

Bloody Rain

Tom Costello felt like he'd been plunged into a bath of ice-cold water and held there until he was so wet and numb that if someone punched him he wouldn't feel a thing. It had been raining for hours, even before they'd arrived and taken up their positions amongst the dripping conifers overlooking the single-track road as it forced its way up the steep hillside. The tall grass would also have to play its part in providing them with necessary cover and it had long since ceased to be uncomfortable lying on its saturated surface.

There were eight of them, split into two groups of four, who had planted themselves on either side of the road. It was the perfect spot for an ambush. A blind man in a snowstorm could have seen that, and Tom could hardly believe anyone would be so careless as to navigate this narrow stretch of track. That was the Brits for you, he thought – arrogant to the point of stupidity. He would make sure they'd soon come to regret their decision, even if a tiny doubt continued to gnaw at the back of his mind that this might all be a pointless waste of time. What if the intelligence was false? They'd eventually have to trudge home frustrated, their rifles still full of bullets and their bodies already in the grip of colds that would probably floor them for a few days at least.

Tom sat up and stared through the sheets of rain that poured relentlessly across the dismal landscape. There was no sign of life in any direction and he cursed the spy who'd tipped them off. He was probably sitting in front of a peat fire at this very moment, thankful that all he'd been asked to do was provide information. If it was wrong, Tom knew he'd have to fight the temptation to shoot the messenger. It would be a waste of a bullet, he thought, but a couple of well-aimed punches would still make him feel better.

There was a cough, quick and urgent, and he glanced round, hoping it was a signal that something had been spotted. It was only Danny Doyle clearing his throat before pushing a cigarette between his lips and cupping his hand round it to offer shelter from the rain as he tried to light it.

'Get that out of your mouth,' Tom hissed.

Danny looked up.

'They'll see the smoke, you feekin' eejit.'

Danny shook his head and snatched at the cigarette, crushing it angrily in his palm and throwing it away.

'No-one's coming, Tom,' he said.

'They'll be here. Bide your time.'

'We've been here for hours and there's been nothing. I'm so bloody cold I feel like pissing myself just to get some feeling back in my legs.'

Tom said nothing. He knew Danny was right but he didn't want to be the one who suggested they abandon their saturated vigil. In any case, it wasn't his call to make. Seamus Kelly was in charge and they would only be able to go home on his order. After all, he was the one who would have to answer to their superiors, so Tom could

understand the reluctance to acknowledge what increasingly seemed like a fruitless expedition.

Danny was glaring straight ahead, sulking like a child and Tom wasn't sure whether to laugh or slap the boy. Danny was only eighteen but he'd already proved himself on numerous ambushes before this one. No-one ever mentioned his age when it came to operations, though it never stopped the rest of the men teasing and tormenting him when the subject of women was mentioned and in particular the boy's lack of experience in that department.

Tom would laugh along with everyone else as Danny's embarrassment and rage built to a crescendo, though he never said anything himself. Danny was his cousin, after all, and there had to be some family loyalty. He felt protective of the younger man and he was glad they were part of the same flying column. He'd promised his Aunt Theresa that he would look after her son and that's what he always tried to do, though he had to leave Danny to deal with the verbal abuse he received by virtue of being the youngest member of the group.

He began imagining the bowl of steaming hot potato soup that would be waiting at Theresa's when they finally got away from here. He always called in on his way home, making sure that his cousin was safely delivered back to his parents, though the prospect of getting fed would be enough to lure anyone into their cottage at any time of day or night. Theresa's soup was legendary – better even than his own mammy's though he never told her that – and it would certainly be welcome on a day like today. He hoped Seamus would make a decision soon, licking his lips in anticipation of the soup that he swore he could almost taste already.

Murphy stood up and stretched, groaning as he held his rifle above his head.

‘It’s always feckin’ raining here,’ he said.

‘Stop your whining,’ said Seamus.

‘I’m only saying.’

‘We all know it’s raining. You don’t need to state the bloody obvious.’

Murphy held out his rifle and waved it in front of him.

‘We’re fighting for this, you know,’ he said.

‘What?’

‘To live in a country where the heavens drown us every day.’

‘Well, at least we’ll be wet and free,’ said Seamus.

‘I’d love to live somewhere warm.’

‘If you don’t shut up, I’ll send you to hell right now and you can warm your bony Armagh arse on the devil’s pitchfork to your heart’s content.’

Murphy shook his head but turned away and began staring towards the road, not wanting to run the risk of the threat becoming a reality, but he continued muttering under his breath. Seamus always wore an air of quiet authority which it was never wise to question. The men respected him – he was a veteran of nineteen-sixteen, after all, and had fought alongside James Connolly in Dublin – but they had seen enough of him in action to fear him as well.

Seamus was fed up. They all were and Tom knew the four men on the other side of the road were feeling exactly the same. It must have been at least two hours since they’d arrived and not a single vehicle had passed. They might have expected at least one tractor or truck from one of the nearby farms but there had been nothing. Even a passing

cyclist might have caught their attention and given them something to talk about but instead they were stuck with their own company and the incessant rain which had long ago soaked through the many layers of clothing they’d all put on. Every topic of conversation had been exhausted and now they were wet and tired and on the verge of mutiny.

Tom glanced at Seamus, and shook his head.

‘Right lads,’ Seamus said.

‘Something’s coming.’

‘What?’

‘Down there. Look.’ Danny pointed towards the bottom of the hill where they could see a truck beginning its slow ascent.

‘Heads down, lads. Now!’

They all dropped to the ground, not caring that the grass was wet and soggy. Hoods were pulled up, rifles pointed at the road and a silent determination quickly took over. Tom could feel his heart racing, the anticipation provoking a heightened sense of excitement, and he knew the rest of the men would be experiencing the same thing. He would have been worried if he didn’t feel this way. That would mean complacency on his part and it was not a welcome companion. Complacency could lead to death – his own – and he wasn’t ready for that just yet.

It would take less than five minutes for the truck to reach them and with each passing second his focus became narrower and sharper. It was a familiar sensation and it brought him a sense of comfort. He allowed a tiny smile to creep out from the edges of his mouth, though he could barely feel it, so numb was his face. This was what he was trained for. This was why he had volunteered. This was

what he enjoyed most, even if he sometimes felt guilty at having such feelings.

Seamus had no need to issue any final instructions. They all knew what they had to do. They'd gone over it so many times before and had carried out enough ambushes in the past to know their respective roles.

Tom would fire the first shot. He was their top marksman, the finest shot in Donegal; some said he was the best the IRA had in the whole of Ireland but he would always dismiss such praise even if, secretly, he hoped it was true. His first bullet would be for the commander of the army patrol.

'Shoot the head and the body loses all direction,' is what he'd always been told and it was true. Panic would spread through the rest of the soldiers when their commanding officer was taken out and before they had time to re-organise, most of them would also be dead. That's why there was no room for error. The first shot had to be perfect.

Tom lay absolutely still, the safety catch on his rifle cocked, his eye, steady and unblinking, trained through the sight on the road ahead. His finger gently caressed the trigger and he licked his lips again. It wouldn't be long now till he was wolfing down that potato soup.

It began as a distant growl, like a roll of thunder from many miles away, but slowly the rumbling of the truck grew louder, the engine seeming to groan and grumble as it pulled the weight of the vehicle and the group of soldiers sitting in the back up the steep road. Tom pictured the soldiers hunched together, as wet and miserable as he and the rest of his comrades were, probably cursing their own

bad luck at having to patrol this deserted stretch of Donegal on what felt like the wettest day of the year. None of them would be thinking that they were about to die, and even those who had contemplated such things in the past couldn't have pictured the last few minutes of their lives being spent in the back of a rain-soaked truck.

Tom glanced to his left where Danny lay, pressed to the ground. His cousin winked at him and Tom winked back. It was a ritual they had before the shooting began which made them both feel better because they realised they were not alone. Danny pulled out the silver chain he wore from under his jacket and kissed the medal of Our Lady. It was his lucky charm, he always insisted. Religion was not for Tom. He couldn't understand why anyone would pin their hopes and dreams on a bunch of superstitious nonsense that never put any food on the table and always let you down, and which made people accept their suffering in this life with the false promise of a better time after they died. He'd learned all that on his mother's knee and he'd never forgotten her words.

Danny hid the medal back under his clothes and grinned at his cousin. Tom shook his head dismissively and touched the trigger again as the rumbling truck drew ever closer.

Another minute passed and then it re-appeared round the bend in the road, inching its way forward as the track flattened out. The driver gripped the steering wheel and stared intently through the windscreen that was cleaned intermittently by a temperamental wiper. Another soldier sat beside him, arms folded, with his boots up on the dashboard.

The back of the truck was uncovered. Five soldiers sat

against one side, facing five of their colleagues while one man stood in the middle of them, hands on hips and staring ahead. He was the officer. Tom grinned and shook his head. It was as if they'd drawn a target on this man just to help him. He'd heard that British officers weren't the brightest but this really took stupidity to a new level. If he'd been in charge, he would have been beside the driver and dressed as a regular soldier so as not to draw attention to himself. Instead, this officer posed proudly in front of his men, his uniform distinct and dashing, his hat almost shouting out 'Look at me, I'm in charge. Shoot me first!'

Tom closed his left eye and stared through the sight with his right, focusing the target on the officer's forehead. He'd see if he could shoot the man without knocking his hat off. He squeezed the trigger, feeling a jolt to his shoulder as the rifle recoiled while from the other end the bullet exploded out of the barrel, though it had almost reached its target before the noise reached the ears of the soldiers. In the same instant the tiny piece of metal crashed through the skull of the officer, lifting him off his feet and sending him crashing backwards where he toppled over the end of the truck and landed with a dull thud on the wet road.

For a few moments the soldiers were stunned, gripped by an inertia brought on by the sight of their commander vanishing, remnants of his brain splattered on several of their faces, and it was in those seconds that the rest of Tom's comrades began firing. Bullets rained down on the truck which came to a sudden halt when the driver slumped over the steering wheel, having been shot through the throat. It was Tom's second shot.

Short explosions filled the Donegal countryside, soon followed by the panicked shouts of desperate soldiers mixed in with the screams of the dying. Several of the soldiers had managed to clamber over the side of the truck but while they sheltered at one side of the vehicle, trying to fire off some sort of response at their attackers in front of them, they were picked off from behind, unaware that they were surrounded.

Tom kept his sight trained on the front of the truck, watching as the passenger opened the driver's door and kicked his dead colleague out on to the road. He tried starting up the engine and after two failed attempts managed to spark it into life. It was at this point that Tom pressed his trigger again and a burst of lumpy red liquid smeared the inside of the windscreen.

The shooting continued for five minutes, most of it coming from the hillside, before Seamus shouted a ceasefire command. Immediately the guns drew silent, though some echoes of their activity resonated through the rain. Weak clouds of gun-smoke hung briefly in the air before finally being extinguished by the endless downpour and Tom caught a hint of the odour of burning cordite. No-one moved and rifles remained trained on the truck, waiting for any sudden movement that would indicate any unfinished business.

After a few minutes Seamus got to his feet, a signal for the rest of the men to follow suit.

'Careful, lads,' he shouted automatically as he led the way down the hill. Tom looked at Danny as he pushed himself on to his knees, feeling himself relax. It was another job safely and successfully executed. He knew they

didn't have too long to complete their work, which involved stripping the soldiers of any weapons they had, before army reinforcements might arrive, and they all quickly followed Seamus down the hill and on to the road, rifles still poised, but they were now gripped with a sense of elation and one or two whoops of delight filled the air.

This had been the perfect ambush, thought Tom as he began lifting weapons from the dead soldiers and stacking them at the side of the road. He nodded to Seamus as he passed him, a silent gesture of congratulation that the other man acknowledged. It wasn't always as easy as this. They both knew that and had seen enough comrades fall by their side not to get too carried away by one successful operation. Still, it was one they would enjoy when they finally all returned home.

Tom wasn't sure where he would be staying tonight. He was moving between safe houses, never feeling comfortable if he remained more than a couple of days in the one place. There were soldiers everywhere, and spies too, and he'd been warned on more than one occasion that he was considered a prize well worth capturing. Seamus knew where he was to go but Tom would wait until he'd dropped Danny off before finding out. The fewer people who knew the location the better and that included his cousin.

He didn't pay attention to the men he was relieving of their weapons. It was best not to look into their dead eyes lest he was haunted by them in his dreams, nor would he glance at their blood-soaked bodies which would only remind him of their youthfulness, which he had brought abruptly to an end. To him they were simply uniforms – enemy uniforms – and that was the only way to deal with it.

A sudden gunshot startled him and he spun round. There was a split second of silence before Murphy and Cahal Kennedy, one of the men from the other side of the hill, began firing their rifles at the back of the truck and he raced towards them as a low moan broke clear of the gunfire which had now ceased again. Danny was lying in the middle of the road, his knees pulled up towards his body and his hands clutching his stomach.

Tom glanced towards Murphy and Cahal. Their rifles were pointed at a soldier whose body, riddled with bullet wounds, was slumped against the tyre, and Tom immediately knew what had happened. Dropping his own weapon he stumbled forward and sunk down beside Danny whose groans were getting louder and more incessant. His cousin's hands were bright red like he'd dipped them in a pot of paint.

'Danny! Danny! It's okay. I'm here.'

'I'm shot, Tom. Oh God, I'm shot!'

'I know, Danny, but you're going to be okay,' he said automatically.

The teenager let out a sharp cry as a sudden pain surged through his body. Tom tried to pull Danny's hands away from his stomach to examine the full extent of his injury but the younger man showed a surprising surge of strength to resist his efforts and he knew anyway that there was nothing he could do.

Tom looked round as the other men inched forward. Seamus barged his way past them and knelt down beside Tom. There was a detached calm about his demeanour as he gripped Danny's shoulder, his touch seeming to soothe the boy's frantic squirming but it was only for a few moments.

‘Help me, Tom,’ he pleaded.

‘I’m here, Danny,’ he said, taking his cousin’s bloody hand and managing to wrench it away from his stomach. He squeezed it tightly, muttering ‘It’ll be okay,’ over and over again. He looked at Seamus, whose eyes confirmed what he already knew, and he glanced away, leaning into Danny’s face and gently kissing his cousin’s forehead. The gesture took him by surprise and he could feel his face burning brightly. He wondered what the rest of the men would think about it and hoped they’d forget what they’d seen.

Danny was gasping for breath now and every time he tried to speak, blood poured out the side of his mouth.

‘I’m scared, Tom,’ he mumbled. ‘I don’t want to die.’

‘Danny, Danny,’ he said, blinking furiously to force back the tears that were threatening to soak his cheeks. He didn’t know what else to say. There was nothing he could say. Danny managed to muster one final burst of energy and let out a cry that could only have lasted for a few seconds but which seemed to hang in the saturated Donegal air for as long as they all remained there. Then his body went limp. Tom felt his cousin’s hand effortlessly slip out of his own palm and he let it fall to the wet ground.

He remained on his knees staring at the dead body, studying a face he knew and loved. He wanted to commit it to memory because he would never see it again, never see it relax into a warm, innocent smile, or clench up with youthful anger. Danny’s eyes had closed over but Tom would remember them as green and inquisitive. He felt a hand on his shoulder.

‘We have to go,’ Seamus said and Tom nodded. He was grateful for the strong grip Seamus took of his arm as he

helped him back to his feet, and he needed the support as he swayed unsteadily. The rest of the men were gathering up the weapons, all of them keen to keep busy and avoid any eye contact with Tom. He was vaguely aware of the activity going on around him though he could only look down at his cousin.

Once they’d gathered everything up, Seamus ordered two of the men to lift Danny and they gripped the arms and legs of the dead teenager. Seamus began walking back up the hill but Tom stopped him.

‘I’ll lead the way,’ he said, moving ahead and striding up the wet grass, the rest of the group following behind. Even if he closed his eyes he would have been able to find his way to Danny’s house but as they got nearer he felt himself slowing down. He could hear the forced breathing of the men carrying the body – Seamus had made sure they had all taken turns – but he never glanced round once.

Tom’s heart sank as he caught sight of the cottage. He knew the big pot of soup would be warming on the stove in the kitchen at this very moment and he wondered what he was going to say to his Aunt Theresa.