

The Fingal Battalion: A Blueprint for the Future?

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The Fifth Battalion of the Dublin Brigade, also known as the Fingal Battalion, was the Irish Volunteers one military success of Easter Week. Eschewing the static-point defensive strategy that was adopted in the city, the Fingal Battalion, operating just a few miles away in north County Dublin, demonstrated the potential of guerrilla warfare. Under the stewardship of Thomas Ashe and Richard Mulcahy, the battalion would, in classic guerrilla fashion, pick the time and place of the engagement, strike and then retreat from the scene of the attack. While the Irish Volunteers were being pounded by the British Army's artillery and picked off at will in the city, the Fingal Battalion was rounding off its actions by scoring a resounding success over a large force of RIC at Ashbourne. The Battle of Ashbourne was indeed a resounding success but one that, as will be shown, could just as easily have become a disaster for the Irish Volunteers. Nevertheless, the battalion performed so well that it should have pointed the way towards a new way of fighting. The similarities between Ashe's column and later columns such as Tom Barry's in Cork are indeed striking. Given Mulcahy's prominence in the Fingal Battalion and his later role as IRA Chief of Staff it is reasonable to assume therefore that Fingal had a strong influence on the evolution of the guerrilla strategy adopted during the Anglo-Irish war. The evidence suggests however that this was not the case. Instead of the Fingal Battalion providing a blueprint for future flying columns, it would appear that it was rediscovered on a local level. The individual initiative and guile of local commanders, what Mulcahy would later term 'dash', was crucial. This can be best seen in the case of Fingal itself. Though it was the most successful unit during 1916, it slipped back into relative insignificance during the Anglo-Irish War. It will be seen that the personal enterprise of the commander was crucial in building a successful unit.

This paper examines the significance and context of the Fingal Battalion. The Bureau of Military witness statements are used extensively throughout, to provide a lively view into the establishment and development of the Fingal Battalion. These are supplemented by various personal collections such as the Mulcahy and J.J. O'Connell papers, both of which have been relatively underutilized. These sources, along with printed memoirs and secondary literature, will be used to investigate how guerrilla warfare and the flying columns developed. They show that the Fingal Battalion pointed the way to a more successful way of fighting.

‘A chance to burst the English domination.’

The establishment of the Irish Volunteers was enthusiastically received in the Fingal area. According to Richard Mulcahy, the volunteer movement appealed to the area’s nationalist sympathies and took advantage of the strong and vigorous ‘Irish-Ireland’ activities in Fingal.¹ Charles Weston was typical of many Fingal men. He joined the Irish Volunteers as it gave ‘a chance to burst the English domination’². The need to arm was pressing. The Irish Volunteers were playing catch up with the UVF who had landed a massive shipment of arms at Larne in April 1914. It was not until July that the Irish Volunteers landed their own, much smaller consignment at Howth.³ One Fingal volunteer, Bernard McAllister, remembered how the true purpose of the operation was kept from the rank and file. They were told it ‘was field exercises’, only learning ‘on arrival at Howth Pier... it was gun-running’ they were on.⁴ McAllister’s Donabate Company drew up across the pier to prevent inquisitive civilians, policemen or coastguards from entering. The battalion did not acquire much for their efforts however. McAllister was the only Donabate Volunteer to get a rifle, a ‘Howth Mauser.’⁵ The Lusk Company did not get any rifles whatsoever.⁶ Despite the relatively meagre haul, Bulmer Hobson was proven right when he claimed that ‘the effect upon public opinion of such a plan would be very great.’⁷ Joseph Lawless recalled that the ‘appearance of rifles on Volunteer parades gave a decided fillip to morale.’⁸ Yet the burgeoning force, estimated to be 160,000 strong by August 1914, was soon split into two unequal parts.⁹ The outbreak of war in Europe saw John Redmond pledge the Volunteers to support the British war effort.

The interests of Ireland as a whole are at stake in this war. This war is undertaken in defence the highest principles of religion, morality and right... account yourselves as men, not only in Ireland itself, but wherever the firing line extends.¹⁰

¹ UCDA, P7b 201 (Mulcahy Papers).

² NAI, BMH WS 149(Charles Weston), p. 1.

³ Bulmer Hobson, *A short history of the Irish Volunteers* (Dublin, 1918) p. 145. The Irish Volunteers committee charged with procuring arms was headed by Roger Casement. They purchased 1500 Mauser Rifles and 45,000 rounds of ammunition from a dealer in Antwerp.

⁴ NAI, BMH WS 147 (Bernard McAllister), p. 1.

⁵ *Ibid*, p. 2.

⁶ NAI, BMH WS 149 (Charles Weston), p. 1.

⁷ Hobson, *A short history*, p. 145.

⁸ NAI, BMH WS 1043 (Joseph V. Lawless), p. 11.

⁹ *Irish Times Sinn Fein Rebellion handbook* (Dublin, 1917), p. 155.

¹⁰ *Irish Independent*, 21 Sep. 1914.

The ensuing split was particularly damaging to the anti-Redmondites in Fingal. James O'Connor noted that 'nearly all of our members went with the Redmond side.'¹¹ James Crenegan was typical of those who stayed loyal to the original Volunteer executive; he maintained that 'believed in the freedom of Ireland' and 'thoroughly disagreed with the policy of John Redmond.'¹² The Lusk Company, already split because of a familial feud, saw over half their number become inactive.¹³ Indeed the split became personal for some volunteers. Bernard McAllister case best illustrates the extent of the split. McAllister's father, who had possession of the company's armament at the family home, was a Redmondite. After the split, Bernard McAllister, risking his father's wrath, swiftly transferred the precious consignment to an Irish Volunteer household.¹⁴ It should be noted that at this stage Redmond's National Volunteers were held to be *the* Volunteers. The support of the Irish Parliamentary Party gave the National Volunteers political legitimacy. This is evident by the number of men that followed Redmond's call. In contrast, the Irish Volunteers were held to be 'madmen' by a 'generally hostile' public.¹⁵ J.J. O'Connell remembered how 'it was a rather unpleasant discovery' to find 'that the Irish Volunteers were viewed askance by great numbers of people all over the country.'¹⁶ The split saw the Fingal Battalion reconstituted into a much smaller force. It now comprised four companies: St Margarets, Lusk, Skerries and Swords. Dr Richard Hayes was Battalion OC with Tomas Ashe as his second-in-command. Ashe was a high-placed IRB member and assumed command of the Battalion shortly before the Rising due to Hayes's busy medical practice.¹⁷

The battalion began its operations in Easter Week under-armed in regular terms, but comparatively well armed for a guerrilla force. In December 1914, RIC Intelligence estimated that the 260 Irish Volunteers in County Dublin had only 78 rifles to be shared between them.¹⁸ These had obviously been added to by the start of hostilities. The Battalion's armament consisted of several shotguns, a dozen single shot Martini rifles, some Howth Mausers and a small number of modern service rifles. There were also supplied with a

¹¹ NAI, BMH WS 142 (James O'Connor), p. 1.

¹² NAI, BMH WS 148 (James Crenegan), p. 1.

¹³ NAI, BMH WS 1399 (Thomas Peppard), p. 1. Peppard remembered how the Lusk Volunteers were split between the Rooneys and the Taylor and Murtagh families. The Rooneys chose the Irish Volunteers, the Taylor/Murtagh faction went with Redmond.

¹⁴ NAI, BMH WS 147 (Bernard McAllister), p. 2.

¹⁵ NAI, BMH WS 142 (James O'Connor), p. 1.

¹⁶ J.J. O' O' Connell, Autographical account of events leading up to 1916, p. 3, (NLI, O'Connell papers, Ms 22 114).

¹⁷ NAI, BMH WS 97 (Richard Hayes), pp 1-2.

¹⁸ Brendan Mac Giolla Choille, *Intelligence notes 1913-1916*, (Dublin, 1966), p. 112.

consignment of bomb-making equipment to be used in grenade making and sabotage.¹⁹ In true guerrilla fashion this limited arsenal would be supplemented during Easter Week by raids on RIC Barracks. Despite the scarcity of arms the Fingal men were evidently well trained and proficient in the use of firearms. There was regular rifle and pistol practice. Indeed, it was a credit to the average volunteer that training was carried out to such a high level. The Irish Volunteers were in reality a subscription army. One member recalled having to pay a weekly subscription of 2d. towards the purchase of arms, uniform and equipment.²⁰ This was a period of high unemployment, underemployment and low wages. Often, ammunition expended during practice was paid for by the individual volunteer.²¹ Nevertheless, as Mick McAllister pointed out

Most of the men were good natural shots, which is usual with young men from the Country, while some of them were exceptionally good and could be said to be marksmen with a rifle.²²

True to form, Charles Weston's company was rewarded with a .22 rifle for coming in first place in a shooting competition.²³ Target practice was but one facet of the Fingal men's training regime. One Fingal volunteer claimed that 'we were so well trained we could hide behind an apple tree.'²⁴ The battalion's training regimen was well suited to its rural surroundings. The battalion had regular parades and route marches. There were regular company, battalion and brigade level exercises. Several of the battalion's officers attended the Ticknock training camp, where they were instructed in 'minor tactics and military organisation' under the stewardship of J.J. 'Ginger' O'Connell.²⁵ There were occasional lectures from Eimer O'Duffy, an alumnus of Sandhurst Military College.²⁶ O'Duffy was a protégé of O'Connell, an advocate of 'hedge-fighting', a vital component of guerrilla warfare which was well used by the Fingal men at Ashbourne.²⁷ It should be noted however that the camps were not teaching guerrilla warfare 101. It was a learning experience that benefitted training officers like O'Connell as much as student officers. Ernie O'Malley later recalled

¹⁹Terrence Dooley, 'Alexander "Baby" Gray (1858-1916) and the battle at Ashbourne, 28 April 1916,' *Ríocht na Midhe [Journal of the County Meath Historical Society]*, 14 (2003), p. 208.

²⁰ NAI, BMH WS 142 (James O'Connor), p. 1.

²¹ NAI, BMH WS 149 (Charles Weston), p. 2.

²² NAI, BMH WS 1494 (Mick McAllister), p. 2.

²³ NAI, BMH WS 149 (Charles Weston), p. 2.

²⁴ Dooley, 'The battle at Ashbourne', p. 207.

²⁵ NAI, BMH WS 1043 (Joseph V. Lawless), p. 20. The Fingal men who attended the camp were Ned Rooney, Dick Coleman, Joe Taylor, James Rooney and James V. Lawless.

²⁶ NAI, BMH WS 97 (Dr Richard Hayes) p. 1. It is worth noting the role that British Army-trained men played in instructing the Battalion. At least three are mentioned in the witness statements.

²⁷ Charles Townshend, *Easter 1916 the Irish rebellion* (London, 2006), p. 99.

O'Connell being well versed in the theory and methods of guerrilla warfare.²⁸ O'Connell undoubtedly learnt valuable lessons from camps such as Ticknock. He admitted that before the camps, he no idea as to the best methods of fighting in 'hedge-intersected country.' The camps allowed O'Connell to experiment with different tactical formations. From these training camps O'Connell formed the opinion that

Close country, on occasion, would offer quite extraordinary opportunities for the effective tactical action of small bodies of men- provided the latter had specialised training in such country.²⁹

It is tempting to conclude that training and lectures such as these gave the Volunteers the edge in the hedges and fields around which the battle at Ashbourne took place. The majority of the battle was fought in 'hedge-intersected country' and it was here that the merits of guerrilla warfare were proven in action.

Despite the potential of rural guerrilla warfare, it was avoided in favour of fixed-point fighting. A cursory glance at James Connolly's *Insurrectionary Warfare* shows the type of war the fixed point side envisaged. Connolly likened the streets of Dublin to a mountain pass into which regular soldiers would have to funnel down and hence be at the mercy of revolutionaries. There is also more than a hint of Pearse's blood sacrifice ideal in his analysis of the battle of the Alamo.

The defence of the Alamo was one of those defeats which are often more valuable to a cause than many loudly trumpeted victories. It gave spirit and bitterness to the Texan forces, and more important still gave time to their comrades elsewhere.³⁰

This is exactly the sort of warfare that the Volunteers adopted in Dublin city, a method that would ultimately prove futile. This mentality permeated through to the outbreaks that occurred outside of Dublin. In Galway, Liam Mellows had over ten times the force present at Ashbourne but did little of consequence with them.³¹ Úna Newell labelled the Galway's effort as haphazard and hurried.³² Though there were some attempts to engage the RIC and capture police barracks most of these attempts were characterised by confusion and a lack of

²⁸ Ernie O'Malley, *On another man's wound* (Dublin, 1979), p. 211.

²⁹ J.J. O'Connell, Autographical account of events leading up to 1916, pp 42-3, (NLI, O'Connell papers, Ms 22 114).

³⁰ James Connolly 'Insurrectionary warfare' (<http://www.ucc.ie/celt/published/E900002-006/index.html>) (19 April 2009).

³¹ Townshend, *Easter 1916*, p. 228.

³² Úna Newell, 'The rising of the moon: Galway 1916,' in *Journal of Galway Archaeological and Historical Society*, 58 (2006), p 123.

clear strategic planning. Mellows led the Volunteers from an initial camp at a Department of Agriculture and Technical instruction farm to Moyode Castle and then finally on to Tulira Castle where the force finally disbanded, the men returning to their homes while the leaders went on the run.³³ Campbell has claimed that the rising in Galway was hampered by the seizure of the *Aud* and its armament as well as MacNiell's countermanding order. The Galway Volunteers numbered around five hundred but were woefully bereft of arms, possessing only fifty rifles between them. The rest were armed with either with shotguns or pikes.³⁴ Indeed, the proposed landing of the *Aud* arms was vital to the Volunteers plans. The capture seriously hampered the Volunteer efforts not only in Galway but countrywide. In Enniscorthy, the Volunteers occupied Vinegar Hill and attempted to starve out the R.I.C. barracks. Again the Volunteer effort here was insignificant.³⁵ The Fingal Battalion was in this context conspicuous by its success, and as Charles Townshend points out

A few outbreaks, as anachronistic as Dublin's, did occur, notably in Galway; but only one local commander, Thomas Ashe in northern County Dublin, adopted what might be seen as a new style of warfare.³⁶

It was indeed a new style of warfare. Yet as will be seen below it was a style of warfare that had to be relearned during the Anglo-Irish War.

'Strike at one o'clock today.'

There was a general feeling amongst the battalion that there would be some sort of action taken during 1916. Bernard McAllister stated that 'we had a good idea that the fight

³³ Townshend, *Easter 1916*, pp 227-230.

³⁴ Fergus Campbell, 'The Easter Rising in Galway,' in *History Ireland* 14:2 (2006), p. 24.

³⁵ Townshend, *Easter 1916*, pp 240-242.

³⁶ Charles Townshend, 'The Irish Republican Army and the development of guerrilla warfare 1916-1923,' *The English Historical Review*, 94, 371 (1979), p. 320.

we were looking forward to would start soon.’³⁷ Another claimed that he knew there would be a rising as early as 1915.³⁸ The Irish Republican Brotherhood was well represented in the battalion; Ashe was the local centre while the Lawless’s were also I.R.B. members.³⁹ According to Richard Hayes, battalion adjutant and second in command, Thomas Ashe received a verbal order from James Connolly on Good Friday that operations should begin at 7pm on Easter Sunday.⁴⁰ Charles Weston, another I.R.B. member, claims that Ashe told him there would be a rising on Thursday and that ‘the Germans were outside.’⁴¹ On Easter Sunday 120 men from the four companies were mobilised at Saucerstown on the pretence of normal battalion manoeuvres. However McNeill’s countermanding order caused general havoc in the plans across the country. The Fingal Battalion was no exception. Thinking the planned manoeuvres off, some of the Fingal men had gone to the Fairyhouse Races. One recalled that he heard ‘the rising had started in Dublin’ and started back towards Dublin where he met up with the battalion at Kileek on Tuesday.⁴² Meanwhile, Ashe had sent Hayes and Joe Lawless into the city on Sunday to find out what was going on and returned with a message that everything was ‘off’ but that the men were not to be disbanded till further notice.⁴³ The battalion was eventually disbanded at 2am with the proviso that ‘they could expect to be mobilised at any moment’.⁴⁴ At 7am on Easter Monday Joe Lawless handed Ashe a dispatch from Pearse ordering the battalion to ‘strike at one o’clock today.’⁴⁵

The countermanding order continued to have a major effect on the battalion. As a result only fifty-sixty men mobilised out of two hundred at Knocksedan Crossroads.⁴⁶ As the first order of business, Ashe detailed Charles Weston to blow up the railway viaduct between Malahide and Donabate. Weston had wanted to do this on Saturday night at low tide but was not allowed because it would compromise the secrecy of the Rising.⁴⁷ At any rate the operation was hampered by high tide and was only a partial success, the damage being easily repaired by railway engineers during the week.⁴⁸ Weston then returned to Knocksedan where

³⁷ NAI, BMH WS 147 (Bernard McAllister), p. 3.

³⁸ NAI, BMH WS 278 (Francis Daly), p. 3. Daly, a member of the I.R.B., was not a member of the Fingal Battalion and literally stumbled upon the battle at Ashbourne.

³⁹ NAI, BMH WS 97 (Richard Hayes), p. 1.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 2.

⁴¹ NAI, BMH WS 149 (Charles Weston), p. 3.

⁴² NAI, BMH WS 142 (James O’Connor), p. 2.

⁴³ NAI, BMH WS 97 (Richard Hayes), p. 2.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 3.

⁴⁵ UCDA, P7b 203 (Mulcahy Papers).

⁴⁶ NAI, BMH WS 147 (Bernard McAllister), p. 4.

⁴⁷ NAI, BMH WS 149 (Charles Weston), p. 4.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*

he cut the telephone wires and then rejoined the main body of the force in Finglas.⁴⁹ At around seven o'clock that Monday, three volunteers joined the battalion that was encamped in the Finglas golf links.⁵⁰ Amongst them was Richard Mulcahy. Joe Lawless's opinion of the new addition was glowing:

What fortuitous circumstances guide our destiny! The officer who thus made accidental contact and remained with us was Dick Mulcahy, without whose presence with us on the Friday following, there might have been a very different story to tell.⁵¹

Mulcahy's small party had been ordered to cut 'telegraphic communications, cross channel and with Belfast, at a point near Howth junction.'⁵² They were then to report back to headquarters in the GPO. On seeing two DMP men at the Ballymun Road Mulcahy turned for Finglas where they 'fell into Ashe's hands.'⁵³ Mulcahy offers differing versions of Ashe's position at Finglas calling it alternatively 'difficult' and 'very unsatisfactory'.⁵⁴ Whatever the reality, Ashe ordered Mulcahy to remain with the battalion and by all accounts gained a valuable officer. Charles Weston thought him 'a very capable and efficient officer.'⁵⁵ On Monday night, Mulcahy set out for Blanchardstown to wreck the railway line and signal cabin along with half a dozen men. This was to have impeded British troop movement from Athlone to the city.⁵⁶ This was in keeping with general instructions to hinder British troop movements into the city and give the city battalions as much time as possible to hold out. Yet Mulcahy claimed that 'the only immediate orders Ashe had were to send a party to Blanchardstown and to make as much noise as possible there.'⁵⁷ On Tuesday a dispatch came from the GPO to send reinforcements into Dublin. The battalion were 'very disappointed' with this order.⁵⁸ Accordingly, Ashe sent twenty men under Captain Richard Coleman into the city where they fought in the Mendicity Institute until surrender.⁵⁹ The remaining force moved onto Knocksedan joined by a few 'stragglers' from the city who were retreating from

⁴⁹ Ibid, p.6. Weston states that locals who knew him at Knocksedan asked him 'Charlie Weston are you gone mad.'

⁵⁰ UCDA, P7b 201 (Mulcahy Papers). Hayes states however that it was midday that Mulcahy joined them. This is unlikely however as at that time Mulcahy was in the middle of cutting communications near Raheny. The other men were Paddy Grant and Tom Maxwell

⁵¹ NAI, BMH WS 1043 (Joseph V. Lawless), p. 64.

⁵² UCDA, P7b 201 (Mulcahy Papers).

⁵³ Ibid.

⁵⁴ Ibid. Mulcahy is careful not to criticise Ashe publicly. The criticism appears in private notes.

⁵⁵ NAI, BMH WS 149 (Charles Weston), p. 7.

⁵⁶ NAI, BMH WS 97 (Richard Hayes), p. 4.

⁵⁷ UCDA, P7b 201 (Mulcahy Papers).

⁵⁸ NAI, BMH WS 97 (Richard Hayes), p. 4.

⁵⁹ NAI, BMH WS 148 (James Crenegan).

the British breakthrough at Phibsboro.⁶⁰ The battalion now consisted of approximately forty to forty-five volunteers. At Knocksedan, the force was divided into four separate sections. In the opinion of Charles Townshend this was the perfect guerrilla 'flying column' size.⁶¹ It is worthwhile noting here that despite the tactical instruction received at various training camps, there was not a preconceived plan to have the battalion operate in a flying column formation. It is example of how guerrilla warfare was learned rather than planned. The battalion had three sections in the field at one time while the fourth was kept in reserve, guarding camp and foraging for food.

On Tuesday night plans were laid to move against the RIC barracks in Swords and Donabate. On Wednesday morning, Ashe and Hayes drove up Main Street in Swords, knocked on the barracks door and demanded the surrender of the barracks with the words 'we want no trouble, but the arms and ammunition you have in the barracks.'⁶² This order was immediately obeyed and the barracks was relieved of its arms and ammunition, five carbine .303 rifles and 25 rounds of ammunition and a revolver. Mulcahy meanwhile destroyed the Post Office communications equipment. A bread van from Kennedy's bakery in the city was requisitioned, the van driver staying with the battalion for a day before being discharged with pay.⁶³ The battalion moved onto Donabate but the Sergeant in charge here was made of sterner stuff. Refusing to obey Ashe's order to surrender, the barracks opened fire on the volunteers but surrendered after ten minutes later after one policeman was wounded. The RIC were again relieved of their weapons and ammunition. On Thursday the battalion moved against the Garristown barracks. This turned into an anticlimax however as just one unarmed RIC man remained. The barracks armament had also been evacuated. The Post Office telegraph and telephone equipment was destroyed and the money was taken. Richard Mulcahy recalls that the postmistress went into hysterics but reassured her confidently 'this money is no longer of any value.'⁶⁴

At this point some of the volunteers began to grumble that the country had not risen. Ashe called the entire battalion to attention and, with Mulcahy, gave an inspirational speech asking each man, 'are you willing to fight on?' 'Fight on' was the overwhelming reply; only

⁶⁰ UCDA, P7b 201 (Mulcahy Papers), Jerry Golden's battalion had failed to blow up the Kingsbridge and block the M.G.W. railway line. *Irish Independent* 26 April 1916.

⁶¹ Townshend, *Easter 1916*, p. 217.

⁶² *Irish Independent* 5 May 1916. The Newspaper account differs from the accounts given by the Volunteers.

⁶³ NAI, BMH WS 149 (Charles Weston), p. 8.

⁶⁴ NAI, BMH WS 149 (Charles Weston), p. 9.

two men actually left.⁶⁵ The remainder would go on to score the only military success for the incipient Irish Republic at Ashbourne. The battle would enter into historical record as a daring ambush, a prefiguring of later IRA flying column tactics. In reality it was not an ambush at all but a confused encounter in which elementary tactical mistakes were made on both sides. Contemporary printed accounts were generally inaccurate or tainted by unreliable information. One claimed, wrongly, that ‘rebel losses are believed to have exceeded in dead alone the total number of police casualties.’⁶⁶ The *Irish Times* reported that ‘the policemen had fought to the very last cartridge.’⁶⁷ Again, this was patently untrue. The real story, as told by the participants, was a much bloodier and confused affair, interspersed with bouts of bravery and ineptitude on both sides. Nevertheless, when the dust had settled it was Ashe’s Fingal men that held the field and provided the Irish Volunteers with their only successful action of a military nature.⁶⁸

The Battle of Ashbourne

Around 9 o’clock on Friday morning Ashe ordered three sections, comprising approximately thirty five men, to get ready for that day’s operation. The fourth section, under the battalion Quartermaster Frank Lawless, remained in camp at Borranstown. GHQ had ordered the battalion to destroy the M.G.R. line at Batterstown and create diversions that might impede enemy troop movement into the city.⁶⁹ An attack on Ashbourne barracks was held as something of an afterthought.⁷⁰ Mulcahy claimed the action was ‘completely unplanned’ and not complicated by ‘over planning.’⁷¹ The advance section of the battalion entered Ashbourne around 10.30 am on Friday morning.⁷² The barracks, evidently hearing of the Fingal Battalion’s operations earlier in the week, had been reinforced by extra police from surrounding districts, its normal strength being four constables and a Sergeant. As the three sections entered into Ashbourne, Jerry Golden recalled that

⁶⁵ Ibid, p.10. Weston labelled them as potential troublemakers.

⁶⁶ W.E. Wells and N. Marlow, *A history of the Irish rebellion of 1916* (New York, 1917), p. 183.

⁶⁷ *Irish Times*, 29 Apr. 1916.

⁶⁸ Ristead Mulcahy, *My father, the general: Richard Mulcahy and the military history of the revolution* (Dublin, 2009), p. 10.

⁶⁹ These messages were taken in and out by Miss Mollie Adrian, a member of Cumman na mBan, who by all accounts did trojan work during Easter Week. She was still braving danger as a dispatch carrier during the Anglo-Irish War.

⁷⁰ NAI, BMH WS 97 (Richard Hayes), p. 5 Hayes states that the battalion left camp at 11 am but this unlikely. Throughout the witness statement Hayes’ recollection of time is usually off.

⁷¹ UCDA, P7b 201 (Mulcahy Papers).

⁷² NAI, BMH WS 904 (John Austin), p. 2.

About 5 yards from Rath Cross Roads we were ordered to dismount and the Commdt. Ordered 11 of the men under the orders of Joe Lawless and Charlie Weston to enter the fields on the north side of the road and proceed under cover of the hedges and ditches until they came to the nearest hedge to the rear of Kilmoon R.I.C. Barracks.⁷³

In the process, Golden's section came upon three RIC men cycling round a curve from Ratoath. Two of the policemen surrendered on seeing the rebels but a third, Sergeant Brady, tried to shoot Golden but after a scuffle was disarmed.⁷⁴ Scouts then reported that the police were erecting a barricade which consisted of a 'ladder lying on two boxes.'⁷⁵ These RIC men were swiftly disarmed. One constable fired at the rebels then ran off, changed his clothes and hid under a bed. He was brought back and made prisoner.⁷⁶ Ashe ordered Paddy Holohan to take Sergeant Brady down to the RIC barracks to convince the barracks to surrender but before he reached the barracks Brady jumped through a gap in the hedge and 'was seen no more.'⁷⁷ The volunteers surrounded the barracks as Ashe personally went forward and demanded their submission. According to Joe Lawless

Ashe climbed up on a bank demanding surrender- perhaps this was a rather flamboyant gesture on Ashe's part, but one that had to be admired even by those who thought it rash at the time.⁷⁸

Ashe's 'flamboyant' gesture was met with a volley of gunfire from inside the Barracks. This precipitated a protracted fire fight which lasted approximately half an hour.⁷⁹ Jerry Golden then threw a homemade bomb against one of the lower windows which was covered with a steel shutter.

It fell down to the ground and went off with a great roar... it had only made a hole about four inches deep. I told Lieut. Mulcahy the result and he ordered me to light and throw the second bomb...meanwhile the men in front and rear were keeping up a rapid fire on the barracks and after about five minutes we heard the men inside shouting and roaring that they would all be killed... 'we surrender if you promise not to take our lives.'⁸⁰

Before the surrender could be taken however, a convoy of between seventeen to twenty four motor cars commanded by C.I. Gray and D.I. Smith arrived with a force behind the Volunteers position with approximately fifty to sixty RIC men. This took the Volunteers at

⁷³ NAI, BMH WS 177(Jerry Golden), pp 3-4.

⁷⁴ Ibid.

⁷⁵ NAI, BMH WS 904 (John Austin), p. 2.

⁷⁶ Ibid, p. 3

⁷⁷ NAI, BMH WS 177 (Jerry Golden), p.14.

⁷⁸ NAI, BMH WS 1043 (Joseph V. Lawless), p. 36.

⁷⁹ NAI, BMH WS 97 (Richard Hayes), p. 6.

⁸⁰ NAI, BMH WS 177 (Jerry Golden), p.5.

the cross by surprise as they were preoccupied by events at the barracks.⁸¹ The police were not however able to take advantage of their surprise appearance. Many observers have noted that the R.I.C. was poorly led in the engagement. Eugene Bratton, one of the RIC men present at Ashbourne, stated that the D.I Gray had knowledge that a large body of volunteers were waiting at the Rath of Cross.⁸² Indeed, Gray's leadership during the affair has been criticised by many commentators. As Dooley noted

His attitude on approaching Ashbourne may have been just as cavalier as that which he had the day he charged up the street in Dingle on his horse, scattering rioters in every direction.⁸³

Despite Gray's cavalier charge, Joe Lawless pointed out that the 'situation was 'definitely serious' as the volunteers were completely surprised.⁸⁴ A chaotic five hour battle ensued.⁸⁵ The arrival of the police convoy was met with a rapid fire from the cross which was accordingly returned on the volunteers. One policeman, Sergeant Shanaher, was shot dead immediately, Bratton surmised by one of his own men.⁸⁶ On the arrival of the D.I. Gray's force, Ashe had ordered his men to begin a retreat but some quick thinking from Mulcahy saw to it that the Volunteers held their ground and regained the tactical initiative. Charles Weston whose section had pinned down the police reported to Mulcahy that the convoy contained around a hundred men to which Mulcahy replied 'it does not matter if there was a thousand, we will deal with those fellows.'⁸⁷ Despite Mulcahy's bravado, it was apparent that the Volunteers were in a dangerous situation. The police were superior in number and the Volunteers were sandwiched between the police in the barracks and the Cross. Frank Lawless's section was called for to help deal with the new threat. As the reinforcements made their way to the fight they were mistaken by RIC reinforcements and fired upon by Lawless's own son. As the fight wore on however, the police were hampered by a lack of tactical awareness. The Volunteers' field training and superior marksmanship began to tell. Mulcahy's tactical nous and Gray's early blunder meant that the initiative passed from the police to the volunteers. The police had been bottled up at on the road by a small party of

⁸¹ NAI, BMH WS 97 (Richard Hayes), p. 6.

⁸² NAI, BMH WS 467 (Eugene Bratton), p. 3.

⁸³ Dooley, 'Battle at Ashbourne', p. 212. In Dingle, Gray had been successful in dispersing a crowd of land leaguers by driving up and down the Main Street on a horse.

⁸⁴ Joe Lawless, 'Battle of Ashbourne' in *Dublin's fighting story 1916-1921*, p. 122.

⁸⁵ Participant accounts of the battle are sometimes contradictory. This is understandable given the nature and duration of the fight and the time elapsed since the witness statements were recorded. Nevertheless, the statements are generally corroborative.

⁸⁶ NAI, BMH WS 467 (Eugene Bratton), p. 3. 'he was a bad one and had been very hard on the men.' John Austin also called Shanaher 'a right bad one.' NAI, BMH WS 904 (John Austin), p. 4.

⁸⁷ NAI, BMH WS 149 (177), p. 11.

Volunteers while the main body of the force wheeled around to bring the main body of the force to bear on them. Small parties of police started to break. Joseph Lawless took the surrender of eleven RIC men and relieved them of their arms and ammunition. Mulcahy initiated a 'ruse... making great noise to give the impression that we were very numerous.'⁸⁸ This tactic was successful and caused the RIC resistance to crumble. Indeed, initial newspaper reports estimated the number of 'Sinn Fein or Sinn Fein sympathisers' at 'about 400.'⁸⁹ Mulcahy and Ashe worked it that Mulcahy's section would drive the police down to Ashe position; Mulcahy personally led a bayonet charge on the police position at the Cross. James O'Connor 'thought Dick Mulcahy was a very brave man as he went up to the middle of the road disregarding any cover and firing at the RIC as he went.'⁹⁰ The Volunteers were now in the ascendancy. Some of the police began to panic here with Mulcahy urging 'will you surrender by... if you don't we will give you a dog's death' they began to break.⁹¹ As D.I. Smith exhorted his men to keep up the fight he was shot down by Frank Lawless; 'his death was a signal for a general collapse of police resistance.'⁹² An onlooker claimed that the volunteers 'were very excited after their victory and were cheering, as men would after a football match.'⁹³ The volunteers collected 96 rifles while Dr Richard Hayes attended the wounded. Ashe paraded the RIC before him and warned them that they were not to fight again against the Irish people.⁹⁴

When the dust had settled it was revealed that the Volunteers had scored an overwhelming success. The RIC had suffered very heavy casualties; eight dead including C.I. Gray and D.I. Smyth along with eighteen wounded.⁹⁵ The Volunteers meanwhile had comparatively light casualties; two dead and five wounded.⁹⁶ After the Volunteers had left Austen recalls that the surviving police went into Ashbourne village to get some food and drink:

⁸⁸ UCDA, P7b 201 (Mulcahy Papers).

⁸⁹ *Irish Independent* 26 Apr. 1916. The actual number was closer to forty.

⁹⁰ NAI, BMH WS 142 (James O'Connor), p. 4.

⁹¹ NAI, BMH WS 149 (Charles Weston), p. 12.

⁹² Lawless, 'Battle of Ashbourne', p. 129.

⁹³ NAI, BMH WS 904 (John Austin), p. 4.

⁹⁴ NAI, BMH WS 142 (James O'Connor), p. 4. According to Nora Ashe, Thomas Ashe held the Ashbourne police in high-regard and 'they would do anything for him afterward.' NAI, BMH WS 645 (Nora Aghas), p.7.

⁹⁵ *Irish Times*, 29 Apr. 1916 A full list of the RIC men killed and wounded at Ashbourne is available in Jim Herlihy, *The Royal Irish Constabulary A short history and genealogical guide* (Dublin, 1997), p. 101.

⁹⁶ NAI, BMH WS 97 (Richard Hayes), p.8.

They were very shaken and were shivering. One of them remarked to me that the rebels were great men, and I replied "If you had won, I know what you would do."⁹⁷

The volunteers returned to their camp in good spirits where they enjoyed a good meal. Having proved their mettle under fire, the battalion looked forward to more action. Indeed Ashe was to remark to Mulcahy that he smelt 'victory in the air.'⁹⁸ The prophecy proved to be wide of the mark. Although the Fingal Battalion had a spectacularly successful week, in Dublin it was a different matter. The Volunteers position had been mercilessly pummelled by artillery and starved into submission. On the Saturday morning, two RIC men came to the Volunteer camp and stated that the leaders had surrendered. Ashe sent Mulcahy into Dublin for confirmation from Pearse. When Mulcahy returned the message was clear; 'It is all up boys.'⁹⁹

The Fingal Battalion was successful because it cast aside static warfare and adopted fluid, guerrilla fighting. Crucial to the battalion's success was its mobility. Every man was equipped with a bicycle, in addition to Ashe's motorcycle and Hayes' two-seater Morris Minor.¹⁰⁰ This mobility allowed the Battalion to strike at diverse targets within their zone of operations and then move on. In Charles Townshend's opinion it was a classic template for guerrilla warfare. The battalion was small and this aided the tactic of diffusion. Townshend explains the importance of this:

Diffusion in space, in that the conventional military principle of the concentration of force is replaced by dispersion, and diffusion in time, in so far as rapid military decisions thus become impossible.¹⁰¹

It also helped that the battalion did not have to engage the British Army during the week. Its targets were the RIC. Nevertheless, the Ashbourne engagement entered into nationalist folklore as an ambush *par excellence*. Even contemporary historians fall into the trap of describing it as an ambush. Tim Pat Coogan claimed the Ashbourne engagement was an ambush, in which the police were 'overwhelmed in the sort of attack which was to form the pattern of the future.'¹⁰² It is clear from participant accounts that this was not the case. Indeed

⁹⁷ NAI, BMH WS 904 (John Austin), p.5.

⁹⁸ UCDA, P7b 201 (Mulcahy papers).

⁹⁹ NAI, BMH WS 147 (Bernard McAllister), p.9.

¹⁰⁰ Townshend, *Easter 1916*, p. 215.

¹⁰¹ Townshend, 'The Irish Republican Army and the development of guerrilla warfare 1916-1923,' in *The English Historical Review*, 94, 371 (1979), p. 318.

¹⁰² Tim Pat Coogan, *Michael Collins* (London, 1990), p. 70. Coogan is not alone in this. In histories or biographies of the period, the operation is usually confined to a mere footnote, and reference to it occurs most

the battle could have been a disaster for the volunteers had the police been more decisive and pressed home their numerical advantage. Mick McAllister maintained that the RIC were 'badly led' and pointed out that initially they had 'all the advantages.'

They had surprised us; they outnumbered us in the first stages, at least by ten to one, and they had the advantage of ground having caught us in low ground while they were on the high and had observation over us. Had they deployed into the fields from the road they could easily have outflanked us in the early stage.¹⁰³

Most historians have tended to agree with McAllister's assessment. Indeed, the RIC's fighting qualities have been called into question. The RIC were not the shrinking violets that Terence Dooley has painted them however. Dooley disputes Sean O'Lúing's claim that the policemen were part of 'a powerful military system' and depicts the RIC at Ashbourne as custodians of law and order who 'were neither trained nor skilled military men and who had no real combat experience.'¹⁰⁴ This view fails to take into account the emphatic military nature of the RIC's training or indeed their function as guardians of British power in Ireland. RIC training was regarded so highly that the Phoenix Park Depot became the de facto police training centre for other colonial police forces throughout the British Empire. Trolling through the small pool of RIC memoirs, it is noticeable that literally all stress their training was highly militarised, especially after the 1916 Rising. John Regan remembered how 'the depot was run on military lines.'¹⁰⁵ He also admitted that the force 'was semi-military in its constitution and armament.'¹⁰⁶ Another recruit who enlisted in 1918 recalled the heavy physical demands and noted it 'was just like drilling for the army...you had to fire your rounds the same as a soldier. You were taught with the revolver as well.'¹⁰⁷ One commentator noted the RIC were adept in the use 'of arms and all other acts of military skill.'¹⁰⁸ The crucial term to remember however is Regan's description of the force as 'semi military'. While it is true that the Constabulary were supplied and trained as lightly armed

often when discussing Michael Collins rise to prominence. For example, even the doyen of forensic historical research, Peter Hart, referred to Ashbourne as a 'clever ambush' in *Mick: the real Michael Collins* (London, 2005), p. 95.

¹⁰³ NAI, BMH WS 1494 (Mick McAllister), p. 7.

¹⁰⁴ Dooley, 'The Battle at Ashbourne', p. 222.

¹⁰⁵ John M. Regan, *The memoirs of John M. Regan a Catholic officer in the RIC and RUC 1909-1948*, ed. Joost Augusteijn (Dublin, 2007), p. 39.

¹⁰⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 43.

¹⁰⁷ John D. Brewer, *The Royal Irish Constabulary: an oral history* (Belfast, 1990), p. 44.

¹⁰⁸ J.M. Sullivan, 'Irish police gleanings', in *Journal of the American Institute of Criminal Law and Criminology*, 4, 6 (1914), p. 880. An interesting footnote is how little was spent on armaments and other military supplies. The amount spent on arms during the early years of the twentieth century was negligible and amounted to under one percent of total expenditure in 1915. *Thom's directory 1915*, p. 770.

soldiers, it is nevertheless hard to argue against Elizabeth Malcolm's assertion that the R.I.C generally did not function as soldiers once they were sent out into the real world.¹⁰⁹ Once the land issue had effectively been diffused (but not entirely removed), the average constable settled down to more sedentary and regular duties. The *RIC Manual*, compulsory reading for all recruits, stressed the importance of detecting and preventing crime while cultivating good relations with the local community was of overriding importance. The RIC was accordingly seen as a respectable institution by many nationalists by the outbreak of the First World War, though this feeling was by no means universal. An American correspondent noted the 'soreness' towards the RIC which lingered 'in the memories of the people.'

The community bears a semblance of outward respect for the police, but it is the same affection and respect that the fox entertains for the hen-roost. The reason for this feeling is not hard to find: in past years the police did the work of sheriffs, bailiffs, process-servers, and carried out wholesale evictions¹¹⁰

Despite this, the RIC were overwhelmingly drawn from the people. Jeremiah Mee remembered the story of Constable James Gormley who was killed at Ashbourne. Gormley's brother was an active member of the Volunteers in Ballintogher.

The Gormley family was very popular in the district and nearly all the people, including local Volunteers, turned out to attend a Requiem Mass for the dead constable.¹¹¹

Clearly the RIC crossed political boundaries. Indeed it should not be forgotten that many RIC men had strong nationalist sympathies and passed invaluable information onto the IRA. Indeed one of the police who had fought at Ashbourne, Eugene Bratton, did just that and conveyed information to the IRA.¹¹² Nevertheless, it is hard to ignore the fact that the RIC *did* have implicit military-like functions. They served as escorts during times of civil disorder, enforced eviction notices and performed political duties for Dublin Castle. In effect, they were the first line of defence against the state's enemies be they tenant farmers or Fenian revolutionaries. They were the eyes and ears of the British state and subsequently suffered for it, at Ashbourne and during the Anglo-Irish War.

Despite the RIC's deficiencies, and the tactical mistakes made by the Volunteers during Easter Week, there was enough evidence to support the assertion that guerrilla warfare

¹⁰⁹ Elizabeth Malcolm, *The Irish policeman 1822-1922: a life* (Dublin, 2006), p. 93.

¹¹⁰ Sullivan, 'Irish Police Gleanings' p. 876.

¹¹¹ Jeremiah Mee, *Memoirs of Constable Jeremiah Mee*, ed. Anthony J. Gaughan (Kildare, 1975), p. 48

¹¹² NAI, BMH WS 467 (Eugene Bratton), p. 6.

was the best, arguably the only way, in which to conduct a future fight against Crown forces. The question needs to be asked then; did the example of the Fingal Battalion have any relevance to the future military strategy of the IRA? Sean O'Lúing's was emphatic in his assertion that the Fingal Battalion was copied, with great success, in the Anglo-Irish War.¹¹³ Logically, the first place to look for any Fingal-inspired guerrilla master plan should be the post-Rising internment camps, most notably Frongoch. Many Volunteers, and Tim Healy, were adamant that Frongoch served as a hotbed of revolution which helped crystallise the moves towards the next phase of the struggle. Many historians have argued that the guerrilla tactics adopted by the IRA were debated, developed and perfected here.¹¹⁴ It is true that the internees revelled in the fact that the British 'had swept up the cream of the Irish Volunteers, and dumped them all down in a huge training camp in North Wales.'¹¹⁵ Lyn Ebenezer quotes one Frongoch internee, Joe Sweeney, who claimed that

We set up our own university there, both educational and revolutionary and from that camp came the hard core of people who led the subsequent guerrilla war campaign.¹¹⁶

Brennan-Whitmore claimed that Frongoch was doing for the IRA what Sandhurst was doing for the British Army.¹¹⁷ Mulcahy soon occupied a prominent position in the camp owing to, he believed, 'his rising experiences' i.e. the reputation he had built up with the Fingal Battalion.¹¹⁸ He was considered by many to be an excellent soldier and was recognised as a military minded-man alongside O'Connell and Brennan-Whitmore.¹¹⁹ It leads to speculation as to whether guerrilla warfare, as exemplified in Fingal, was decided upon as a definite course of action. Yet Michael Hopkinson has argued against placing too much emphasis on the revolutionary value of such camps. Contrasting the IRA with Sinn Fein he claimed

The military side of the movement had no preconceived plan. The move away from the obsession with preparation for a general rising towards the adoption of guerrilla methods did not occur because of any inspired revelation in the post-Rising prisons and internment camps; rather it evolved in response to changed circumstances.¹²⁰

There was undoubtedly a realisation amongst the main movers that the Volunteers must never again hole themselves up in buildings and wait for the inevitable encirclement and

¹¹³ Sean O Luing, *I die in a good cause: a study of Thomas Ashe idealist and revolutionary* (Kerry, 1970), p. 81.

¹¹⁴ Sean O'Mahony, *Frongoch university of revolution* (Dublin, 1987), p. 64.

¹¹⁵ W.J. Brennan-Whitmore, *With the Irish in Frongoch* (Dublin, 1917), p. 30.

¹¹⁶ Lyn Ebenezer, *Fron Goch and the birth of the IRA* (Llanrwst, 2006), p. 113.

¹¹⁷ Brennan-Whitmore, *With the Irish*, p. 30.

¹¹⁸ Mulcahy, *My father*, p. 28.

¹¹⁹ O'Mahony, *Frongoch*, p. 67.

¹²⁰ Michael Hopkinson, *The Irish War of Independence* (Dublin, 2002), p. 15.

destruction. Yet this had not crystallised into definite plans for a guerrilla war as it would develop when hostilities resumed in 1919.

‘A purely spontaneous development which arose from the prevailing conditions.’

British intelligence noted the wide scale establishment of flying columns in October 1920 as an ‘astute move’ providing on the run men with safety and ‘created a small force which stirred the sluggish Sinn Feiners.’¹²¹ It was indeed an astute move but one which was born out of force of circumstance. Joost Augusteijn has termed the Volunteers post-Rising military reorganisation ‘haphazard’. He did note however that by 1920 guerrilla warfare was decided upon as a definite course of action.¹²² Yet, very few, including Mulcahy, appear to have taken the lessons of the Fingal Battalion into consideration. The reorganisation of the Volunteers followed conventional lines; units were still based on the standard brigade, battalion and company model, just as the pre-Rising Volunteers had been. Indeed, many Volunteers envisioned a rerun of 1916. In contrast to the guerrilla campaign he later waged, Sean Moylan admitted that he was

Thinking in terms of a nationwide military effort along the lines of Easter Week and from discussions I afterwards had with other Volunteers it seems to me that the same idea was widely held... with conscription regarded as an imminent possibility, preparations for such methods of fighting were actually being made.¹²³

Most Volunteers stressed that circumstance rather than design was the single most important factor in the evolution of the IRA’s guerrilla strategy. They maintained that guerrilla warfare was not a master plan originated by GHQ. Florrie O’Donoghue stated

Much has been written in late years crediting the origin of guerrilla warfare with one brigade or another, or even dating it to ideas discussed in pre-Rising days. My personal conviction is that it was not a preconceived policy planned by GHQ or any Brigade.¹²⁴

O’Donoghue added that strategy evolved step by step, and was motivated by the desire to resist enemy raids and repression, the need to procure arms and the need for action of ‘some kind.’¹²⁵ Sean Moylan’s testimony supports this. Moylan disputed the assertion that the

¹²¹ Peter Hart (ed.), *British intelligence in Ireland 1920-21 the final reports* (Cork, 2002), p. 25.

¹²² Joost Augusteijn, *From public defiance to guerrilla warfare* (Dublin, 1996), p. 64.

¹²³ Sean Moylan, *Sean Moylan in his own words: his memoir of the Irish War of Independence* (Cork, 2004), p. 27.

¹²⁴ Florence O’Donoghue, *Florence and Josephine O’Donoghue’s War of Independence: a destiny that shapes our ends* (Dublin, 2006), p. 80.

¹²⁵ *Ibid.*

guerrilla campaign 'was created as a result of clearly conceived plans' or that it 'was directed or controlled by a clearly recognised Headquarters Staff.'¹²⁶ He did note that headquarters did exercise some measure of control, 'but it was a general rather than a specific direction.'¹²⁷ The Mulcahy papers do indeed support Moylan's claim. GHQ, by and large, left each brigade to its own devices though it did provide advice on ambushing, shared intelligence and coordinated larger scale offensives between different brigade areas.¹²⁸ The countrywide burning of RIC barracks on Easter Saturday 1920 was the largest of such operations and was apparently based on Mulcahy's experience with the Fingal Battalion.¹²⁹ GHQ had earlier vetoed Michael Brennan's plan to attack all RIC barracks in his area in 1919 because, as Mulcahy put it, 'people had to be led gently into open war.'¹³⁰ Mulcahy was also receptive to suggestions and advice from his field commanders. After protests were raised against GHQ's plan to call for surrender before firing during an ambush, Mulcahy relented and 'it was made clear that the mode of attack employed was left to the discretion of the Brigade Commanders.'¹³¹ GHQ was, in truth, a coordinating body which disseminated the ideas and methods of innovative field commanders. They did this through *An t-Oglách* and training officers, such as Ernie O'Malley, who were dispatched by GHQ to help country units establish flying columns, instruct in ambush and general guerrilla tactics, or encourage brigades to become more active.¹³² GHQ's role as a coordinating body can best be seen when investigating the formation of the flying columns. These mobile formations provided a formidable military challenge to the Crown. Of course it was possible to conduct a guerrilla war without flying columns as subsequent guerrilla campaigns have proven. They were however potent markers of intent from the IRA as they constituted a semi-permanent army of the IRA's best men that tied down large bodies of enemy forces. Tom Barry offered the best description as to the value of the flying column.

¹²⁶ Moylan, *Sean Moylan in his own words*, p. 17.

¹²⁷ *Ibid*, p. 18.

¹²⁸ UCDA, P7A 17. (Mulcahy Papers). Mulcahy personally critiqued different brigades and often handed out stern reprimands for inactivity. For example, he circulated a list of serious deficiencies in country units criticising a organisation and intelligence gathering capabilities.

¹²⁹ Ulick O'Connor, *Michael Collins and the troubles the struggle for Irish freedom 1912-1922* (Edinburgh, 2001), p.153.

¹³⁰ Michael Brennan *The war in Clare 1911-1921* (Dublin, 1980), p. 38.

¹³¹ Liam Deasy, *Towards Ireland free the west Cork brigade in the War of Independence 1917-1921* (Cork, 1973), p. 133.

¹³² Organisers and commanders were urged to procure British Army training manuals such as Lake's *Knowledge for War*. The use of such manuals illustrates the common training aspects of a guerrilla and conventional army in terms of the basics of war.

The very existence of such a column of armed men, even if it never struck a blow, was a continuous challenge to the enemy and forced him to maintain large garrisons to meet the threatened onslaught.... it also remained the highest expression of our Nationhood, the Flying Column of the Army of the People.¹³³

The flying column operated as the Fingal Battalion had in 1916. It would 'choose its own battleground' and 'refuse battle if circumstances were unfavourable'. The question needs to be asked then; did the Fingal Battalion have any bearing to the establishment of flying columns in the Anglo-Irish War? Liam Deasy maintained that the 'rapidly changing pattern of the war, towards the middle of 1920' was instrumental in the formation of brigade flying columns.¹³⁴ GHQ, reacting to this new situation, issued a communication to all brigades in the summer of 1920 recommending that a flying column to be started in each brigade.¹³⁵ Michael Brennan, however, claimed that no such order reached the East Clare Brigade and added

A great deal of nonsense has been published on the origins of the Flying Column of 1920-21 ... I have read in many places of how the Flying Column idea was originated and elaborated by different officers, of how many men were trained for it in camps held years before and of how training and organisational instructions were issued in advance.

Brennan maintained that the establishment of flying columns in east Clare 'was a purely spontaneous development which arose from the prevailing conditions.'¹³⁶ These prevailing conditions were brought about by British raids and arrests that necessitated large number of Volunteers going on the run. The evidence suggests that this was the single most important factor in the spread of flying columns. Nevertheless, the formation of the first post-Rising flying column, in east Limerick, was down to local initiative and not enemy pressure. After a group of armed volunteers had walked thirty miles unmolested across open country, and in broad daylight, it occurred to them that there was 'no reason why a larger number of men, organised and equipped as a unit could not do likewise. Thus was conceived the idea of the active service unit.'¹³⁷ The 'flying column' would 'strike at the enemy where and whenever a suitable opportunity arose.'¹³⁸ It operated along the same lines as the Fingal Battalion had in

¹³³ Tom Barry, *Guerrilla days in Ireland* (Cork, 1989), p. 23.

¹³⁴ Deasy, *Towards Ireland free*, p. 141.

¹³⁵ Barry, *Guerrilla days*, p. 19.

¹³⁶ Brennan, *The war in Clare*, p. 70.

¹³⁷ D. O'Hannigan, 'Origin and activities of the first flying column', in J.M. McCarthy (ed.) *Limerick's Fighting Story* (Tralee, 1966), p. 87.

¹³⁸ *Ibid.*

1916 yet the latter had no input on the establishment of the east Limerick unit. Indeed it has been noted that Mulcahy was initially lukewarm to the idea of flying columns.

Dick Mulcahy was not too keen on the idea, but Michael Collins was very keen on it: 'We'll have to get these bloody fellows doing something' said Collins referring to the men on the run.¹³⁹

It appears from this that Mulcahy's experience with the first flying column in Fingal had little relevance to the IRA's guerrilla strategy during the Anglo-Irish War. Mulcahy undoubtedly disseminated the idea through his circulars but saw the flying column as a training formation to be used to supplement battalion or company work rather than an elite force in itself. Interestingly, Mulcahy was not overly enthusiastic about setting up a flying column in Fingal. Indeed, it is curious to note that how slow the Fingal area was to develop its own column given its success in the past. In the opinion of Thomas Peppard, 'the Fingal area was very unsuitable for guerrilla warfare being very flat and open and honeycombed.'¹⁴⁰ This may have negated the need for a large flying column but as will be seen below, there were other reasons for Fingal's relative passivity during the Anglo-Irish War.

'This Black-and-Tan infested area.'

The initiative, dynamism and ability of a commander are often overlooked when investigating the effectiveness of a brigade. There were undoubtedly a multitude of considerations at play in producing an efficient fighting force. Though Tom Barry would scoff at such suggestions, terrain and topography were important, as was the competency of

¹³⁹ Joost Augusteijn, *From public defiance*, pp 120-121.

¹⁴⁰ NAI, BMH WS 1399 (Thomas Peppard), p. 24.

the enemy not to mention the unit's armament. Suffice to say there was no use in a column having a talented commander if the unit had no bullets. Nevertheless, the initiative of the commander played a large role in the effectiveness of an area.¹⁴¹ This is demonstrated, aptly enough, in the case of Fingal itself. It was clear that Mulcahy was a talented field commander as was proved at Ashbourne in 1916. Yet, despite scoring the Volunteers only military success in 1916, Fingal remained largely inactive during the Anglo-Irish War, much to the exasperation of Volunteers like Joe Lawless. The Fingal battalion was reformed as a brigade in 1918, and placed under the command of 1916 veteran Michael Lynch. He laid out the problems he found in Fingal.

There was a skeleton organisation there, but the greatest difficulty I found was to procure men with any type of training whatever. We had only two motor drivers in the whole area, nobody with a knowledge of engineering, and nobody with any idea of training in musketry instruction or any of the special services. Things looked pretty hopeless.¹⁴²

This is a strange statement given the fact that many of the 1916 veterans were still active. These men had proven themselves adept in musketry and other vital areas of guerrilla warfare and yet Lynch claimed that Fingal clearly not ready to step up activity. Joe Lawless became ever more aggrieved at Fingal's inactivity as time went on.

Except for a few minor incidents...nothing very much was happening there and we felt that the laurels we had won in 1916 were sadly withered through the subsequent inactivity of the Fingallians.¹⁴³

Lawless clearly blamed this inactivity on Lynch. In Lawless's opinion Lynch was the wrong man to lead the Fingal Brigade because Lynch was a 'city man' who did not dedicate enough time or energy to Fingal.¹⁴⁴ After the Black and Tans had burned Balbriggan, Lawless was dumbfounded to find that Lynch and his wife were taking a holiday in England instead of preparing a reprisal operation. Indeed Lynch himself admitted that he was not prepared to give up his job and work full-time for the IRA.¹⁴⁵ Fingal's inactivity came to the attention of GHQ who sternly criticized the Fingal Brigade's efforts. Mulcahy stated that

¹⁴¹ See for example Marie Coleman, *County Longford and the Irish revolution 1910-1921* (Dublin, 2006), p 128. Coleman has traced the decline in the effectiveness of the North Longford IRA with the shooting and arrest of the flying column commander Sean MacEoin.

¹⁴² NAI, BMH WS 511 (Michael Lynch), p. 144.

¹⁴³ Ibid.

¹⁴⁴ NAI, BMH WS 1043 (Joseph V. Lawless), p. 316.

¹⁴⁵ NAI, BMH WS 511 (Michael Lynch), p. 139. Lynch at one time held numerous positions including Minister for Munitions, Vice-Commandant of the Dublin Brigade and Superintendent of the Abattoir in the Corporation.

The total loss inflicted on the enemy in three months (Jan 1921-Mar 1921) in this Black-and-Tan infested area, is apparently 5 killed and 13 wounded... From the standpoint of the War as a whole this can be described as negligible.

He maintained that the Brigade staff in Fingal was overly concerned with big brigade level operations when opportunities for small successes passed by.¹⁴⁶ This was in line with what Mulcahy was telling other less successful brigade. Evidently, Lynch felt his efforts in Fingal were sufficient. He wrote to Mulcahy expressing his surprise at the rebuke and 'was of the opinion that' Fingal had 'done quite well'. He complained that he could never hope to organise Fingal along proper lines when most of his time and energy was spent cycling round the district and added 'when I arrive at my headquarters I really feel like resting than doing strenuous mental work.' He concluded by asking 'is there any case in me applying for a motor bicycle?'¹⁴⁷ Clearly, Lynch lacked the same drive and determinism that were characteristic of more successful commanders such as Liam Lynch or Michael Brennan. Yet he could not be blamed for all the wrongs in Fingal. More than one Volunteer claimed the flat open terrain, devoid of cover, hampered the chances of waging a successful guerrilla campaign.¹⁴⁸ The area was heavily saturated with enemies as Mulcahy had noted. It was this and the many Fingal men on the run that contributed to the formation of the Fingal Brigade flying column.¹⁴⁹ The column typically comprised twenty men who were armed with modern service rifles and 150 rounds of ammunition each. According to James Crennigan training was 'on the commando style with...guerrilla tactics...being all important.'¹⁵⁰ The columns two most successful operations were an attack on an unarmed Remount installation in Lusk and a larger operation where the column, in conjunction with local battalions, destroyed all the coastguard stations between Donabate and Layton in Co Meath. Both of these operations were achieved without a shot being fired.

There is an intriguing subplot to Fingal's story during the Anglo-Irish War. Joe Lawless claimed that Michael Lynch and Dan Brophy, brigade Commander in Lynch's absence, told him that Michael Collins wanted Fingal deliberately kept quiet.

Dan Brophy told me, in course of a discussion on these things in recent years, that he had had a number of talks with Mick Collins during 1919 and 1920 on the question of beginning offensive

¹⁴⁶ Chief of Staff to Brigade Commander Fingal, 6 Apr 1921 (Mulcahy papers P7A 17).

¹⁴⁷ Fingal Battalion Commander to Chief of Staff, 29 Apr 1921 (Mulcahy paper P7A 17).

¹⁴⁸ NAI, BMH WS 1436 (Walter Brown), p. 10.

¹⁴⁹ NAI, BMH WS 1395 (James Crennigan), p. 17. In common with most of the country, Fingal's flying column was formed because of the large number of volunteers being on the run

¹⁵⁰ Ibid, p. 18.

operations against British forces and establishments in Fingal and that Collins forbid anything of the kind. He went on to explain to Brophy that it was necessary, in pursuance of the policy of the General Staff, to keep things quiet in Fingal so that there would be no excuse for the British to declare this a military area.¹⁵¹

According to Lawless, Collins wanted Fingal kept as a strategic rest and recuperation area for city units. Collins, it was claimed, also deliberately kept Fingal quiet as it was a vital communications corridor between GHQ and Connacht and Ulster units.¹⁵² However, the correspondence between Mulcahy and Lynch clearly contradicts this. Mulcahy was pressing for more action, haranguing Lynch for the Brigade's timidity. If Lawless's account is accurate this would mean that Collins was dictating military strategy without consulting Mulcahy. Would Michael Collins have made decisions such as this without the knowledge of his Chief of Staff? Clearly this is a subject that would take much more investigation, one that is beyond the brief of this paper. It is nevertheless an intriguing reason, if accurate, as to why the area was quiet. One thing is for certain. Fingal did not have the spectacular success that attended it during Easter Week.

A Blueprint for the Future?

The Fingal Battalion was significant in the context of being the only successful military enterprise of the Easter Rising. The manner was as important as the success itself. It triumphed because it adopted guerrilla tactics and refused to be shut up like the Volunteer

¹⁵¹ NAI, BMH WS 1043 (Joseph V. Lawless), p. 263.

¹⁵² Ibid, p. 348.

battalions in the city. It attacked at its own convenience and moved on to its next target. A large measure of its success was down to the fact that it attacked the softer targets of the RIC rather than large detachments of British troops. At Ashbourne it defeated a larger force of RIC, despite being surprised and almost surrounded. In many ways it presaged the IRA's guerrilla campaign of 1919-1921. It is logical therefore to assume that the Fingal Battalion had some impact on future IRA strategy, given Richard Mulcahy's role in both. This was not the case however. The Fingal Battalion was not mentioned or cited as an example to follow. Some instead remembered McBride's counsel to fight as the Boers had. Many at GHQ cited Lettow-Vorbeck's guerrilla campaign in east Africa as the path to follow. A little perspective is needed however. In truth, the engagement at Ashbourne was not the Battle of Jena; Ashe was not traversing the Alps with war elephants nor was the RIC rampaging Cossacks. The battalions operations were small-scale and limited in scope. Nevertheless, the Fingal Battalion was important in its context. It provided a direct and forceful comparison with the futile tactics adopted in the city. Despite being the brains behind the first flying column, Mulcahy had little or no influence on their subsequent appearance. This may be overly harsh on the Chief of Staff. As many historians have pointed out GHQ control over local units was 'largely fanciful' and very often resented.¹⁵³ Fingal meanwhile, for a variety of reasons, lapsed into relative insignificance during the Anglo-Irish War. One of the main reasons was the lack of a full time dedicated commander in the mould of a Mulcahy or Liam Lynch. Fingal went from being the most successful unit in 1916 to one of the quietest during the Anglo-Irish War.

The Fingal Battalion did however have a tangible, if indirect, effect on the course of Irish history. Richard Mulcahy and Thomas Ashe gained a great deal of respect and prestige for leading the only successful engagement of the Easter Rising. Ashe became President of the IRA and died on hunger strike in 1917 and his funeral was one of the defining moments of post-Rising Ireland. It saw a huge show of force from the Irish Volunteers. Mulcahy embarked upon a rapid ascent from Lieutenant to Chief of Staff and was instrumental in coordinating the IRA campaign of 1919-21. Though GHQ's role has in the past been overstated, Mulcahy was vital to the IRA's campaign as he had been to the Fingal men in 1916. The Fingal Battalion did point the way to the future guerrilla war waged by the IRA. It

¹⁵³ David Fitzpatrick, 'Militarism in Ireland, 1900-1922' in Thomas Bartlett and Keith Jeffery (eds) *A military history of Ireland* (Cambridge, 1997), p. 402. Ernie O'Malley's *On Another Man's Wound* is an illustrative depiction of GHQ's problems. Ernie O'Malley's *On another man's wound* and Tom Barry's *Guerrilla days in Ireland* an illustrative depiction of GHQ's problems in establishing central control.

attacked where the enemy was weakest and on its own terms. It presaged the post-Rising guerrilla war but did not influence it in any meaningful way.