

CHAPTER 1

County Cork, Ireland | 1920

For the past year, armed rebellion progressively escalated in the latest attempt to free Ireland from British rule. After centuries of oppressive domination as a colony of the British Empire this latest rebellion held real possibilities. A combination of British missteps resulted in most of the Irish population openly voting for independence in the 1918 election. The backing of a large segment of the Irish population therefore made possible an armed insurgency. Where past rebellions failed, the Irish Republican Brotherhood founded in the middle of the nineteenth century now provided the necessary organizational structure for engaging in armed rebellion. With widespread popular support the IRB could rely on material support and intelligence to militarily confront the British in guerrilla warfare. Widespread passive resistance by the general population turned all of Ireland into a zone of British military occupation.

The political journey of Egan Walsh was like so many willing to give over their lives in the cause of Irish freedom. His family had an activist history in the Irish Republican movement. His paternal grandfather participated in the Fenian Rising of 1867. In the failed Easter Rising of 1916, Egan's father provided secret material support for the rebellion and his older brother Cormac lost his life fighting for the Irish Republican Brotherhood.

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Having recently graduated from University College in Cork, Egan joined the staff of the *Cork Examiner* newspaper. While he supported the aims of rebellion, he argued with his brother and father that armed rebellion was premature. The Irish population would not revolt against British rule. Thousands of Irishmen were serving in the British Army in France. The IRB did not have the manpower or weapons sufficient for insurrection.

Egan's views proved correct. Cormac died of wounds sustained in the unsuccessful 1916 rebellion. While the rebellion did not enjoy popular support in Ireland, the subsequent executions of the ringleaders by British military tribunal infuriated the Irish. Then in 1918 with British military losses in WWI mounting, London attempted to enforce conscription in Ireland. This final insult resulted in wholesale rejection of the prevailing majority Irish Parliamentary Party in the 1918 general election. The new republican Sinn Féin Party openly advocating independence overwhelmingly swept the election.

Immersed into reporting for the republican-leaning *Cork Examiner*, Egan Walsh turned to more active resistance by joining the Irish Republican Army constituted mostly from members of the former Irish Republican Brotherhood and other dissident organizations. The IRA was now the official army of the Irish Republic as declared by the outlawed revolutionary Irish parliament, Dáil Éireann in 1919. As the war progressed into 1920, those active in the IRA could no longer hold regular jobs because of widespread arrest by British security forces. The beleaguered Royal Irish Constabulary soon ceased to function as a viable policing organization of the British with the general population shunning all contact with RIC constables.

British Army units poured into Ireland to provide military security resources. Westminster passed the Restoration of Order in Ireland Act in 1920 to maintain the fiction that London still maintained civil control of Ireland. The British then augmented the RIC with thousands of unemployed former WWI British Army veterans. Thousands from the ranks signed on for the good pay. Informally known as the Black & Tans for their inconsistently mixed uniforms, they operated largely independent from the Army as a

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mobile policing force. Providing for an elite strike force, the British additionally established the Auxiliary Division of the RIC comprised exclusively of former British Army officers. Ostensibly as part of the RIC, the militarized Black & Tans and Auxiliaries engaged in a reign of terror. Unarmed Irish citizenry suffered terrible acts of brutality intended to break support for the IRA. Along with the burning of houses, creameries, and other means of livelihood, these former British Army veterans indiscriminately resorted to murder and torture. The Act further provided for British Army court martial jurisdiction for trying IRA combatants with authority for imposing death sentences.

The IRA resorted to counterterrorism as the only response given their inferiority in numbers and weapons. The Anglo-Irish War began to look like another brutal British colonial war in 1920. Yet this war was different. The Irish invoked worldwide sympathy. America with its large ethnic Irish population sided with Irish independence. Much of the funding for the Republican cause came from American private donations. The Irish cause looked very much like the situation of the American colonies 150 years earlier. In the United Kingdom, public sentiment resented the unpopular military crisis in Ireland while Britain suffered economically from five years of WWI.

Yet for everyone actively engaged against British security forces, the larger political issues became reduced to the immediate dangers and hardships of engaging in a desperate guerrilla war. One in which capture might end in death at the end of a hangman's rope, or *shot while trying to escape*, or *died of wounds*, a euphemism for torture. Such a life on the run bound each IRA fighter to his comrades. It equally bent and twisted everything normal in each participant's life. Egan Walsh's experience was no exception.

By autumn of 1920, Egan Walsh commanded the Clonakilty Company of the 2nd Battalion of the IRA 3rd Cork Brigade. The brigade was better known as the West Cork Brigade for its area of operation. County Cork and Dublin represented the highest concentration of armed confrontation with the British throughout the war. Unlike other armies, each IRA unit elected its commanders. Walsh was a natural leader.

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September and October saw continual back and forth killings between both sides. IRA headquarters set out a plan to create mobile strike forces to inflict casualties on the Black & Tans and Auxiliaries. The strategy was born out of the necessity to demonstrate the military viability of the IRA while optimizing the effectiveness of the IRA's limited weapons and ammunition. Within the West Cork Brigade, WWI veteran Tom Barry organized an active service unit, commonly called a flying column, of IRA selected from across the brigade. These experienced and disciplined fighters would move through the countryside mostly on foot to execute attacks against vulnerable British forces. They specifically directed those attacks against crown forces engaging in brutal activities outside the realm of accepted warfare conduct. Since inflicting terror on the supporting civilian Irish population characterized the Black & Tans and Auxiliaries, the only counter measures available to the IRA were to inflict equivalent brutality on the enemy.



By November, Egan Walsh's duties in the IRA expanded from commanding a company to becoming brigade intelligence officer. In that capacity, he conceived a plan to ambush the hated Essex Regiment based in Bandon in the heart of the IRA West Cork Brigade territory. Of all the regular British Army forces stationed in Ireland, the Essex were the most brutal, rivaling the excesses practiced by the RIC Auxiliaries. Trained in counterinsurgency tactics, they even had a unit specializing in torture. Much of the Essex brutality was due to their intelligence officer, Major Arthur Percival.

Walsh's plan to ambush the Essex impressed Tom Barry. Every morning two or three lorries traveled from Bandon to Cork City and returned each evening. It was to be the first ambush of Barry's newly formed flying column. On the morning of 22 October, thirty-two IRA occupied positions outside the village of Tooreen. Walsh commanded the section tasked with attacking the second lorry.

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The engagement proved a resounding IRA success. Suffering no casualties, the IRA killed five, wounded four, and captured six British soldiers of the hated Essex Regiment. Equally important, they seized fourteen rifles and 1,400 rounds of ammunition along with several Mills bombs and revolvers.

In reprisal, members of the Essex Regiment went on a violent rampage against Brandon. Of those participating, some included soldiers released unharmed by the IRA earlier that day.

Unfortunately, British reprisals took a more targeted form. This attack costing the lives of British Army regulars required a decisive response. The Essex intelligence was first rate. They targeted suspected IRA sympathizers and families of known IRA members. Among those were Dr. Dillion Walsh and his nurse wife Agnes. Fixtures in Clonakilty. Their son was known to be IRA. Dr. Walsh therefore became suspected of providing medical treatment to injured IRA.

Wanting to deflect such a direct reprisal as the work of the RIC instead of the Army, Essex Major Percival alerted the RIC Auxiliary Division Southern headquarters in Macroom, 25 miles north of Clonakilty.

By telephone to the commanding officer, Percival said, "The bloody *Shinners* murdered five good British troops yesterday. Survivors of the attack identified Egan Walsh as a leader in the ambush near Tooreen. Walsh's father is a local doctor and known to provide medical services to wounded IRA.

"Regulations restrict Army operations to only those directly involving enemy combatants. This is more within your policing portfolio. The Colonel would appreciate you including Dr. Walsh among those targeted for removal for active support of rebels. Clonakilty is an IRA hotbed. Best to eliminate the services of the doctor and his wife and torch their home which serves as an IRA medical facility."

Within days, two lorries carrying fourteen RIC Auxiliaries swept into Clonakilty. Targeting Dr. Walsh provided a perfect reason for inflicting their unique brand of barbarity. This from former British officers that never indulged in such acts during conventional combat of WWI. This essentially colonial war brought

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out an all too familiar pattern of British cruelty against subjugated colonials defying the might of the British Empire.

It was early afternoon under an overcast autumn day. The Walsh house was a large stone home with a slate roof built seventy-five years earlier. Located on the northern outskirts of Clonakilty, it was surrounded by a typical stone wall separating the property from grazing pasture of a neighboring sheep farmer. No mistaking the residence marked with a prominent sign at the road.

The entry to Dr. Walsh's surgery was through a separate side door in a single-story wing of the two-story building. Ten Auxiliaries took up positions to cover any threat. Both lorries carried mounted Lewis machine guns with each taking up a position to cover both directions of the road passing by the Walsh house. Four Auxiliaries entered the surgery armed with revolvers.

Dr. Walsh was attending to a local farmer having injured his forearm when the Auxiliaries made a noisy entrance.

The Auxiliary in charge said, "Who is your patient, Doctor? A Shinner no doubt?"

"Only a farmer with a laceration," Walsh responded. He was surprised but had never previously been accosted by this new RIC paramilitary force brought over from England. The former Royal Irish Constabulary by this time no longer represented a functioning police force. Ostracized by the general public, they were forced to remain secluded in their barracks fearing attack by the IRA.

The Auxiliary in charge stepped next to Walsh and pushed him away from the man sitting on a gurney. Turning to the patient, he said, "Are you a farmer or IRA? Maybe both?"

The man did not respond. Undoubtedly terrified, the man starred back at the Auxiliary defiantly.

Infuriated, the Auxiliary pulled away the unfinished bandage wrapping, exposing the wound. Clearly, a laceration just sutured. "Get the fuck out of here."

The man looked at Dr. Walsh, who said, 'Go along, Dermot. Keep the bandage clean and return in two weeks so I can remove the sutures.'

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As the farmer was leaving Agnes Walsh came into the surgery office. "What is going on? What are you doing here?"

The lead Auxiliary said, "Shut your mouth woman! We are here to shut down medical support for IRA murderers. Your son is one of those murderers."

"Are you arresting us?" Dr. Walsh asked.

"You can call it that," the lead Auxiliary said. "Outside, the both of you. You'll be coming with us, Doctor."

The other Auxiliaries grabbed Walsh's parents roughly by their arms and pushed them outside. As they led Dr. Walsh toward one of the lorries, Agnes Walsh screamed insults and started pummeling the Auxiliary holding her arm with her free fist. As she pulled free from his grasp, she fell to the ground. As the Auxiliary reached down to pull her to her feet, she struck him in the nose with her fist.

The blow surprised and infuriated him. In reflex, he swung his revolver striking her hard across the forehead. Falling back, the gash began bleeding profusely. Barely conscious, she remained on the ground breathing heavily.

Seeing what happened, Dr. Walsh attempted to resist but the blow from the butt of a revolver to his head subdued any resistance.

The lead Auxiliary yelled, "Get to it! Burn it to the ground."

Several Auxiliaries carrying jerry cans of petrol entered the house. Minutes later, the building was fully engulfed.

Disoriented and bleeding, Agnes Walsh looked on helplessly unable to get up from the ground. Worse than seeing her home in flames was watching as the Auxiliaries drove off taking her husband.

Dermot O'Connor, the farmer being treated by Dr. Walsh when the Auxiliaries arrived, remained nearby after leaving Walsh's house. Once the Auxiliaries departed, he placed Agnes Walsh in his wagon and set off to his own farm to get help from his wife in treating Agnes Walsh. Not far along the road, he spotted the body of Dr. Walsh by the side of the road.

Murdered by a bullet to the back of the head. A terrible trauma for Agnes Walsh as O'Connor struggled getting the Doctor's body

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into the wagon. The best he could do was cover the Doctor's head with his coat while his injured wife wept sitting up next to him holding his lifeless hand.

Several violent confrontations in November 1920 between the IRA and British Crown forces framed the vicious character of this conflict. This was a challenge to the British Empire. Failure to suppress the insurgency could carry far reaching consequences among other colonies. Although Ireland elected members of Parliament to London, Ireland was nothing more than a mature colonial extension after hundreds of years of British domination.

On the third Sunday of November, the IRA struck a spectacular blow against the British forces in Dublin. The events of *Bloody Sunday* would further harden the violent tactics on both sides.

Michael Collins, the inspirational leader of the IRA, recruited a select team of assassins called the *Squad*. Their purpose was to make clandestine war on British Crown forces operating from Dublin Castle, the seat of British administration in Ireland. On the morning of the 21st, Collins set loose the *Squad* to kill British intelligence agents operating undercover in Dublin. The mission involving coordinated attacks in many different locations proved remarkably successful. Fifteen British agents were killed by gunshot from point blank range.

That afternoon, British forces reacted by surrounding a Gaelic football match in Croke Park. Something provoked the British to open fire with machine guns on players on the pitch. Fourteen players and spectators were killed and another sixty wounded.

Strategically the day's events favored the IRA. British intelligence in Dublin never recovered with covert agents fearing the same fate. The British reprisal against noncombatants further increased IRA support among the Irish population and in America representing a vital source of funding and arms.

Events that Sunday signaled to the IRA the need to escalate direct armed assault on British Crown forces. Make British continued presence in Ireland untenable. The IRA had the Irish

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population firmly on their side. British public sentiment was turning against the costly conflict in Ireland. Britain could not sustain military operations indefinitely. Greatly increasing British forces necessary to militarily subjugate Ireland was economically and politically unrealistic.

Lacking sufficient weapons and ammunition to arm all IRA members, the leadership fixed on a plan to create active service units, called flying columns. Well-armed small mobile units of fighters intended to harass British security forces. Inflict casualties and seize weapons. Utilize the vast rural countryside of Ireland populated with villages where IRA fighters could obtain support and safe haven. Classical guerrilla warfare tactics.

Tom Barry knew Dr. Walsh and his wife Agnes. They saved the lives of many wounded IRA. Losing one son in the Easter Rising of 1916, and their other son Egan now a wanted IRA fighter, Dr. Walsh and his wife now became casualties. Few families gave so much to the cause of Irish Freedom

Before the murder of Dr. Walsh, Barry had already decided to recruit Egan Walsh to join the West Cork flying column and command a section. Walsh displayed exceptional skills in using intelligence for tactical military advantage. In the Tooreen Ambush, Walsh displayed courage and leadership. Barry had in mind another audacious operation to bloody the reviled RIC Auxiliaries. The murder of his father would provide Walsh with the opportunity to transform grief into useful revenge.

Late the night following the murder of Dr. Walsh, Barry approached the home of Dermot O'Connor, the farmer undergoing treatment by Dr. Walsh at the time of the Auxiliaries' raid. Outside the house, ten IRA stood guard. Agnes Walsh was resting peacefully attended by O'Connor's wife Saoirse. Her husband sat with Egan Walsh as a knock on the door startled Walsh from his silent withdrawal. Extracting a revolver from his shoulder holster, Walsh jumped up from his chair.

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O'Connor answered the door then ushered Barry into the living room warmed by a fire in the hearth. Walsh lowered his revolver as Barry embraced him.

"How is your mother, Egan?" Barry said.

"Resting. She took a nasty blow to the head. Possible concussion. Dermot was there getting his arm stitched up by my father when the Auxiliaries burst into the surgery. Saoirse says she will recover but needs looking after for a few days. She may never emotionally recover from the death of my father. My older sister in Cork City will look after her."

Barry turned to O'Connor. "What happened?"

O'Connor said, "The bastard in charge accused Dr. Walsh of giving medical aid to the IRA. They let me go after seeing my wound was not from a bullet. When they dragged Dr. Walsh away, Agnes protested and one of them smashed her head with his gun.

"After leaving the house, I walked to my wagon close by. I watched as they hurt Agnes then set fire to the house."

"It was you who found Dr. Walsh?"

O'Connor turned toward Egan. "Aye. As I travelled here to the farm with Agnes in the wagon, I saw Dr. Walsh lying next to the road only a mile further on."

Tears welled up in O'Connor's eyes. "It was something awful. I couldn't leave the Doctor's body out there. Terrible for Agnes her being wounded and now riding in my wagon next to the body of her husband."

Walsh sat down with a vacant look, withdrawing into his despair. Barry pulled up a chair next to him. "Nothing I can say could possibly ease your grief, Egan. Your father and mother have given so much to the cause. Everyone in the Brigade grieves with you."

Walsh looked at Barry without expression.

"You have no choice but to move forward, Egan. The only thing I can offer is for you to join our flying column. I need someone smart like you. You need a way to redirect your grief into action. I can promise you will have the opportunity to strike hard against those responsible for this atrocity against your family."

Walsh remained silent for several moments before nodding his agreement.

The engagement planned by Barry was against the Auxiliary Division of the RIC. The worse perpetrators of British terror in Ireland. Ostensibly a creation to bolster the Royal Irish Constabulary with experienced and trained former British Army officers. However, in practice the Auxiliaries acted independently seeing their mission as one of inflict terror to damage IRA support among the Irish population.

Although former British Army officers with experience in WWI, these were not officers from the traditional British officer corps. Prior to the attrition of the Great War, British officers came from well-connected families, paying for officer commissions. With the carnage of the Western Front, soldiers from the ranks were promoted to fill the ever-increasing demand for replacement officers. Referred in a pejorative sense as *temporary gentlemen*, post-war demobilization found no home for them in the British Army. Instead, having not come from wealth, they faced unemployment in a distressed British economy overwhelmed with returning veterans.

The offer of £7 per week pay provided an attractive inducement to ship out to Ireland for a one-year enlistment in the Auxiliary Division of the RIC. However, there existed no sense of longevity or higher purpose. In practice, higher level command leadership was virtually nonexistent. Individual ADRIC companies were left to operate without restraint with no more motivation than that of mercenaries.



The Auxiliaries were chiefly responsible for the reprisal against civilians in Croke Park following Michael Collins' sensational decimation of British intelligence operations in Dublin. Tom Barry therefore thought it appropriate to target the Auxiliaries in County Cork to demonstrate IRA capabilities in the South. Like Collins, Barry intended to inflict serious casualties against this enemy. Engage in repeated small-unit IRA engagements

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would demonstrate the vulnerability of the Black & Tans and the Auxiliary Division of the Royal Irish Constabulary. By 1920, resignations had depleted the ranks of the original RIC ranks. Those that remained became isolated in their barracks fearing IRA attack and ceased to be an effective counterbalance to the insurgency. What served as policing in Ireland fell to the RIC paramilitary forces of the Black & Tans and Auxiliaries.

By November, the Auxiliaries had been conducting a reign of terror throughout Ireland for several months. Yet the IRA had yet to fire even a shot at them. They represented a formidable mobile strike force with each officer carrying a rifle and two revolvers strapped to each thigh. From their Sam Browne belts hung two Mills grenades. Their mission was to cripple the resistance will of the Irish population. They directed their indiscriminate killings, lootings, and burnings against noncombatant civilians attempting to cut off support to the IRA. Rumors began circulating that the IRA was unable to confront the Auxiliaries. Tom Barry intended to change that impression.

Too exposed for Egan Walsh to remain at the O'Connor residence, Barry took Walsh with him to a safe house. Barry spent the rest of that night explaining his plan of attack to Walsh.

"I have thirty-six men assembled for an ambush. Most are new to the flying column, but all are good lads. I am dividing the raiding party into three sections. I want you to command one of those sections. You did an outstanding job in the Tooreen ambush."

"What is the target?" Walsh asked.

"A contingent of Auxiliaries. From Company C, billeted in Macroom Castle."

Walsh raised his eyebrows. "That is outside the West Cork Brigade operating area."

"Aye, but these are the Auxiliaries responsible for forays to the south. The same command that murdered your father. Come Friday I'm venturing out to select the ambush site. Every day, units of Auxiliaries venture south using the Macroom-Dunmanway Road. Care to come along?"

Walsh nodded. "Where are our men right now?"

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“Training. East of Dunmanway. I will take you there tomorrow. I see you already have a revolver.”

“It’s my brother’s Webley. He died in the Easter Rising. Michael Collins returned it to my father. Collins’ father and my father were friends and IRB members having grown up not far from each other on the Cork coast.”

“I saw you shoot down two Essex soldiers at Tooreen.”

Walsh nodded. “My brother Cormac taught me how to shoot. Never thought a time would come when I would use the skill to kill an enemy.”

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At 2:00am on Sunday 28 November, the flying column assembled miles from the ambush site near Kilmichael. A priest arrived an hour later to hear confessions. Individually the men went to him then returned to the ranks. Egan Walsh did not participate. Why should he after Catholic Bishop of Cork, threatened the IRA with excommunication for killing British security forces.

After receiving the priest’s blessing, Barry informed them of the mission. They then set out on the long march to Kilmichael avoiding roads. A miserable night with a driving rain drenched the men without relief. They reached the ambush site at 8:00am to a cold winter dawn. The location was a barren countryside interspersed with peat bogs. The position Barry chose was a short stretch of 150 yards where the road abruptly turned west-east before resuming its north-south direction.

The ground rose slightly on the north side of the road with scattered rocks affording limited cover for the waiting IRA. Intelligence reported Auxiliary units passed here every day in a convoy of two or three lorries.

Before allowing the section leaders to deploy their men, Barry addressed the unit. “As you can see, this is not an ideal location for ambush. However, necessity dictates this is where we must make the fight. There is no plan for retirement should the situation turn against us. We shall smash the Auxiliaries or meet our end here. What we do this day is necessary to protect West Cork

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and show all Ireland that British terror will be met with equal terror.

“It is an honor to fight alongside every one of you this day. God be with us. Now take up your positions.”

By 9:00am, everyone deployed to their assigned position. All understood not only their role but the larger picture of the role of each group. The only food available was that offered by the occupants of a lone house nearby along with a bucket of tea. With sodden clothing, the men shivered all day in the cold.

As dusk began to fall at 4:00pm, strategically located scouts signaled movement on the road. As the first lorry arrived at the ambush site, it slowed for the slight bend in the road. At a distance of a hundred yards, they saw a man in military uniform standing in the middle of the road. That was Tom Barry wearing a borrowed IRA tunic with Sam Browne belt and holster. However, with the mixed uniforms of the special RIC British forces, from a distance it was difficult to identify the uniform.

As the lead lorry slowed and came closer, Barry blew a whistle and tossed a Mills grenade. The grenade sailed through the air landing into the driver’s seat of the open-topped lorry. The explosion killed the driver causing the lorry to lose control and come to a stop. Rifle and revolver fire erupted from IRA attackers of Section One concealed behind rocks.

Auxiliaries jumped from the lorry and began returning fire. Fighting was at close range and over within a minute. All nine Auxiliaries from the lead lorry lay dead or dying.

The second lorry with another nine Auxiliaries stopped near the bend in the road a hundred yards from the lead lorry involved with the intense firefight. These Auxiliaries dismounted their lorry and began dispersing looking for firing positions.

IRA Section Two consisting of seven men led by Egan Walsh began firing on the Auxiliaries of the second lorry from the north side of the road immediately after it stopped. A third IRA section of six riflemen occupying a chain of rocks south of the road prevented the Auxiliaries from securing cover.

Barry and those that attacked the first lorry now joined in the fight against the Auxiliaries from the second lorry. As the tide of

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the battle turned in favor of the IRA, Barry called for the Auxiliaries to surrender. A reply came and the IRA temporarily ceased firing. When several IRA stood, several Auxiliaries resumed firing, killing two of the IRA.

Sensing deception, Barry angrily yelled, "Resume firing! Do not stop until ordered!"

An Auxiliary fired two shots from a revolver at Walsh from five yards but missed. Walsh steadied his Webley .455 revolver and shot the officer in the upper chest, following with a second shot hitting him in the left elbow as he spun around from the first round. Yet the man still held his revolver pointing it at Walsh.

Walsh steadied his weapon aiming a kill shot to the head. The man dropped as the large round struck below his left eye.

Walsh looked around at the one-sided carnage. The scattered Auxiliaries from the second lorry were now also dead or dying. The third section took up a position before the bend in the road to deal with a possible third lorry.

Barry saw to the one IRA badly wounded and looked upon the two dead IRA and the greater number of dead Auxiliaries.

Of the eighteen Auxiliaries, one badly wounded man escaped across the barren field finding a house looking for help. Two IRA men unrelated to the ambush were staying at the house and killed the wounded Auxiliary with his own gun then dumped his body in a bog.

While the ambush was a resounding success, the vicious close quarters fighting left the IRA survivors stunned. No one spoke. Many looked upon the scene of carnage expressionless. A couple vomited.

Understanding he must reestablish control, Barry yelled out, "Section leaders, form your men on the road." For twenty minutes, Barry drilled his command, relying on military discipline to refocus his shaken command. They had a long nighttime march ahead of them. No telling the scope of the British response once they discover the bodies of their comrades.

For Tom Barry, the Kilmichael Ambush proved the effectiveness of the IRA in blood. For Egan Walsh he understood this level

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of violence now represented his life until the British left Ireland,
or he died in the attempt