

# JER O'LEARY

## ΔΙΑΓΜΥΝΟ Ο ΛΑΟΓΑΙΡΕ



*Courtesy of Nora Mai  
Fleming, niece of Jer  
O'Leary.*

Jeremiah O'Leary was born at Mount, a townland adjacent to Scartaglin, in 1894. He was the eldest child and only son of James O'Leary, a farmer, and Hanna Scanlon of Knockafreaghun, Brosna. He was a bright pupil at school and an avid reader with a keen interest in scientific books. He was educated in Scartaglin National School and later worked on the family farm. He was a Volunteer in the Scartaglin Company from its foundation and his four sisters were members of Cumann na mBan.<sup>1</sup> The Scartaglin Company was attached to the 1st Battalion, Kerry No. 2 Brigade.

O'Leary came to prominence at an early stage in the Black and Tan War. He was one of those who participated in the attack on the barracks in his native village on 31 March 1920. Such was O'Leary's reputation as a leader of fighting men, that he was appointed to the position of O/C of the 1st Battalion in May 1921. This command included companies from Castleisland, Scartaglin, Cordal, Currow, Lyre, Knocknagoshel and Brosna. With a reorganisation in July 1921, O'Leary's battalion was transferred to Kerry No. 1 Brigade, as the O/C of that brigade was now Humphrey Murphy, whose native area of Currow was part of the Castleisland Battalion's remit. The Castleisland Battalion was redesignated the 7th Battalion, Kerry No. 1 Brigade, and Jer O'Leary was appointed Murphy's V/C on the brigade's staff. A fearless and popular soldier, he led his men in engagements at Scartaglin, Brosna, Glenlahern, The Black Banks, Feale's Bridge and on the streets of Castleisland.

Following the outbreak of the Civil War, Jer O'Leary and his 7th Battalion

1 Information from Alice O'Keeffe, niece of Jer O'Leary.

remained loyal to the Republican cause. As a result they suffered heavily during that conflict, with the battalion noted to have lost thirteen men either killed in action or murdered in custody from 1922 until 1924.<sup>2</sup> During the Civil War, Jer O'Leary had a dugout built beneath the outer stairs of the large three-storey house owned by his relatives, the Walsh family of Cordal.

On 24 May 1923 Frank Aiken, the IRA chief of staff following the death of Liam Lynch, ordered IRA units throughout the country to dump their arms. This followed the announcement of a ceasefire on 30 April. The military resistance to the Free State government had now officially halted and so ended the Civil War. Jer O'Leary and Seán Kerins, a battalion officer, met in Kilmurry House, owned by the Walsh family, in Cordal to discuss the matter on Monday 28 May. It seems that O'Leary was earlier at a nearby house owned by the O'Loughlin family, where he had gone to inspect a plough that his brother-in-law had recently purchased. Shortly after he reached Walshs', a large Free State force in vehicles passed the O'Loughlins' house, destined for where O'Leary and Kerins were meeting. The O'Loughlin home was adjacent to the main road and, having seen the military convoy, one of the family ran across the fields to Walshs' house to try to alert O'Leary of the imminent danger. However, by the time he reached Cordal House, it had been surrounded by Free State soldiers. As their position was hopeless and due to the fact that there were civilians in the house, O'Leary and Kerins surrendered.<sup>3</sup> They were brought to the Free State Army's headquarters in Castleisland, which was located at the fortified Hartnett's Hotel at the junction of Main Street and the Limerick road. O'Leary was detained in the guardroom of the converted building.

At 11.30 a.m. the following morning he was brought by a Captain O'Donnell to the barracks yard, which had a gate opening onto the street. The yard had been cleared of the soldiers who would usually congregate there. Having been brought into the small yard, O'Leary was ordered by an officer to close the gate which had been conspicuously left open. As he approached the gate, he was shot in the back by Lieutenant Patrick McGinn and Captain Patrick Byrne. Captain Martin Nolan, also of the Dublin Guard, fired twice

2 Irish Military Archives, pension records for the 7th Battalion, Kerry No. 1 Brigade, RO 95.

3 Information for Nora Mai Fleming, niece of Jer O'Leary.

more at the wounded man as he lay on the ground.<sup>4</sup> A woman on the street who happened to be passing near the gate witnessed the shooting. She rushed to the dying man's aid and held his head in her arms as his life slipped away. Local shopkeeper Con Browne also came to the scene and it was he who brought the news to the O'Leary family that their only son had been shot dead.<sup>5</sup> O'Leary was twenty-nine years old when he was killed on 29 May 1923.

Commandant Jeremiah O'Leary was buried in the Republican Plot in Kilbannivane Cemetery near Castleisland. His name is inscribed on the Republican memorial there amongst the men of his command. His father later bought a family grave adjacent to where his only son was buried when his wife died in 1934 and Jer O'Leary's name is inscribed on the family headstone also.<sup>6</sup> Today a plaque on the wall of Hartnett's Hotel, now the Castle Bar, marks the spot where Commandant Jeremiah O'Leary was killed by his Free State captors. Near his home in the village of Scartaglin stands a large Celtic cross erected to his memory. This was paid for by public subscription and unveiled in May 1946. On it is his name inscribed in his native language: Diarmuid Ó Laoigaire. On 29 May each year until her death, his sister, Kate O'Connor, took out the scarf that her brother wore when was killed and shed a tear.<sup>7</sup>

4 The killing was witnessed and subsequently a statement was given to the newspaper *Éire*, 7 July 1923.

5 Information from Séamus Fleming, grandnephew of Jer O'Leary.

6 *Ibid.*

7 Information from Nora Mai Fleming, niece of Jer O'Leary.