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Tragedy at Cullenstown Strand

27th of January 1941

This is the tragic story of four Irish soldiers from the Curragh area who lost their lives in the service of their country during the Second World War. They were engaged in the dangerous work of destroying sea mines washed up on our shores. They are almost forgotten. Is it not time some monument in memory of their sacrifice was erected on the Curragh or at Cullenstown Strand? That their deaths may have been due to mistakes having been made does not diminish the fact that they died for their country.

During the war Britain imported a large part of its food, raw material and weapons from overseas, mostly from Canada and the USA.

All of this shipping had to pass on a sea route around Ireland to reach Britain. The Germans did everything in their power to stop this traffic by using their air and submarine service's.

After the fall of France Britain stood alone against the Germans. The south Irish Sea was easily reached from the occupied French ports and airfields used by the German submarine fleet and air forces. The British after terrible losses and having been denied the use of southern Irish ports, closed the south Irish Sea to shipping by laying sea mines. All sea traffic was directed around the North of Ireland to Britain by what was known as the western approaches, which was easier for them to defend. The U-boat menace almost cost Britain the war. The consequences for Britain and Ireland and indeed the world if this had of happened are unimaginable. In the three-month's of January to March 1941 the Allies lost some 317 ships totaling 1,250,000 tons. Many of these ships were sunk as they approached the choke point around the north of Ireland. The seabed around the western approaches is littered with hundreds of ships lost during the war.

The sea mines deployed in the early years of the war were of various types and some were of very old stock and some were not of a great design. They were however a great deterrent to submarines or warships. Basically they consisted of an anchoring device or heavy metal frame from which a tethered floating case of explosives rose to a pre-determined depth beneath the sea surface. The commonest means of detonation

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was by contact with a protruding prong on the floating mine. The prongs were usually made of glass or rubber-covered glass. When the glass was broken it allowed a small amount of acid to enter a battery, which produced an electric current strong enough to fire a detonator. This then set off the main charge with devastating results to anything nearby. Another type of detonator was tripped by long wires, which trailed, from the mine; these making contact with the steel hull of a vessel produced an electrical current sufficient to detonate the mine. A typical charge would be about 200kg of explosives but could be up to 1000kg in some cases. In some mines the explosion was so great that it could blow in the sides of a ship or the resulting decompression could suck the plates off the hull.

The Germans also laid mines in British coastal waters but with limited success. Most of the mines found in Irish coastal waters were of British origin. A mine exploding on a shore or in a harbor could devastate a small town. Depending on the size of the mine the danger area could extend to least one quarter of a mile inland. Generally the mines were not fitted with anti-handling devices. They were not easily disarmed. They were designed for short service and various devices were sometimes fitted to render them harmless or at least less dangerous after a set period of time. They also were fitted with devices to prevent them exploding due to the rough handling they received when being laid from a ship. Those used in the early years of the war were particularly unreliable. They were prone to break free from their tether and drift more especially after storms. They became a menace to shipping when they drifted outside the designated minefields or could endanger property and people on shore. The south of Ireland coastline was the resting-place of a large number of them during the war. Sometimes when they hit the shore they detonated. All too often they had degraded somewhat and failed to detonate but still remained in a very unstable and dangerous condition. In fact occasionally even today mines are discovered on beaches and are still considered very dangerous.

I have been in touch with the Irish Army records section in Cahal Brugha Barracks in Dublin in attempt to find out exactly what occurred on that faithful day in January 1941. The head of the record section Col. V Laing provided me with a copy of some newspaper cuttings from their files, which contain an account of the incident. These cuttings also contain an account of the evidence given by an Irish Army officer at the inquest into the death of the victims. Col. Laing makes mention of an intelligence report in the files but released nothing from it.

. About noon on the 27th of January 1941 the Gardai at Baldwinstown contacted the military and reported the presence of a mine at Cullenstown Strand on the shore. A Lieut. M F Horgan, Sergeant James Curran (40), Privates James Kehoe (31), Joseph Tinsley (33) Peter Conlon (22) and T Groome were dispatched to deal with it. Also present were a Garda Morrissey and a LDF group leader and national teacher from Duncormick Mr. A Herne. There is some doubt about the schoolteacher's name. It may have been Ahern. A gentleman that I interviewed in Wexford, whom he taught, used the name Hearne. Newspaper reports of the time use the name Ahern.

The following account is based on newspaper reports and testimony by Wattie Cullen the present owner of the Coastguard Station at Cullenstown Strand, Mr. Peter Colfe of Cullenstown and others whose names are unknown but were interviewed by me. I would also like to acknowledge the help of Mr. John Sinnott of Duncormick who

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gave me some valuable leads when I visited his licensed premises with Tom Flanagan in 2007.

The exact location of the mine explosion is unknown. It's thought the mine was located partially in the water on a spit of land directly opposite the old Cullenstown Coastguard Station which at that time was an abandoned derelict building. The spit of land is known as the Ballyteigh Burrow. Whether the mine was on the open sea side of the spit of land or the shore side is unknown. However evidence given at the inquest on the victims suggests it be on the mainland side of the burrow. The Army party had to use a boat to cross about 100 yards of water to reach it.

The area has little changed over the years since the incident took place. The Coastguard Station, which at the time was deserted, is now converted into apartments but remains largely the same. A small lane runs down to the Coastguard Station (now owned by Wattie Cullen) and past it to the shore. Here also is an old boathouse and at one time there must have been a launching ramp for the coastguard cutter. In any case the party had to use a boat to cross a stretch of water about 100 yards wide to reach the mine. They were equipped with rifles, guncotton, gelignite and detonators. From about 400 yards the mine was shot at using .303 rifles. It failed to explode. The officer in charge and the sergeant then crossed in a boat and examined the mine up close. They noted three hits. We do not know how many shots were fired but at four hundred yards this was good shooting in my opinion. Why two men would have approached the dangerous device is difficult to understand. It is standard practice in such a situation to never expose two people when one will do. The officer then fixed guncotton to the mine and attempted to detonate it. He used an electrically fired detonator, which means he must have laid out a line to a safe position to use an electrical generator. No mention is made of the digging of a trench for protection, which would have been standard practice and a wise precaution. The detonator fired but the guncotton failed to explode because of water and spray. This was before the invention of the plastic bag. The mine was partially floating at this time. Rifle fire at a shorter range was tried without effect. A further examination showed more hits but the mine failed to explode. More rifle fire was tried, again without effect. By this stage the mine must have been riddled with holes. It well may be that by now the party may have become somewhat of the opinion that it was reasonably safe or at least of little danger. The men then secured the mine to an anchor with a ten-yard rope. It would appear from the evidence that the mine was partially afloat. For some reason the officer decided he needed a longer rope. If secured to the shore at high tide it would then be in a stable position out of the water at low tide. Perhaps he felt the tide would take the mine away into the sea or perhaps he thought the mine would lose its buoyancy as it was by now full of bullet holes and it would sink. He withdrew his men to a safe distance and went himself to get a rope from the Coastguard station area where some boats were stored. I would imagine he withdrew the men to a position behind the ridge, which forms the spit of land. Perhaps on the seaside of the spit of land. At the inquest the officer stated that he told his sergeant "Stay there until I get a longer rope". Why did the officer go himself to fetch a longer rope? It would seem more natural for an officer to send one of his men on such an errand.

We must bear in mind this was the month of January, after six o'clock in the evening by now and on a very exposed shore with possibly the light failing and the tide rising. Also the men must by now have been wet and cold and perhaps hungry.

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The officer then rowed back alone to the coastguard station side of the water and had only walked a short distance when the mine exploded. We do not know what type of original detonator was fitted to the mine but obviously it had survived the mine rubbing against the shore and a considerable amount of rifle fire. The party was close around the mine when it exploded.

Why did the sergeant and the men return to the mine in the absence of the officer? And against his instructions. In his evidence the officer states of the sergeant "He knew the mine was dangerous to move". Was moving the mine discussed?

Private T Groome said that after the officer went ashore he had seen the sergeant and the soldiers near the mine, one man actually had his hand on the mine and then it had exploded. After the explosion three of the party were dead, Sergeant Curren, Privates Tinsley and Kehoe. Private Conlon was alive but badly injured. He died some days later. The LDF group leader Francis Herne (Ahern) who had remained on top of a rise some distance away was also injured but recovered after a few weeks in hospital. Why were so many of the party near the mine? Were they trying to pull it onto the shore?

Is it possible that the officer or men knew nothing about the firing mechanism of a sea mine? They may have thought that a mine needed to be struck to detonate. Did they not appreciate that all it needed was a small trickle of acid to contact two metal plates for the detonator to be activated. Bullets could pass through the Amatol main charge without causing an explosion.

The bodies were brought ashore to the boathouse and the then derelict coastguard station where the dead were laid out and the wounded treated.

Mr. Wattie Cullen of the Coastguard Station who was then a child remembers his older sister lifting him up to a window to see the lights of military lorries down in the Coastguard Station yard on the night of the tragedy. At the time the Cullen family lived in Cullenstown on the hill above the Station.

There are reports gathered locally from older residents that the officer was seen in a highly agitated state on the roadway in Cullenstown Strand after the explosion waving his side arm around and he had to be restrained. One would expect him to be distraught.

At the inquest on the victims the South Wexford Coroner Mr. M F O'Connor puts the blame for the tragedy squarely on the shoulders of the victims. He remarked that had the instructions of the officer in charge been carried out there would have been no necessity to have an inquest.

Pieces of the mine were found

over a wide area. Some were found years later in the thatch of a house in Cullenstown. There are reports that the local blacksmith used some of the metal in his business. The explosion was heard six miles inland.

A newspaper report on the 31st of January lists some thirty mines along this stretch of coastline. Some 200 residents of the village of Slade were evacuated because of mines. Twelve families in or near Cullenstown Strand were evacuated because of two mines near the village on that date. The Gardai, LDF or other military personnel guarded these mines when they came ashore pending the arrival of Army Engineers to detonate them. Twenty mines exploded of their own accord when they hit the shore

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around that date. It seems likely that a winter storm and poor mine tethers combined to free a large number of mines.

No reason was given for why the party went to such lengths to detonate the mine. If some important structure such as a bridge or harbor installation was threatened then more risk might have been warranted. In this area of the shore there was no reason to take the risks that were taken. The result was four good soldiers lost their lives. The Coroner did not question the officer's judgment in this. Neither did he ask to what use was he going to put a longer rope.

The funerals of the victims were most impressive.

Sergeant James Curran and Private Joseph Tinsley had a joint funeral. By all accounts the funerals were most moving affairs, a tribute both to the men themselves and also to the fact that they each belonged to such well-known families. Their remains were taken from Wexford on Tuesday evening to the garrison church of Saint Bridget on the Curragh. Requiem mass was celebrated at 10 o'clock on Wednesday with full military honors. Both coffins were draped in the National flag. The No 3 Army Band led the cortege and more than 200 men drawn from the 21st Battalion formed an escort party. The pallbearers and the firing party were drawn from the Army Corps of Engineers. The commandant of the Engineer's Col. Prendergast and other senior officers of the Corps were present. The OC of the Curragh Col. T McNally and his staff also attended. The cortege left for Newbridge at 3.00p.m. When the cortege reached Newbridge the town had all but shut down. All business's had closed and the townspeople lined the street. The burial took place in the New Cemetery Newbridge. The officiating clergy at the graveside was led by Rev E J Cleary who was well known to both families. Trumpeters sounded the last post and the firing party discharged three volleys over the grave in a final tribute.

The chief mourners for James Curran were Mrs. M Curran (widow), William, John and O'Keefe (sons), Kathleen, (daughter) and Miss Curran sister.

For Joseph Tinsley the chief mourners were Mr. and Mrs. William Tinsley (parents), William (my father) and Edward (brothers), Mrs. A Kennedy, Mrs. R McCarney and Miss Frances Tinsley (sisters). Tom Tinsley, Charles Tinsley and Ben Martin uncles. Later that day the funeral of Private James Keogh took place in Kilcullen, again with full military honors.

On that same evening the remains of Private Peter Conlon arrived from Wexford to Saint Conleths Parish Church in Newbridge. The following day his funeral took place to the New Cemetery in Newbridge with full military honors. Peter Conlon was a son of Frank Conlon (Joyce) TC the well known Kildare Gaelic footballer who had played on the same famous All Ireland winning Kildare team as the Fitzgerald brother's John (Jack) and Michael (Gundy) my grandfather.

Joseph Tinsley's gravestone records after his name the simple inscription "Died on duty".

Note on Joseph Tinsley and some of his family connections.

Joseph Tinsley was the first-born son of William and Mary Ann Tinsley of the Curragh Golf Club. He was named after his grandfather Joseph Tinsley of Ballysax. Joseph of Ballysax died as a result of a fall from his horse near Lumville around the turn of the century. When the Second World War broke out Joseph Tinsley like many other fellow Irishmen joined the Irish Army and prepared to defend the country. He was a private in the Irish Army Corps of Engineers. He was single and 33 years old

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when he died. His family loved him and two of his sisters who gave birth to boys in 1941 after his death both named their newborn sons Joseph after him. One of these Joseph's was Joseph McCarney of the Curragh. His father the late Henry McCarney served all his life in the Defense Forces and was a Congo veteran. Joseph McCarney possessed one of the finest minds ever to have attended the Curragh Boys School. He was a retired professor of philosophy at London's South Bank University. Joseph was a world-renowned expert on the ideology of Karl Marx and wrote several books on the subject. Joe as we knew him was tragically killed in a car accident last year in England. Our family therefore lost a Joseph from each of three generations to tragedy. The other Joseph is Joseph Kennedy who is alive and well living in Dublin. My late uncle (my mothers brother) Eamon Fitzgerald remembered Joseph when he was a fellow young recruit in the Irish army on the Curragh. He told me that Joseph was very reserved and always seemed to be reading books when he met him. He recalled that at mess time Joe never seemed to be in a hurry to get his grub unlike the rest of the young recruits who almost fought one another to get theirs.