Street) which was then occupied by Fianna Éireann. These men became the only company of Irish Volunteers in Kilkenny City. Banba Hall became known as “The Irish Volunteers Hall” and was the H.Q. of the Irish Volunteers up to 1916.

On St. Patrick’s Day 1916, “A” Company paraded to Mass in St. John’s Church, Kilkenny, with the Republican Flag and Lee Enfield Rifles.

SECRET AND IMPORTANT NEWS

Early in April, 1916, about a fortnight before Easter, Pat Corcoran called Tom Treacy out from the Banba Hall and told him that someone wanted to see him. Outside, Corcoran introduced him to Cathal Brugha. Tom Treacy had not been personally acquainted with Brugha before this, but he knew him by sight as a commercial traveller coming to Kilkenny. Pat Corcoran told him that Cathal Brugha had something very secret and important to tell him as Captain of the Irish Volunteers in Kilkenny.

Cathal Brugha started by telling him that the Rising was coming off soon and the instructions he gave were that general manoeuvres were to be arranged for Easter Sunday. Treacy’s Company were to parade with whatever arms and equipment they possessed, and were to proceed by way of Borris (Co. Carlow) to the Scallop Gap, on the Wexford border, where they were to link up with the Wexford Volunteers before any operations and tasks were to be taken from him. His orders would also apply when they met their Wexford comrades at Scallop Gap.

The Irish Volunteers in Kilkenny at that time numbered about 60, counting Officers, N.C.O’s and men and they had only sufficient rifles, revolvers and small automatics to poorly arm 25 men. Treacy pointed out this position to Cathal Brugha, and Brugha told him that there was a quantity of arms to be picked up when they arrived and contacted Dr. Dundon in Borris on Easter Sunday. He also intimated that it was confidently expected that a further supply of arms would be available later to arm all available men. Pat Corcoran and Peter DeLoughry had been our contact with G.H.Q. in Dublin, and they had also been given these instructions by Cathal Brugha.

Tom Treacy issued the instructions to the Irish Volunteers in Kilkenny regarding the manoeuvres on Easter Sunday. He gave not the slightest indication of the main objective of marching to join the Wexfordmen. All available arms and equipment were to be carried. The arms were to be mounted on bicycles and a sufficient supply of rations was to be carried also.

On Spy Wednesday of Holy Week, 1916, Peter DeLoughry, James Lalor of Kilkenny, and Eamonn Fleming of the Swan, Leix, collected explosives from Wolfhill Coal Mines, and delivered them to Patrick Ramsbottom, Portlaoise.

About Good Friday, Pat Corcoran, Peter DeLoughry, James Lalor, and Tom Furlong went to Co. Wexford in DeLoughry’s motor car and collected a quantity of explosives from a brother of Tom Furlong. Michael Nugent, a Volunteer from “A” Company (Kilkenny City) and a native of Ballykeefe, Kilmanagh, drove the car. Michael was later killed by an accidental blow of a hurley while playing with Dicksboro, in Maryborough, in August 1916.

MANOEUVRES CANCELLED

The members of the Irish Volunteers in Kilkenny mobilised in Banba Hall, King Street (now St. Kieran Street), at 12 o’clock noon on Easter Sunday, April 23, 1916. The first intimation that Tom Treacy got that there was any alteration in plans was when he saw the announcement in the Sunday Independent at 10 O’clock on that morning that the manoeuvres were cancelled. On arrival at the Volunteer Hall a short time later, some of the officers and men who had already arrived had either seen the announcement or were told it by some of their friends who had seen it in the paper. Treacy did not dismiss the company of Volunteers until dinner time on that day as it was thought that an official message by way of a dispatch might still arrive. After dinner, the officers who were in the know, assembled again in the same place, and discussed the situation and details. Some officers from some of the outposts in the county also attended at the hall.

The whole company again mobilised at 8 o’clock that night at the hall. It was expected that Pat Corcoran, who was in Dublin that day, would be back with definite news or instructions. About 10
p.m. he arrived at the hall accompanied by Capt. J.J. O’Connell (Ginger) with official word that everything was “off”. The Kilkenny Volunteers were then dismissed.

On Easter Monday morning, Pat Corcoran and Peter DeLoughry went in DeLoughry’s car to bring the guns, which were under the control of Dr. Dundon in Borris, back to Kilkenny. Michael Nugent again drove the car. At about 2 p.m. on this date, Tom Treacy received a message from Lieutenant Pierce Brett that word had arrived at Kilkenny Railway Station (now called McDonagh Station) that hostilities had broken out in Dublin, but that report was confused.

All the available men of the Kilkenny company of Irish Volunteers assembled in the vicinity of Stallard’s garden at Asylum Lane, Kilkenny, at 7 o’clock on that night. They met the car carrying the guns from Co. Carlow on the Thomastown Road at around 8 p.m. This party of men pushed the car over a rise of soft ground into Stallard’s garden, where the guns were unloaded. The delivery consisted of about 30 single barrel breech-loading shotguns with a quantity of ammunition to suit them. The guns were distributed amongst the members of the company. The men were instructed to hold themselves available to be called out at any time to carry out all orders which might be issued by Capt. J.J. (Ginger) O’Connell, and they were told to mobilise again at the Irish Volunteer Hall on Tuesday at 8 p.m. Mobilisations for a similar purpose were held each night of that week, except Saturday. These mobilisations were attended by 100% of the members in Kilkenny City, and during Easter Week a number of new members joined, and a few lapsed members renewed their membership.

There were two R.I.C. Barracks in Kilkenny, one in Parliament Street and the other in John Street. These were occupied by 40 constables. There were 400 British soldiers in Kilkenny Military Barracks. The R.I.C. constables remained confined to their barracks during the week, and about 30 extra policemen were drafted in from outlying areas to reinforce those in Kilkenny City towards the end of the week. The British military were also confined to barracks.

The number of Irish Volunteers in Kilkenny City in 1916 totalled sixty-six, and those scattered throughout County Kilkenny numbered around seventy.

**HOPELESS POSITION**

Captain J.J. O’Connell had conferences with members of the controlling committees, company officers and representatives of the small outlying units each night during all that Easter week. Contact with Dublin broke down early in the week. Captain J.J. O’Connell decided to send James Lalor to James Leddin of Limerick on a motor cycle on Wednesday to find out how things were there, and around the south-west of Ireland. He brought back a dispatch from Mr. Leddin stating that “Limerick was not out”, as the Aud had been sunk and all the expected arms had been lost. The Irish Volunteers in Kilkenny City did not begin any military operations because, being isolated as they were in the circumstances, their position was hopeless.

There was no surrender of arms in Kilkenny. A Kilkenny woman named Mary Byrne was friendly with a Mrs. Doherty of John’s Quay, who was the wife of an R.I.C. Sergeant. Mrs. Doherty told Mary Byrne that many of the Irish Volunteers in other counties had been arrested, and that the British military would be coming to Kilkenny soon after that to arrest members of the Volunteers in the city.

On learning this news, Mary Byrne called to Peter DeLoughry in Parliament Street and asked him if he was aware of these facts. It was a great surprise to Peter to get this important message. He took measures to hide the guns away before the British Army arrived to make the arrests.

On May 3, Capt. J.J. O’Connell was taken into custody while staying at Peter DeLoughry’s home in Parliament Street, and he was lodged in Kilkenny Gaol. On the following day Peter DeLoughry was arrested. Alderman James Nowlan of Bishop’s Hill was taken into custody when he stepped off the train from Dublin on the same evening. On the following morning the town was heavily patrolled by British Infantry, accompanied by 200 R.I.C. constables. All the streets were cordoned off, and houses and shops were entered and 26 men were arrested. On the following morning four men from outlying country areas were arrested. All the prisoners were lodged in Kilkenny Gaol.

Four days later the prisoners were removed, on foot, and marched to the Railway Station. On the march, John Kealy, who had complained of illness since his arrest, had not the strength to complete the journey and he collapsed and died in Upper John Street, about 30 yards from his own home. He was at the extreme rear of the line of prisoners, and many of the prisoners did not know of his death until after in the day when they missed him. All the prisoners were put in a special train and brought to Kingsbridge, Dublin. It is ironic that Kilkenny Railway Station is now named after Thomas McDonagh, one of the executed 1916 leaders.

All was not lost when the Easter Week prisoners were released. Ireland had changed by then, and “a terrible beauty had been born”. Shortly after they returned they found a “Risen” people ready to take on the might of the British Empire to secure the freedom that the Leaders of the 1916 Rising had given their lives to achieve, and these loyal Kilkenny men once again devoted themselves wholeheartedly to that same purpose.

**Irish Volunteers Arrested in Kilkenny were:**

Capt. J.J. O’Connell, Dublin.
Peter DeLoughry, Parliament Street.
James Nowlan, Bishop’s Hill.
Pat Corcoran, Patrick Street.
Edward Comerford, Wellington Square.
James Lalor, Friary Street.
Tom Furlong, Michael Street.
Pierce Brett, Blackmill Street.
Lawrence DeLoughry, Parliament Street.
Thomas Neary, Poulgour.
William Stephens, c/o Bourke’s, High Street.
Denis Barry, The Monster House (died later while on hunger strike in Cork Gaol).
Patrick Parsons, Wolfe Tone Street, and Bourke’s, High Street.
Anthony Mullally, Parnell Street.
Patrick Burke Sr., Wolfe Tone Street.
James Madigan, Abbey Street.
Joseph Coyne, Bishop’s Hill.
Michael Ryan, Bishop’s Hill and the Monster House.
Charles Smyth, Maudlin Street.
Maurice Higgins, Upper John Street.
William Denn, Talbot’s Inch.
Michael Purcell, High Street.
Lawrence Walsh, Dunmore.
Stephen O’Dwyer, Patrick Street.
Michael O’Dwyer, John Street.
Thomas Treacy, Dean Street.
Sean Gibbons, Ballylarkin, Freshford.
Martin Kealy, Blanchfields Park.
John Harte, Blanchfields Park.
James Carrigan, Clara.
Irish Volunteers from Kilkenny City and County who were deported to English Prisons and Frongoch Internment Camp:

Denis Barry, The Monster House (died later while on hunger strike in Cork Gaol).
Patrick Burke Snr., Abbey Street.
Edward Comerford, Wellington Square.
Joseph Coyne, Bishop’s Hill.
Lawrence DeLoughry, Parliament Street.
William Denn, Talbot’s Inch.
Stephen O’Dwyer, Patrick Street.
Tom Furlong, Michael Street.
Sean Gibbons, Ballylarkin, Freshford.
John Harte, Blanchfields Park.
Maurice Higgins, Upper John Street.
Martin Kealy, Blanchfields Park.
James Lalor, Friary Street.
James Madigan, Abbey Street.
Thomas Neary, Poulgour.
James Nowlan, Bishop’s Hill.
Michael O’Dwyer, John Street.
Patrick Parsons, Wolfe Tone Street.
Michael Purcell, High Street.
Michael Ryan, Bishop’s Hill, and the Monster House.
Charles Smyth, Maudlin Street.
William Stephens, c/o Bourke’s, High Street.
Lawrence Walsh, Dunmore.
Richard J. Healy, Jenkinstown.
John O’Shea, Knocktopher.
Peter DeLoughry, Parliament Street. Tom Treacy, Dean Street.
Anthony Mullally, Parnell Street.
Pierce Brett, Blackmill Street.
Thomas Stallard, Parliament Street.
James Carrigan, Clara.
Pat Corcoran, Patrick Street.