

The shelling of the Strand Barracks

by P.J. Ryan

IN voices appalled with horror it was suggested that the Staters might bring down the Big Gun from Dublin and start shelling the defenders of the Republic. As everything that went on in the rival camps was known to each side and to the citizens, the various events of the day were discussed with homely and spirited candour. As the city prepared to bed down for the night, the possibility that the Staters might bring down the Big Gun was freely considered.

In the four military barracks there was quiet and confident calm amongst the garrisons. The possibility of the Big Gun being used against them was also freely discussed. It was felt that the gun would come in by the Dublin Road and that its progress would be resisted and halted. It was felt that Patrick Sarsfield of glorious memory looking down from Celestial Orbit would smile approval on their noble efforts and bless their brave hearts.

While some discussed and others mused and some lay quietly dreaming, the gun came south over O'Brien's Bridge. It crossed the Shannon again at Athlunkard Bridge and continued on by the Corbally Road. It crossed over the Abbey river by Park Bridge and entered the city before ten at night.

The gun was towed by a covered, heavy motor lorry and travelled at about nine miles per hour. If it had travelled any faster, the iron-shod wooden wheels would have fallen to pieces. The gun slowed down to a crawl to pass the barrier at the humped-back, narrow Park Bridge. The gun was called Sean McKeon's 18-Pounder. It entered the city on the evening of Wednesday, the nineteenth of July, 1922.

The gun was taken to Arthur's Quay that night. Next morning, July 20th, the gun was set up alongside the Curraghower Falls and forty feet from the quay wall. The gun was manned by three Limerick men, Jim Leden, John and Michael McNamara, all from the "Island". These three men had been in artillery regiments of the British Army and had been demobilised in 1919 and 1920 at the end of the first World War. The officer in charge of the gun was Colonel Fraher, an ex-officer of an artillery regiment and also a Limerick man.

By 10 a.m. in the morning, the whole city was aware of the arrival of the gun and that the Strand Barracks was to be shelled. Crowds of citizens flocked to every vantage point to view the scene of impending horror. The Staters were unable to stop the onrush of spectators, except at Arthur's Quay where lines of barbed wire prevented entry.

Almost dead on 10.30 a.m. the gun was ready. The range across the river was about 150 yards. At such short range aim is always taken through the barrel of the gun. Colonel Fraher and each of the gunners in turn looked through the barrel of the gun. Some few privileged officers also had a look through the barrel of the gun. It was considered improper to invite the Major and the two city Bishops to have a look; there was but little time for such courtesies. The view through the barrel was true; it gave a telescopic view of the Strand Barrack's gate. The shell was then inserted in the breach in correct military manner; the gunners then saluted their officers and the officer returned the salute.

This gun was one of a pair left behind in Athlone

Barracks by the British when they evacuated and the Barracks was handed over to General Sean McKeon. They were old 1912 vintage guns, and were badly worn. With the guns was a supply of solid shells. The shells did not contain an explosive charge and so did not explode. In fact, like the guns, the shells were obsolete. It was a solid shell that was inserted in the breach of the eighteen-pounder. Now that everything was ready, a great hush fell upon the military and spectators and a last consultation was held between the officers. Everyone realised that this was an historic occasion, a momentous event. Not since the Siege of 1691 had a siege-gun been fired in Limerick city.

Standing twenty feet from the gun, Colonel Fraher waved his arm. Michael McNamara then pulled the lanyard and fired the gun. It was 10.30 a.m. With the roar of the explosion, the gun jumped eighteen inches in the air and recoiled backwards, the trail of the gun narrowly missing the gunners. The shell travelled forward and struck a telegraph pole, thirty feet to the left of the Strand Barracks' gate, cutting down the pole. The shell ricocheted and then struck the second window to the right of the gate. It skidded along the road and later was picked up near the Treaty Stone.

The spectators were happy with the spectacle and the loud bang which was heard for miles away. They were unhappy with the result and expressed disapproval of the gunners until it was pointed out that this first shot was a trial shot to get the feel of the gun. Better results would follow the next shot. A consultation was held between the Colonel and the gunners. It was agreed that the soft mud and stone of the roadway at Arthur's Quay was not the best surface for the spade of the gun. A deeper hole was then dug for the trail of the gun.

Once more the gun was mounted and aim was taken through the barrel of the gun. From the first shot it was realised that the gun was shooting thirty-five feet to the left at one hundred and fifty yards range. This represented a lateral deviation of about fifteen degrees. To allow for this lateral deviation, the gun was aimed at the window near the red brick house on the right of the Strand Barracks. Once more into the breach was slammed a solid shell. Once more the gunners saluted and the Colonel returned the salute. The Colonel's hand dropped the signal and McNamara fired the gun. The gun belched smoke and flame as it again jumped almost two feet in the air. It then moved forward, swung around and a wheel became embedded in the hole dug for the trail of the gun. The gun was now pointed at Strand House.

After this odd behaviour of the gun, no further shells were fired, as it was feared the gun might swing around and shoot the gunners. The tenants in the tenement houses on Arthur's Quay complained loudly saying—take that damned yoke away before the houses are knocked down on top of us.

The second shell struck the Barracks' gate knocking it down. It then bounced off the Barracks' square and disappeared over the roof at the back of the building. Thus ended the shelling in the Fourth Siege of Limerick.