

THE PATRIOT GAME

by Mike McCormack, AOH Historian

World War II brought change to Northern Ireland as Loyalists and Nationalists who shared the same bomb shelters broke down the barriers of prejudice erected by the Unionist Ascendancy to keep them divided. The war also created jobs, and the small measure of prosperity experienced by the nationalists satisfied many grievances. After the war, England rebuilt the barriers to maintain control of the north. Churchill publicly blasted the Irish Free State for neutrality during the war despite the cooperation extended to the allies by the Irish, and the tens of thousands of Irish volunteers in the British military - all of which was well known to the government though not to the general public. Anger grew in Ireland in an era of post-war high taxes, and unemployment.

In 1948, the Irish Free State abolished its Commonwealth status and passed the Republic of Ireland Act. The date for it to go into effect was not announced, but it was signed on December 21. On January 20, 1949, northern P.M. Basil Brooke, called a general election for February 10. Southern Prime Minister Costello urged support for anti-partition candidates in the upcoming northern election, and pamphlets describing the discrimination and the gerrymandering in the north were published. Unionists retaliated with a torrent of anti-Republic, and anti-Catholic propaganda that worked on sectarian fears declaring that if the border went, loyalists would be victims of IRA gunmen, urged on by Catholic clergy, in an effort to establish the Pope as the ruler of Ireland. The propaganda, as well as years of conditioning by the Orange Order, had the desired effect as record numbers went to the polls to return the Unionists to power!

In the south; Dail Eireann brought the Republic of Ireland Act into effect on Easter Monday, April 18, 1949 - 33 years after Pearse's declaration on the steps of the GPO. On May 3, British Prime Minister, Clement Atlee declared *Northern Ireland remains part of the United Kingdom and it is hereby affirmed that in no event will Northern Ireland or any part thereof cease to be part of Her Majesty's Dominions without the consent of the Parliament of Northern Ireland.* The new Republic of Ireland protested Britain's continuation of partition, and mass meetings urged action, but the new Republic was not prepared for anything stronger than a protest. With tempers at a fever pitch, a call for action was heard, and the rebirth of the IRA was underway.

Depleted in numbers and finances after the war, the IRA began reorganizing by attacking unemployment and high taxes. They gathered support by standing against the mistreatment of Republican prisoners, and emerged in their traditional role of spokesmen for the Irish people with the rallying cry: **'The Border Must Go!'** On June 5, 1951, the Derry unit of the new IRA raided Ebrington Barracks and captured a quantity of guns and ammunition. As raids continued, the situation in the north became more tense, and nervous B-Special patrols became more violent. The Irish Times urged the northern government to curb its patrols noting that, "*paramilitary forces are an anachronism in a democratic society*", but it was to no avail. On August 15, 1955, four men attacked a Royal Artillery Training Camp, but fled as a sentry gave the alarm. Citing the attack, the Minister of War made a special report to the Cabinet, and P.M. Anthony Eden ordered mobilization to deal with the new IRA campaign. It was later abandoned when four British Officers confessed to the 'raid' to *make things hotter for the IRA.* An embarrassed War Office sent a communique to the police apologizing for the trouble caused and the matter was dropped.

Then, on the night of December 12, 1956, IRA volunteers assembled in 10 different areas along the border in an arc from Antrim to Derry. On a signal from the campaign center in Monaghan, the morning quiet of December 13 was broken by numerous explosions. The border campaign to retake the six counties had begun. Reaction was swift. By December 15, the Special Powers Act was revived allowing arrest and internment without warrant or trial, a curfew was imposed, and police forces strengthened. On December 22, the RUC spiked or blew up every border crossing road and bridge that had no customs post. By the end of the year 3,000 RUC and 12,000 B-Specials were called into action, and the north was an armed camp.

On the morning of January 1, 1957, an IRA raiding party set out for the RUC barracks in Brookborough, Co. Fermanagh. They parked their truck in front of the barracks in the center of town and opened fire on the barracks with rifles and a Bren gun while an assault group attempted to set off a land mine against the building. The mine did not explode and the assault group returned, through a hail of bullets, for another one. This too misfired. The raiders began to run out of ammunition as guns from the barracks returned a deadly rain of fire.

Misfortune continued to plague them as one of the raiders threw a grenade toward a barrack window to cover their retreat. The grenade bounced off the building, and rolled under the truck where it exploded, blowing the tires, and damaging the gears. Somehow the raiders made it back to the crippled truck and the truck limped away. At Baxter's Cross, near the town of Roslea, the truck gave out, and the badly shot up raiding party sought refuge in an abandoned barn. Six members of the party were wounded, two of whom were unable to travel – 19-year old Fergal O'Hanlon of Monaghan and 27-year old Sean South of Limerick. Both were unconscious. One of the party, volunteered to stay behind and hold off the pursuing RUC so the others might escape, but it was felt that such an action would endanger the lives of their unconscious comrades. It was decided to leave South and O'Hanlon to be captured so they would at least get the medical attention they needed. The rest of the raiding party retreated toward the border.

The RUC arrived just after the IRA had left, and opened fire on the abandoned truck. After finding it empty, they approached the barn. The retreating IRA men heard another burst of fire. They prayed it was just the warning shots associated with assaulting a military target, but they later learned it was the murder of their two unconscious comrades. This was a source of unforgiving bitterness in IRA circles for years to come. Author Tim Pat Coogan wrote, *In a sense the Brookborough ambush explains everything about the IRA, and its hold on Irish tradition. It shows all the courage, the self-sacrifice, the blundering, and the emotional appeal that have characterized and kept alive the IRA spirit for centuries. The two young men who lost their lives in the Brookborough affair were given two of the biggest funerals in living memory - but during their lives there was never sufficient public support for their aims for them to receive proper military training or even to be correctly briefed on the target that claimed their lives.*

The courage of the poorly trained, ill equipped and inexperienced 'lads', in going up against the superior RUC and British, caught the Irish imagination and re-ignited the nationalist spirit. As the cortege of Sean South made its way south towards Limerick, it was met with thronged crowds and blazing bonfires, in inspirational procession. At midnight on Jan 5, 1957, 50,000 people, including the mayor and local politicians, stood in the freezing rain to welcome Sean South back home. On the following day, 20,000 people attended his funeral.

In later years, a memorial was erected at Moane Cross in Fermanagh using stone from the abandoned barn in which South and O'Hanlon were killed. Sean South and Fergal O'Hanlon took their place among the martyrs to Ireland's cause, and their memories were kept alive in songs which have become part of the Nationalist tradition - **Sean South of Garryowen** and **The Patriot Game**.



South-O'Hanlon Memorial, Fermanagh