

# A first-hand account of the IRA Border Campaign

*Seán Garland (1934-2018) joined the Irish Republican Army in the early 1950s, leading the Republican Movement forward with unapologetically socialist republican politics, standing firmly against sectarian nationalists, ultra-leftists and careerist politicians all throughout his life.*

*Garland led the 1956 raid of Gough Barracks in Armagh and the 1957 raid of Brookeborough RUC barracks, made popular by the well-known ballads "Seán South of Garryowen" and Dominic Behan's "The Patriot Game" when Seán South and Fergal O'Hanlon lost their lives.*

*While we remember the border campaign and remember proudly the men who lost their lives we also understand the context in which it was undertaken. The failure of the campaign led to the movements change of direction and its new focus on social and political agitation under the direction of people like Cathal Goulding, Tomás MacGiolla and Seán Garland.*

*Below is a never-before-seen, first-hand account of the beginning of the Border Campaign, written by Garland himself before his passing.*

Headquarters decided that 11th December would be the opening date for the campaign it was later postponed to 12th December. All the volunteers assembled at a farmhouse in Athboy a week before to sort out which column would do what, in which area of the country and what target they would chose. Headquarters decided that we would only target the British Army and the B-Specials and the RUC would not be targeted. My Column was given Gough Barracks in Armagh.

We had a Column of about twenty. We had a lorry which arrived late so we were late starting off. Once we got to Armagh Barracks the team were supposed to jump out and plant a mine but a sentry spotted the lorry and the activity of the men running with the mine and fired a shot into the air.

The team dropped the mine on the roadway. With the shot going off we knew the alarm would go off and we retreated. I was in the cab with

driver Vince Conlan and Eamon McTomas. Eamon said "fire a few rounds at him" which I did, it had no affect. A voice in the back of the lorry said "ta fear ar an talam" (there is a man on the ground) the voice was that of Seán Sabhat. I got out of the cab and ran back to check but it was in fact the mine that had been dropped. I ran back to the cab, and among other comments, gave instructions to drive away. We sped out of Armagh and headed for Knockatallen in County Monaghan where Big Sean Cronin and Charlie Murphy were waiting.

The column split and half went to Fermanagh and the other half to County Down. From 12th December, for about 10 days, we spent moving around Fermanagh. The instructions were clear no attacks on the B-Specials or the RUC, only the British Army. We spent those ten days roaming around Fermanagh seeking British Army targets which didn't exist.

In Dublin GHQ some idiot decided to have a truce for Christmas. The Column spent Christmas sitting around in Dublin waiting. We then began assembling a few days after Christmas in Dublin. A few volunteers had dropped out and a number of new ones joined these included Paddy O'Regan from Dublin and Fergal O'Hanlon from Monaghan Town.

We picked Fergal up at his home where we met his mother and his family. After a friendly meeting and a warm goodbye we headed to Fermanagh where we met with Dave O'Connell who had been there for months. Dave was second in command of the column and had got to know the county very well and had secured billets. We then began to develop a plan for an attack on the RUC.

The rules governing a column's activity not to engage B-men or RUC from 12th December had changed over Christmas. There was a notable lack of British Army activity in Fermanagh. Operation Harvest, which had been created by Big Sean Cronin and had commenced on 12th December had a very sporadic first couple of weeks. An attack on Lisnaskea in which a member of the RUC garrison was killed along with damage to the barracks, a Derry train had been disrupted and a courtroom destroyed. Many men had been captured. After a number of days we decided to carry out an attack on Brookborough barracks. Reading newspapers at the time it didn't seem that as much progress had been made, significant numbers of captures of IRA members was one feature so we felt that an attack on Brookborough was a prestige target named after a six county Prime Minister, a well know sectarian bigot who gloried in imposing harsh and vindictive laws and denial of civil and human rights to the minority population who were Roman Catholic Nationalists who gave their loyalty in the main to the Dublin Government, itself a right wing reactionary force.

As usual the Column was late setting out for Brookborough. All volunteers were in good form and looking forward to the attack. They had spent

the days tramping around Fermanagh anxious to engage the enemy. The truck did not take long for its journey from the farmhouse to Brookborough.

In the cabin were Vince Conlon, Dave O'Connell and local guide Pat Connelly. The members of the Column were in the body of the truck. Each volunteer had a specific role to play in the attack. Sean Sabhat and Paddy O'Regan were to stay in the truck manning the Bren Gun. Mick O'Brien was to remain at the entry of the town to ensure that no other people could enter and Mickey Kelly to remain at the exit of the town to do the same. Dave O'Connell and a number of volunteers had the task of planting the mine at the barracks door and Fergal O'Hanlon along with rest of the Column remained in the truck to give cover.

The first and most deadly error was the lorry driving on the right hand side on the same side of the street as the barracks. The lorry stopped just at the gable end of the barracks building. Once having stopped all the men moved to take up specific roles. From that moment we were doomed to fail.

The plan was for the truck to stop opposite the barracks on the left side of the road. In such a position the bren gun manned by Sean Sabhat and Paddy O'Regan would have had an open field of fire. Giving cover to the group of volunteers planting the mine. There were also a number of rifle men in the back of the truck which would have almost guaranteed the safety of all volunteers in the truck.

Years later I was told the reason the truck pulled up in the wrong place was because children were playing opposite the barracks. As events turned out the RUC Sergeant Cordner had a field day being able to use the gable window which over looked where the lorry parked. Any volunteer who was shot was shot in the lorry. After a short period of time, with no mine exploding I ran forward and called on the volunteers to withdraw. Some bullets from the Sergeants gun had entered the lorries cabin hitting Vincent Conlan's foot. Mick O'Brien who had been guarding the entry of the town was getting left behind with the truck moving away and he had to run after it, shouting for it to hold on. He got up and was able to get to the truck. I was shot in the left leg as I got back into the truck.

The task began of assessing our overall situation. It was clear that Seán and Fergal were most serious. When the body of Seán was brought down from the lorry and I put my arms around him, I knew that my comrade was dead. Their two bodies were brought to some outbuildings and the emphasis was to get the column moving. I suggested to Dave O'Connell who was second in command that he should take over the Column and should leave myself and the other wounded behind to give comrades an opportunity to get away. Dave O'Connell rejected this and we

organised a retreat.

Having left the bodies of our two fallen comrades the Column headed over the mountains to Monaghan. We could see the actions of the large force of RUC and B-Specials which had been called out to take part in a search for the column. I recall very clearly hearing Pat Connelly's voice shouting out "we're in the State, we're in the State" meaning of course the Free State. We eventually found a farmhouse where the family opened their door and did all they could to help. Dave O'Connell organised to have the weapons put safely away and then went to seek help for the wounded. He found a police and national army road block not far from the farm house and very soon an ambulance arrived and took the wounded to hospital, and lots of Gardai who took the rest of the column into custody.

Within days they were in court and they were sent to prison. The wounded remained in Monaghan Hospital and then transferred to the Mater Hospital in Dublin. On arrival Phil O'Donahue got out of the ambulance and just wandered off.

For myself an abiding memory is watching from the hospital window in Monaghan hospital the funeral cortege of, my comrade, Volunteer Fergal O'Hanlon proceeding slowly through the streets and roads of Monaghan.