

# AERODROME RAID

## DARING CAPTURE OF AMMUNITION BY PARTY OF VOLUNTEERS

IN the latter part of 1918 I was working in Collinstown Aerodrome for the enemy against whom I had fought in 1916, but keeping my eyes open to see what I could do to help the Republic to which we had pledged our allegiance. I was not long there before I discovered that there were several other Volunteers on the job, working away peaceably enough to all appearance, but awaiting an opportunity to further the cause which we all had at heart.

Collinstown Aerodrome was, at that time, a regular little arsenal, and, needless to say, it was well guarded by the British military. The choice collection of arms it contained excited our envy, as the Volunteers were badly in need of military equipment; so we decided to notify G.H.Q. and await instructions. We gave G.H.Q. details about the strength of the position, and were told to submit our plans for carrying out the proposed raid.

### Plans Approved.

My comrades in Collinstown Aerodrome were Peadar Breslin, later killed in Mountjoy; Pat Doyle, later executed by the British; Séan Doyle, who died of wounds after the attack on the Custom House; and Christy O'Malley. I, at that time, held the rank of 1st lieutenant in the Volunteers. Summoned to Brigade Headquarters, I was told that our plans were approved, and that I was to be put in command of the raid. I was given the choice of what Dublin Brigade men I wanted, and I decided that I would have men from "A" and "F" Companies of the 1st Battalion—men of the calibre of those whom I have already mentioned, and P. J. Ryan, Brian Kelly, George Fitzgerald, C. O'Malley, Phil. Leddy, Mick Magee (later killed in ambush), Barney Ryan (later executed), and Tom Merrigan.

### Patriotic Women.

As the work before us was of a very dangerous character I did not wish to call upon any married men to take part in it, but when Pat Doyle heard that he was debarred for this reason he became very indignant with me and threatened to leave the Volunteers if he was not included in the attacking party. I am glad to be able here to pay a tribute to that noble soldier, later to suffer on the scaffold for his country. He was the most devoted soul, and never shirked any risk or danger, although he had a young wife depending on him. Mrs. Pat Doyle was one of those splendid and patriotic Irishwomen who sacrificed so much for their country during the War of

Independence. She never complained, although her husband's life was so much given up to the fight for Irish freedom that they had both been reduced to poverty. Instead of trying to influence him to think of his own safety and her comfort, she stood by him and encouraged him all through the struggle to the day of his death.

### Airedales On Guard.

Pat Doyle having overcome my objection to his accompanying us, it was arranged that we should meet at the Doyle's little home, at St. Mary's Place, to get ready for the expedition. A final reconnoitre of the Aerodrome showed us that we had dangerous opponents to meet, in addition to the

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soldiers, for two large and fierce Airedale dogs were kept outside the guardroom. These dogs, while they never attacked a man in khaki, would not allow any civilian to pass after nightfall. No attempt to coax or bribe them was of any use, for they seemed to say: "You will get in here only over our dead bodies." We soon saw that it was only over their dead bodies that we would be able to penetrate inside Collinstown Aerodrome. On the afternoon of March 19th, 1919 (the night fixed for the raid), Séan Doyle and I, while we were at work, administered a large dose of poison to the Airedales, a dose which was calculated to kill them some hours later. This work was very unpleasant for us, but was absolutely necessary under the circumstances, for the whole success of our undertaking depended upon our being able to enter the grounds without an alarm being raised.

The raiding party met at Mrs. Doyle's house, where they dressed in khaki, supplied by G.H.Q., and masks.

### Silent Party.

As we left town for the aerodrome at about 11.30 p.m., we were troubled to notice that there was a glorious moon, a silent enemy, which would greatly increase our difficulties in approaching the aerodrome unnoticed. According to plan we were to divide forces about four miles from Collinstown, and I apportioned the party which was to attack the rear to Peadar Breslin, I myself taking command of the party which was to attack the front, the total number of those engaged being about 25. The party



Collinstown Aerodrome, taken after its collapse recently.

which I was commanding had to reach the front of the guard-room without detection, so we had to crawl, lying flat on the ground, for about two miles. Peadar's squad had orders not to attack in the rear, until my squad was already in action in the front. All during the action, from the moment we entered the aerodrome grounds, we were to speak as little as possible, and never to address each other by name. Numbers were selected for each man beforehand, and every man knew that when he wanted to speak to a comrade he was to address him as "Number One," or whatever his number was. These orders were carried out so strictly that later, the British reporting the raid, said that the men "were as silent as mummies." In order that there would be no need to fire shots we had brought with us a good supply of rope, and a kind of knuckle-duster weapon. We also carried some sledge hammers, which came in useful, as it will appear, later.

### Disarmed.

Tom Merrigan, who had been detailed to deal with the sentry outside the guardroom, waited until the sentry was at the point farthest from us, and then rushed at him from behind. He was taken completely by surprise, disarmed, and then forced into the guardroom, where the other sentries, about twenty in number, were treated in a like manner. When all of them were disarmed we proceeded to tie them up. We made sure that their arms and legs were securely roped, and swung them out of the cross beams of the guardroom.

While one section was engaged in dealing with the guard, another was busily engaged in collecting all the arms and ammunition, and getting ready for transport.

Our Brigadier had arranged to send motors to carry the munitions, and two others in addition to convey the men back to the city. Willing hands loaded the rifles, bayonets, and ammunition into the cars in record time, and got them safely away.

Our next precaution was to make our

own retreat secure, and now the sledge-hammers came into play. We paid a visit to the military garage, which housed at least twenty motor cars, all in perfect condition, and demolished them. We made sure that these cars would not be able to pursue us that night, and it is doubtful if they were ever able to go on the road again.

### Thirteen Passengers.

Our work being successfully done, we went to look for the two cars which were to drive us into town, but to our disappointment only one, driven by Pat MacCrae, was at the appointed place. This car, a taxi, had to carry thirteen passengers into town, and luckily it made the journey without any mishap. However, one of the cars transporting munitions was not so fortunate, and we had the alarming experience of its breaking down about 3 miles from our dump. The men in charge of this car, not daring to ask for help, had to get out and push the car for the remaining miles, unload it at the dump, and push it again until it was a safe distance away.

Sufficient credit can hardly be given to the men engaged on this raid for their coolness and daring. That the raid was well worth while can be shown when I mention that our "haul" that night consisted of 75 rifles and bayonets, and 5,000 rounds of ammunition, the largest number of arms ever captured at one time from the enemy. In addition, we had no casualties, and lost no prisoners.

Next morning we all turned in to work at the aerodrome, and as we passed in to the gates we were surprised to see our late captives, the guards whom we had tied up, being led away prisoners under a heavy escort. We were sorry for the poor fellows, for they seemed to be having a run of bad luck. I am sure they little suspected that the men going in to work, dressed as "civvies," were no others than the masked men in kakhi the night before. However, I fear that someone else did, as the Volunteers at Collinstown all lost their jobs shortly after.