



TOM FLEMING

Currow

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Extract From Tim Horgan's Book

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Tomár Fléamonn¹

As the conflict with the crown forces gathered momentum, so too did the IRA's need to improve the weaponry that they used. In August 1920, in an attack on a mobile patrol of regular British troops just outside Annascaul, Tadhg Brosnan's 4th Battalion unit used a landmine that had been taken from the abandoned Cloghane RIC Barracks. The explosive had the desired effect of blowing up a lorry in what was the first attack of its kind in Ireland. The impact of such mines could be devastating on military vehicles and so soon the brigade engineers began to prepare their own improvised explosive devices. The metal casing was usually manufactured by blacksmiths and then loaded with either captured industrial gelignite or crude homemade explosives called 'black powder'. A detonating wire was attached to the device and it was then connected to a plunger and battery. Initially, however, such locally manufactured mines were unreliable and somewhat unstable.

Tom Fleming was a native of Currow and in his teens he had gone to Tralee, where he trained as a mechanic. While there he joined the Irish Volunteers, but in July 1920 he returned to his native parish as he became a wanted man when he participated in a raid for arms on a British military picket at Tralee's railway station. He transferred to the Currow Company of the Volunteers and in 1921 volunteered for service with the flying column of the Kerry No. 2 Brigade. He participated in the Headford Junction ambush and the other engagements of the column. His trade as a mechanic made him an obvious appointment for the position of engineer on the brigade staff. It was in this capacity that he was the instructor at an explosives training camp at Glountane near Cordal on 16 June 1921.²

On a summer's day, chosen men from each of the companies of the 1st Battalion gathered at the remote location for a training camp. The explosive that was being used in the construction of the mines was 'black powder', which was a mixture of saltpetre and charcoal made from the sally tree. This mixture

¹ Surviving images of Tom Fleming were not of sufficient quality to reproduce.

² John J. Walsh of Currow, BMH WS 1002.

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was effective but varied in its constitution from parish to parish and was often unstable. The men were instructed by Fleming on the construction of mines and their detonation using batteries as a power source.

Peter Browne, a comrade of Fleming's on the column, described the scene. The class was held on a small side road so remote that guards did not have to be posted in case of the approach of the enemy. The bomb was constructed from part of a cart wheel. The metal ring was closed on one side with a circular block of wood hammered in. Then Fleming filled the cylinder with black powder and inserted the wires as the class was gathered around. The final part was to hammer in another piece of wood to tightly close the metal container. As Fleming was about to do this, an aeroplane flew overhead and the activity stopped momentarily. At this stage the device was between his knees and as he hammered the wooden cover into its place, a colleague, Tim Leahy held the container steady. There was a sudden, deafening explosion and the spectators were blown to the ground. Tom Fleming's wounds became apparent as the smoke cleared. He had deep facial, chest, limb and abdominal injuries and was bleeding profusely. Peter Browne tried to make him comfortable and a doctor and priest were sent for. However, Fleming died within ten minutes, so severe were his injuries. Tim Leahy, who was also beside the device when it exploded, was seriously wounded and several others, including David Coffey and Johnny Mahony, were injured by flying shrapnel. However, the injured Volunteers recovered, though one of them lost an eye and several fingers.³

The remains of Tom Fleming were brought from Glountane, the site of the explosion, and then on to Milleen, near Scartaglin. There the remains reposed for the night before continuing on to Kilsarcon Cemetery for burial the next day. The funeral was accompanied by a sizeable crowd and, despite the obvious danger, a large contingent of his Volunteer comrades marched in the funeral procession. In February 1922, during the Truce, the coffin was reinterred in the Republican Plot at Kilbannivane Cemetery near Castleisland.

Today a monument stands at Glountane near Cordal, which was unveiled in July 1950. It marks the site where Tom Fleming lost his life in the service of the Irish Republic on 16 June 1921.⁴

3 Peter Browne, BMH WS 1110 and Denis Prendiville, BMH WS 1106.

4 *The Kerryman*, 8 July 1950.

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family, one of whom became a priest. In the late 1950s Fr Bill Walsh became acquainted with a man in a retirement home in Taranaki. In the course of the conversation he told the priest that he knew the village of Currow, Fr Walsh's ancestral home, as he had been in the Free State Army in Castleisland during the Civil War. He subsequently admitted that it was he who had shot Jim Walsh, the priest's first cousin, over thirty years previously.⁵

James (Séamus) Walsh's name is inscribed in Irish, Seumas Breathnach, at his burial plot. Today he is remembered by a well-maintained stone monument at Mount Falvey which was unveiled on the same day in 1950 as that to Lieutenant Tom Fleming at nearby Glountane. Walsh is also recalled in a popular local ballad. Section Commander Walsh was twenty-four years old when he was killed on 27 March 1923.

Extract From the MAIN VALLEY POST

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Glountane Explosion Commemoration 95 Years to the Day

Posted on Main Valley Post June 13th, 2016

On this Thursday, June 16th, 2016 a wreath will be laid at the site of an accidental explosion at Glountane where Tom Fleming lost his life and a number of others were injured on Thursday, June 16th, 1921. The main speaker at the event will be well known historian, Martin Moore.

This is part of the 1916 – 2016 commemorations and will take place at 8pm on this Thursday, June 16th at the monument in Glountane and all are welcome.

Captain Peter Browne, Scartaglin

In a vivid account in the Bureau of Military History 1913-1921, Captain Peter Browne of the Scartaglin Company Irish Volunteers tells the story of that fateful afternoon in June 1921.

"We stayed at Kilquane, Cordal, that night, and the following day, having nothing else on, some of us decided to pay a visit to a battalion engineering camp that was being held at Glountane, Cordal, a short distance away.



Eamonn Breen (left) and Patrick O'Leary marking the anniversary of Volunteer Tom Fleming by placing a wreath on his monument at the spot in Glountane where he was killed in an explosives accident on Thursday, June 16-1921.

©Photograph: John Reidy

Tom Fleming, formerly of the Brigade Column, was in charge of the class. He was a native of Currow and had been in my section in the column. I had sworn him into the Volunteers in Tralee in 1918, where he worked as a mechanic before going on the run after participating in the seizure of arms at Tralee railway station.

Class in Full Swing



Historian, Martin Moore (right) pictured with John O'Donoghue. Mr. Moore will be the guest speaker at Thursday evening's commemoration in Glountane. ©Photograph: John Reidy

The class was in full swing when we arrived in the afternoon. There were representatives of all the companies of the battalion attending the class. The purpose was to instruct suitable men from each company to prepare and set off a land mine.

The explosives used were home-manufactured 'Black Powder' made from charcoal and saltpetre. An electric detonator and electric battery were used to set off the charge. The class was assembled on a by-road a short distance off the public road in a very remote and hilly part of the area.

There was little danger of surprise from the enemy so there was no guard out locally. The instructor carried out a demonstration and for the purpose he had filled the iron box of a horse cart wheel with black powder. One end of the box he had previously sealed up with a block of wood while he packed the powder gently into the 'box' through the open end.

All Interested

We were all interested in the demonstration and were seated on the side of the road in two rows facing each other, with our legs into the dyke of the road. I was directly in front of Tom Fleming, the instructor, with my back against the earthen fence. He had previously cautioned all about the danger of smoking and the electric battery and wires were put carefully aside while the filling was going on. He had the 'box' between his knees. The man on the other side of him was holding the 'box' steady while he packed in the last of the powder and drove in with a hammer the plug of wood intended to seal the second end through which wire from the detonator extended. The conversation was general.

An aeroplane passed overhead going towards Cork. As the day was very fine and clear somebody suggested that we should remain motionless as the plane passed as we could be seen. Someone else suggested blowing up the plane.

A Loud Explosion

Scarcely were the words uttered when there was a loud explosion. I was blown back against the fence, while through a dense smoke I could see men scrambling on either side of me. I thought the plane had dropped a bomb. I got to my feet and stumbled over somebody. I lifted up the body. It was Tom Fleming. The smoke was clearing and I said something. The man I had lifted recognised my voice and said 'For God's sake put a bullet through me.' I could notice clearly his mangled body while I tried to console him. I sent for priest and doctor, though realising that he had no need for the latter.

While he repeated the act of contrition after me. He was bleeding from several gashes in his legs, head, hands and body. I endeavoured to stop the main arteries with assistance, hoping to keep him alive until the priest arrived, but gradually he grew fainter and fainter until finally, after about ten minutes, he passed out. There was no time for sentiment. Others were rolling in agony round me.

In a Bad Way

I turned my attention to them and found two of them in a bad way. The flesh was burning off them. They had got a blast of the powder in the face and clothes, as well as some cuts from flying scrap. There were others with less injuries lying around so I had a look at them and concentrated on the more serious cases. After months of treatment under doctor's care they all survived, one with the loss of an eye and a few fingers off. It was a sad procession as we journeyed from Glountane to Mullen with the dead body of our comrade and to Kilsarcon churchyard the following day when he was laid to rest. The funeral, considering the time and the danger, was immense and was vividly representative of all adjacent parishes.