

THE TOMMY CONLON & RONAN MCGREEVY KIDNAPPING

'A triumph'
*Irish
Examiner*

'Riveting'
*Mick
Clifford*

'Incredible'
*Nicola
Tallant*

'Important'
*Irish
Times*



**A hostage, a
desperate manhunt
and a bloody rescue
that shocked Ireland**



The Kidnapping

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Tommy Conlon is a sportswriter with the *Sunday Independent*. He has co-authored books with some of Ireland's most successful sportsmen, including Ronnie Whelan, John 'Bull' Hayes, and Keith Earls, whose autobiography *Fight or Flight* won the Sports Book of the Year at the 2021 An Post Irish Book Awards. He is a native of Ballinamore, County Leitrim.

Ronan McGreevy is an *Irish Times* news reporter and videographer. He is the author of *Wherever the Firing Line Extends: Ireland and the Western Front* and editor of *Centenary: Ireland Remembers 1916*. His latest book, *Great Hatred: The Assassination of Field Marshal Sir Henry Wilson MP*, was the *Business Post* history book of the year. In 2018, for his work on remembrance and the First World War, he was named a Chevalier de l'Ordre des Arts et des Lettres by the French government. He is a native of Carrick-on-Shannon, County Leitrim.

The Kidnapping

*A hostage, a desperate manhunt
and a bloody rescue that shocked Ireland*

TOMMY CONLON AND
RONAN MCGREEVY



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PART ONE

Taken

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1. 'I'm Don Tidey; I'm the hostage'

Through the clump of pine trees, Recruit Garda Tom Barrett could see the silhouettes of two men crouched down with guns. They appeared to be wearing military-style clothing. Recruit Garda Francis Smith could see them too. One of the men was cleaning a rifle with a white cloth.

Smith took in the scene for a second before breaking the silence. 'Soldier! Answer my call,' he shouted.¹ There was no reply.

Another garda recruit, Gary Sheehan, was standing a few yards away from Smith. 'Is that you, Frank?' he asked him. 'Yes,' replied Smith, who then checked if there was a soldier with him. There was.

Sheehan then addressed one of the gunmen in the clearing. 'Can you answer, Soldier?' Again, no reply. He turned to his supervisor, Sergeant Liam Wall, who was watching from a raised embankment some yards behind him. 'Sergeant, there's a man here and he won't speak to us,' he told Wall.²

It was 2.30 p.m. on Friday, 16 December 1983, and the light was fading fast. The sky was grey with rain clouds. As far as the eye could see, uniformed men were beating at the sodden earth with metal probes and swatting aside thick undergrowth in the search for a man who had been missing for twenty-three days. Occasionally an Irish army Alouette helicopter appeared overhead.

Ten search teams comprising soldiers and gardaí were scouring the forested uplands some five miles north of

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Ballinamore, Co. Leitrim, close to the Cavan border. In the distance was Sliabh an Iarainn, the Iron Mountain, the highest point in south Leitrim. Its iron deposits were long gone, and so were most of the people. Further north were the dark hills of the Cuilcagh Mountains.

This was rough, poor land, deemed fit for little other than sheep and trees. Those who stayed were engaged in an attritional battle against the thin topsoil and the heavy rains which turned the land to a gluey daub every spring.³ Yet this part of Leitrim could grow Sitka spruce like few places in Europe. But in the long hiatus between planting and harvesting, the people left and the trees grew unhampered.

The fields between the patchwork of forests and the unkempt woods were small, wet and full of rushes. Barely passable lanes linked the planted forests, which were typically between twenty and thirty acres in size. The trees were grown for the commercial timber industry and intended to yield a supplementary income for hard-pressed local farmers.

The search teams combed the area, one for every mile radius from the centre of Ballinamore, which had become the headquarters for what was the largest operation of its kind in the history of the state. What had started out as a wide-sweeping search had now funnelled down to a patch of terrain that was microscopic on maps, and so remote it would rarely have been visited even by locals. To get there, the security forces had to take the minor road out of Ballinamore, then turn onto a side road barely wide enough for cars to pass each other, and veer off that side road onto hill-side passes no wider than country lanes.

Finally, there was no road at all, just forests and fields and rural silence. A few farmhouse dwellings were nestled here

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and there in the landscape, peopled by families well used to the elements and to hardship.

The search was unofficially named Operation Santa Claus, a festive title that belied its seriousness. A man’s life was at stake, and so too was the reputation of the Irish state when it came to dealing with its greatest national security threat – the Provisional IRA. The media were diligently tracking every twist and turn of a drama that had already been running for over three weeks.

The search parties were each allocated the name ‘Rudolph’, and a number from 1 to 10. The man they had come to rescue was Don Tidey, a British-born supermarket executive who had been kidnapped from his car while bringing his daughter to school in south Co. Dublin on the morning of 24 November. The businessman was being held hostage in a small hillside wood about two and a half acres in size that comprised young pines some fifteen feet high with multiple protruding branches, making for a densely camouflaged location. It was known locally as Drumcroman Wood but would quickly become familiar nationwide as Derrada Wood after the local post office address. Access was hindered by high tangles of briars. Even in broad daylight it was a dark and gloomy place. On a dank December afternoon, the winter light was weaker still. The searchers were moving around in semi-darkness. They could not use torches in case they alerted the kidnappers, if indeed the kidnappers were in there.

Rudolph 5 had twenty-four men in its group that day. They were operating at a considerable distance from the other search parties. Occasionally its members drifted apart from each other, losing touch with the people left and right, becoming disorientated by the forest darkness or separated



1. Soldiers and gardaí search the remote rushy fields near Ballinamore in south Leitrim.



2. Security forces and media among the throngs in Ballinamore, the headquarters for what was the largest operation of its kind in the history of the state. The search was unofficially named Operation Santa Claus.

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3. An army convoy rolling through Ballinamore to join in the search.



4. What had started as a wide-sweeping search became concentrated on a small patch of terrain so remote it would rarely have been visited, even by locals. To get there, the security forces had to take the minor road out of Ballinamore.

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by the uneven ground and protruding branches.⁴ They continued their arduous progress, not knowing they were about to walk straight into the gang's lair.

It was a lair that had been prepared well in advance of the abduction. The chosen hide was a hollow in the ground at the base of some trees.⁵ Its surface was covered by black polythene, lined with straw, while overhead it was sheltered by sheets of black plastic tethered to tree trunks and blanketed in leaves and twigs.⁶ This was where the IRA gang and their captive ate, slept and washed. They toileted nearby.

After several days of relative tranquillity in their bolthole, a crisis was looming. The kidnappers could also hear the search parties closing in. They would have to make a decision: fight or flight? They'd been hearing the gardaí and soldiers roaming through the hinterland for a number of days; the engines of cars and army trucks, the rotors of the helicopter hovering in the sky. The gang knew they were being surrounded; their refuge was mutating into a trap. And now the voices were getting closer. It was time to leave.

Their hostage was forced at gunpoint to his feet. The kidnappers removed his hood and replaced it with a balaclava. They took his shackles off and told him to follow them once they gave the order.⁷

Meanwhile, the Rudolph 5 search party was closing in a V shape on Derrada Wood. It consisted of a garda inspector, a sergeant, four detectives, two uniformed gardaí, ten recruit gardaí and six soldiers. The soldiers had standard-issue FN rifles, and five of the policemen were armed with Uzi machine guns; the rest were unarmed. The men at either end of the formation had radios to call back to the centre of the operation – Echo Base in Ballinamore.

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The search team entered the wood, eyes adjusting to the darkness as they pushed through the branches, droplets of water falling on them from the heights of the trees. Then Recruit Garda Barrett stopped in his tracks, frozen by the tableau he saw ahead: a black plastic covering, stretched and knotted between tree trunks; camping equipment, food litter and other detritus. There was human activity here. He drew back immediately to inform the others.⁸

The realization brought a chilling frisson to the members of Rudolph 5; this was the place. The epicentre of the man-hunt was in front of them; the needle in the haystack had been found. Sergeant Wall, who was in charge of the Rudolph 5 garda recruits, was now lying flat on a raised bank. He turned his body to address the recruit gardaí waiting to advance. ‘Be careful,’ he murmured, ‘there are men with guns in there.’⁹

Some members of Rudolph 5 then spotted the two armed men in flak jackets and balaclavas. But were they friend or foe? Army Rangers personnel involved in the search were also wearing military fatigues and had blackened faces. One gunman was holding a rifle pointed upwards, the other was kneeling with his weapon pointing down.

The air was suddenly dense with tension and fear. Then Smith and Sheehan broke the silence, before the latter turned to Wall: ‘Sergeant, there’s a man here and he won’t speak to us.’¹⁰ Instantaneously, a shattering burst of semi-automatic machine-gun fire rang out. The situation had transformed in an instant.

Recruit Garda Gary Sheehan fell immediately. Another burst of fire felled a soldier, Private Patrick Kelly, just as he was getting into a crouched position to fire back. Neither man had a chance; both had been raked with bullets.

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Many years later Garda Sergeant Joe O'Connor, a trainee on the day, would recount the fateful moment in court. 'I heard a groan or grunt where Garda Sheehan had been,' he said, recalling that the young recruit's feet went from under him as blood poured from multiple bullet wounds; his cranium was shattered and his brain exposed. The twenty-three-year-old, who had begun garda training only three months earlier, died instantly. His garda cap, fastened by its chinstrap, remained on his head.

Patrick Kelly, thirty-six and a father of four, was shot with a line of bullets from ankle to head and fell backwards. Kelly did not die instantly; he slowly bled to death. His comrades heard him plead: 'Please don't leave me, I'm not going to make it.'¹¹ Private Paddy Shine, who was just a yard or two away, would later tell an inquest he saw his comrade fall back against the trees with blood on his neck. He dived for cover as he heard Kelly calling, 'Paddy'.¹²

The kidnappers followed up their gun attack by detonating a stun grenade, designed to cause confusion and terror. It made such a noise that gardaí and soldiers thought a bomb had exploded. Taking advantage of the reaction, the gang moved in on three soldiers at gunpoint and ordered them to disarm. One of them was Shine. 'I thought [these] people were desperate enough to get out that they would have shot me as well,' he would recall.¹³

One gunman put his rifle to the back of Shine's head and ordered him to instruct his fellow soldiers not to shoot. Shine put his hands in the air and shouted, 'Don't shoot, don't shoot.' He was pushed forward and told to run.

The gang now took the soldiers' weapons. Members of the Irish army, officially known in the Irish language as Óglaigh na hÉireann, were now being held at gunpoint by

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men who believed themselves to be the true and rightful Óglaigh na hÉireann.

Next the gang seized Denis Breen, a Ballinamore-based garda, and a number of garda recruits and made them walk in front of them, along with the captured soldiers, as human shields.

One of the recruits was Francis Morgan, who had dropped to the ground in the mayhem. He saw eight or nine people coming out of the trees, three of them wearing combat gear and carrying rifles and sub-machine guns. A garda and two soldiers were lying beside him. A gunman ordered them to stand up. ‘Dead heroes no good,’ he warned them.¹⁴

Paul Gillen was nineteen, a garda recruit from Dublin’s inner city. He could feel the muzzle of an assault rifle in the small of his back. ‘Don’t be a dead hero. We shot one of you, we’ll shoot again,’ a gunman told him in a northern accent.¹⁵

Next the gardaí and soldiers were ordered to start running across a field with their hands held high. Behind the captive gardaí and soldiers the kidnappers kept their weapons cocked. As they came to a fence, one pointed a gun in Shine’s face and ordered him to provide help crossing it. Shine pulled him over the fence. At one stage Morgan became aware of an armed detective to his right and one of the gunmen firing a volley of shots in the detective’s direction.

Meanwhile, in the kidnappers’ panic to get away, they’d abandoned the man who was at the centre of the entire drama and provided him with an opportunity. ‘There was a burst of gunfire,’ Don Tidey would recall later. ‘Then more gunfire and, frankly, from that moment on, it became a battleground. Once firing had broken out, everybody made their own arrangements.’

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‘My arrangement under fire was to hit the ground, which I did. I rolled down an incline into bracken and took in my circumstances. There was gunfire. There was to the best of my recollection an explosion, which I judged was a grenade. When I looked up I was looking into the muzzle of a weapon just a short distance from my forehead. The situation froze. I looked along the length of the barrel and saw a soldier.’¹⁶

This was Private Patrick McLaughlin, and behind him was at least one garda, Francis Smith. All of them were wary about the person confronting them. Smith recalled that this unkempt man ‘looked like one of the criminals that started the gunfire in the wood’. Tidey, after twenty-three days of wondering about his fate at the hands of his kidnappers, was equally unsure now about his fate at the hands of his rescuers.

‘I am the hostage!’ he cried out, gesturing to his chest. The sudden hand movement seemed to agitate the soldier, who perhaps feared this fellow might be reaching for a weapon. But Private McLaughlin held his discipline and assured himself the man was not, in fact, armed. ‘By the grace of God, he didn’t pull the trigger,’ Tidey said.¹⁷

Smith crawled up to them. ‘Who are you?’ he demanded. ‘I’m Don Tidey,’ came the reply. ‘I’m the hostage. There are vicious men up there. They have grenades. Follow me.’¹⁸ Still not sure about this stranger, the security forces weren’t inclined to do so.

‘No, we’ll go our way,’ Smith responded. He and another recruit garda, Joseph O’Connor, along with McLaughlin and Tidey, crawled across a path and hurried out of the wood. Not knowing who the man was, they forced Tidey to remove his wellingtons to ensure he did not run away.

Despite Tidey’s protestations, his English accent and the absence of any weapon, his handlers still did not fully

believe he was the man they’d been looking for. Tidey had scratches on his face from being dragged through brambles, plus a thick beard, adding to the confusion.

The group followed the line of a drain. ‘I was led for two or three hundred yards across the field,’ Tidey remembered. His trousers were nearly dragged off him by the weight of the muck and water.

Watching from the adjacent road, Detective Sergeant Walter ‘Nacie’ Rice could see garda recruits running from the wood. One lost his hat in the confusion, a disciplinary offence, and returned to retrieve it. ‘For f***’s sake, leave that f***ing hat behind you!’ Rice exclaimed.¹⁹ Next thing he saw the party that included Tidey clambering up to a ditch that bordered the road.

Tidey was handed over to him and other detectives from An Garda Síochána’s Security Task Force, including Detective Inspector William ‘Bill’ Somers, who helped him over a gate and onto the road. But there was no great welcome for this wild-looking creature here either. Somers also needed clarity. He ‘held a gun to my head to ascertain who I was’, Tidey later recalled.²⁰

In the Special Criminal Court almost twenty-five years later, Somers gave his account of the incident: ‘The first thing I saw was a person in green combat gear and I thought it was one of the terrorists making a break.’²¹ Then, on second glance, he thought it might be Tidey, but he wasn’t taking any chances. Somers pointed his gun at the man, and once again Tidey declared his name and his innocence. Finally, his rescuers were satisfied they had the hostage.

Once they reached the edge of Derrada Wood, the kidnapers split up. Two made their way to a nearby farmhouse, owned by local man Charlie McTague. A blue Opel Kadett

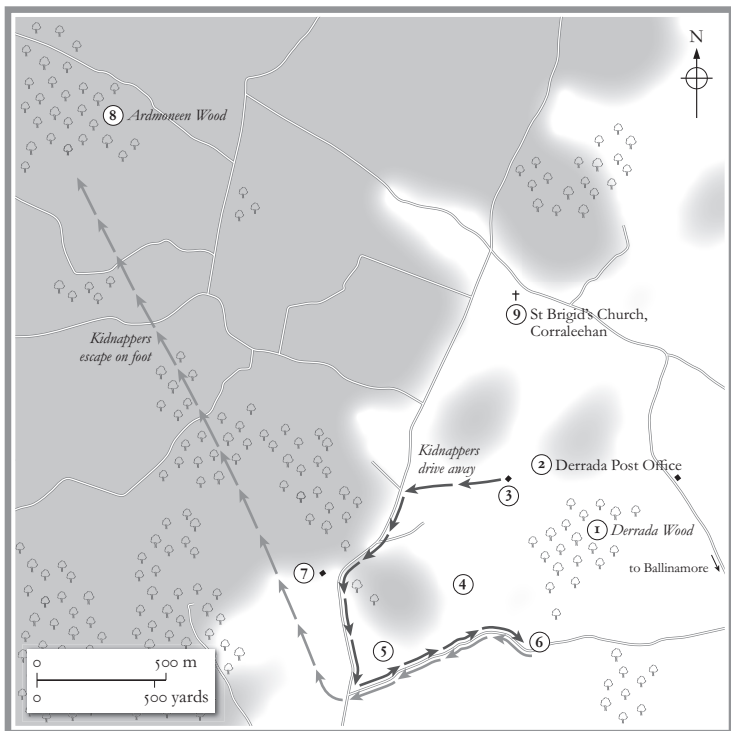


5. Derrada Wood today. It is now a lot smaller than it was in 1983. This view shows the side from which Don Tidey made his escape and the road where Detective Garda Donal Kelleher was shot in the legs.



6. Derrada Post Office, which gives its name to the wood where Don Tidey was kidnapped. It has been closed since 1985.

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Derrada area – key locations

- ① *Derrada Wood:* Location of the hide where Don Tidy is held for twenty-three days.
- ② *Derrada Post Office:* Gardaí and soldiers whom the kidnappers take hostage and walk across fields emerge to freedom at Derrada Post Office.
- ③ *Charlie McTague's house:* The kidnap gang picks up a car at this house.
- ④ After the shoot-out between kidnappers and security forces, Don Tidy makes his escape here.
- ⑤ One of the kidnap gang, in the car they have picked up at the McTague house, leans through the car window and shoots towards the gardaí with a machine gun. Garda Donal Kelleher, escorting Don Tidy to safety, is wounded in both legs.
- ⑥ Still in the car they have picked up at the McTague house, the kidnappers run into a garda roadblock and a shoot-out ensues. The kidnappers abandon the car.
- ⑦ *John Curnan's house:* Curnan owns Derrada Wood, described by one local woman as 'an IRA hill'. He is later convicted for his role in assisting the Tidy kidnappers.
- ⑧ *Ardmoreen Wood:* After the shoot-out at the garda roadblock the kidnappers use a fire-and-maneuvre drill to escape across the fields – the last one covering the retreat of the others with bursts of gunfire. They head north-west in the direction of Ardmoreen Wood, a huge plantation on the Cavan–Leitrim border.
- ⑨ *St Brigid's Church, Corraleehan:* In his sermon at Sunday Mass two days after Don Tidy's rescue, Fr Con Dolan criticizes parishioners who supported the gang while they were holding Tidy hostage and then helped them escape. Weeks later, *Today Tonight* does a vox pop outside the church and finds local people unwilling to condemn the actions of the IRA.

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with the keys in the ignition was there in the yard. The others continued to shepherd their hostages across a number of fields until finally abandoning them with dire warnings to keep walking and not to turn around. They then hightailed it back to the farmhouse where they joined the rest of the gang. As their hostages emerged on to the road beside Derada Post Office the kidnappers were attempting to make their escape in the Kadett.

Meanwhile, the group that had just taken custody of Tidey were making their way along the road. Suddenly the Kadett came roaring round the bend towards them. Tidey assumed it was an unmarked garda car. Somers tried to flag it down. One of the kidnappers leaned out through a window and fired a burst from his machine gun. Gunfire also came from the boot of the car. Tidey dived to the ground, injuring the tip of his elbow.

Detective Garda Donal Kelleher was hit in both legs and felt a burning pain in his left thigh. 'I thought we were all dead, and expected to be hit again,' he remembered.²² The gunfire almost hit Tidey, who ended up lying in a low ditch beside him.

Rice, who had a revolver, fired some shots at the car but it was already speeding out of range. He picked up an Uzi machine gun and ran after them. Somers later recalled dragging Tidey through a gap in the ditch and then into a deep drain out of sight of the car.

The Kadett powered on. At the next crossroads a road-block had been set up by uniformed gardaí and detectives. Just a matter of seconds earlier they had heard the unmistakable rat-a-tat-tat of gunfire as the kidnappers opened up on Somers and his party. Detective Garda Eugene O'Sullivan, then twenty-nine, was one of the personnel at the crossroads

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roadblock. ‘There’s a burst of gunfire,’ he recalled later, ‘and [then] there’s a shout on the radio: “Do not shoot at the blue car, a guard has been taken hostage.”’²³ But the gardaí who’d been taken hostage were not in the Kadett, of course; they were making their way back to the action after their forced march at gunpoint.

O’Sullivan picks up the story. ‘So next thing a blue car comes around the corner at high speed, screeches to a halt. We hesitate.’ They have parked an unmarked garda car, a Ford Granada, to act as a blocker. ‘The Granada is parked in the middle of the crossroads. There’s some of us to the right of the Granada, some of us to the left. I’m on the driver’s side of it because I was driving. We hesitate because of the call “Don’t shoot”. A guy gets out in full paramilitary dress, as in green khaki combat-type gear, wearing a balaclava, with what looks like an Armalite, and fires a burst in our direction. I can still feel the whizz of the bullets going by my head. We were that close to oblivion.

‘We hit the ground, return fire. He has taken cover behind the Kadett very quickly. They have abandoned the car and taken to the field, shooting as they go. They retreat in military fashion: fire, retreat, another guy fires, they retreat. We fire. And then they disappear from sight into the fields.

‘I’m lying across a ditch at that stage. The man next to me was [Detective] Noel McMahon and he was tremendous under fire. Absolutely fearless. He had an Uzi sub-machine gun; I had my Smith & Wesson revolver. I fired two shots initially and then four. And then I remember reloading, but by the time I reloaded the shooting had stopped and they have just disappeared into the undergrowth.’

The kidnappers used a fire-and-manoeuvre drill to escape across the fields – the last one covering the retreat of the

others with bursts of gunfire. They headed north-west, in the direction of Ardmoneen Wood, a huge plantation on the Cavan–Leitrim border.

Shortly afterwards their radios are crackling again with another message: Detective Garda Kelleher has been wounded in the previous incident. O’Sullivan and his colleagues are summoned to that scene. It is there they finally set eyes on Don Tidey. Somers and Rice want to get the former hostage out of there pronto. ‘So, they put him into my car and they say, “Go go go! Get him out of here,”’ O’Sullivan remembers.

Somers, a garda and another detective, Tom Conroy, pile into the car too. O’Sullivan recalls putting his foot down for the first mile or so. ‘And I remember Inspector Somers saying to me, “Slow down, slow down, take it easy now, we’re clear.” Then he said, “This is Mr Tidey, this is Don Tidey.” And he said there had been casualties up in the woods, but at that time we didn’t know who or what.’²⁴

Donal Kelleher was taken to Ballinamore garda station and from there to Cavan hospital, where medics found a bullet lodged in his right thigh that had passed through his left thigh. Bill Somers would later find five separate bullet tears in his clothing. His wristwatch had been broken.

The rescue of Tidey did not immediately ease the tensions. In fact, a chaotic, panic-stricken situation was about to get more complicated still. A second blue car entered the equation on the other side of the hill.

Derrada Wood was owned by a local farming family, the Curnans. A neighbour of theirs, Hugh Prior, had just driven away from their house in a blue Ford Cortina. He was stopped at a checkpoint outside Derrada Post Office and questioned by two detectives. They believed they had sufficient reason to

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arrest him. But not having a car at their disposal, they commandeered Prior’s.

About a minute later they approached an intersection that had another checkpoint, this one manned by army and garda personnel. Word had just gone out on the radios about a blue car being driven by terrorists who were shooting on sight. That was the Opel Kadett, but its make and model hadn’t been conveyed over the radio. A few jumpy members of the security forces thought Prior’s Cortina was the car in question and opened fire, smashing its windscreen and narrowly missing the two detectives sitting in the back. Prior was grazed in the neck by a bullet, leaving him with burn marks.²⁵

Another search party was about a mile away. ‘We were on the side of a hill,’ recalls Joe Feely, then a garda based in Ballinamore.²⁶ ‘And coming out on the radio was the message that the kidnappers were up a hill and there were shots being fired in a wood at the top. Now, we happened to be actually going up a hill, and there was a wood at the top of our hill too, so everyone got very nervous and we were kind of down to a crawl.

‘No one at the scene was able to give the exact location where this was taking place because [Garda] Denis Breen was the local man [in the search party at Derrada] and he’d been taken hostage and they took his radio off him. So there was no one able to pinpoint it at that particular time. “It’s a wooded area on a hill” – that was basically the description coming out over the radio.’

Eventually they got word that the shooting had happened in Derrada Wood. ‘So we came back towards the scene,’ said Feely. ‘I remember seeing young recruits lying up against the ditch with tunics on them but no shirts. And I remember [Inspector] Seamus O’Hanlon talking to an army officer, saying: “There’s bodies up there. I know, there’s bodies up

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there, we have to go up and search.” And I remember seeing himself and the army officer go back up to the woods and the army officer had a handgun and he discharges it – nerves or whatever – and everyone hits the deck.’

Back in the wood, Inspector Seamus O’Hanlon had seen men with hands in the air and assumed the kidnappers had been captured. As he looked again, he noticed the man with his hands in the air was in fact a garda. He heard a voice shout: ‘Garda dead over here.’²⁷ As the action moved towards the outside of the wood, a sudden quiet descended on where the shooting had taken place.

O’Hanlon hurried over and recognized the slain young man immediately. Gary Sheehan was a neighbour’s child; O’Hanlon had served with Detective Garda Jim Sheehan, Gary’s father, in Carrickmacross. O’Hanlon would later recall in court: ‘He had a large wound in his head and he was dead. I said an Act of Contrition in his ear.’ He asked another garda to say an Act of Contrition in the ear of Private Kelly.²⁸

The bodies needed due care and consideration. Gardaí radioed back to Echo Base requesting a doctor and a priest. Local GP Dr Sean Bourke was summoned from Ballinamore and taken to the scene. He saw Private Kelly in a sitting position up against a tree, and with the aid of a torch examined him before certifying he was dead. Close by, he saw the body of Garda Sheehan lying face down; his cap was tilted sideways on his head. One side of his face was badly lacerated.²⁹

Classes were just finishing up at St Felim’s College, the town’s secondary school, when the principal, Fr Thomas Keogan, was approached by uniformed personnel. ‘The guards asked me to go out to give the last rites to the two men that were killed. They brought me out in the squad car,

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as far as I can remember. They brought me into the road leading into Derrada Wood and lent me a pair of wellingtons for going up through the fields.’

The area was now flooded with security forces, all emotionally charged. ‘I went up through the fields and there went off a shot and we were told to lie on the ground – “Lie down!”’ They thought the gunmen were still there. We were lying on the ground for twenty minutes, half an hour, on a freezing winter’s evening. What happened, I think, was that the gardaí and army were high with excitement, so it was one of them let off the shot. Anyway, we went up through the field and in through the undergrowth and the two men were there. They were fairly close to each other.²³⁰

Fr Keogan administered the last rites. ‘You anoint them with the oil of the sick or the dying. You say a prayer that they will be received into the Lord’s home, and you say the Act of Contrition, where you’re sorry for all the sins of your life. And then you pray for them.’

His duties performed, Fr Keogan was escorted out of the woods and back to the roadside. After Christmas, he visited the grieving families and told them he had administered the last rites to Gary and Patrick. ‘I think they took a small bit of consolation from knowing that,’ he remembers.

Night-time came and the countryside was lit up with fires from tar barrels burning at crossroads to keep gardaí and soldiers warm. Ballinamore resembled a war zone with garda cars and armoured personnel carriers on the streets, and soldiers at every corner. Senior garda officers briefed the media on events so far, and they reassured everyone they were closing in on the fugitives. In fact, they were doing nothing of the sort.

2. Getting Away with Murder

Profound relief that Tidey had been found unharmed was mixed with profound sorrow that his liberation had led to the deaths of two servants of the state. The bodies of Sheehan and Kelly lay overnight where they had fallen, as their comrades feared the hideout might have been booby-trapped.

Detective Inspector Edwin Hancock, from the garda technical bureau, arrived at Derrada Wood the following morning.¹ He found the bodies of the two men lying approximately twelve feet from each other. Private Kelly's flak jacket was open and his beret was on the ground beside him. Recruit Garda Sheehan was wearing a raincoat.

Forensics officers began their work on the scene. The camp had been well stocked. The kidnappers left behind a gas stove, saucepans, a pressure cooker, twelve toilet rolls, sugar, tea, milk, marmalade, soup packets, curry powder, apples, onions, tomatoes, a large amount of Calvita cheese, five brown sleeping bags and paramilitary uniforms. All of it would be subjected to forensic analysis.

Some distance away the forensics team recovered a transistor radio which was tuned to Echo Base, the garda communications hub in Ballinamore. The gang had been eavesdropping on the official search channel.²

With Tidey now safe, the garda operation became a man-hunt. The mood among the search parties was grim and determined. There was now no doubt about the ruthlessness

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of the gang they were facing and all involved were resolved to meet fire with fire. Soldiers were told to use ‘maximum aggression’. One told the *Irish Times*: ‘Those guys don’t want to be taken alive and we are not interested in taking them alive.’³

With nerves shredded among the security forces, another accidental shooting in the early hours of the morning of 17 December also came perilously close to a fatality. John Gerard Wrynné, a twenty-seven-year-old local man, was driving just outside the security cordon when he came upon a checkpoint in Gortvagh. He stopped the car and it was searched. Wrynné knew one of the local gardaí and after a brief conversation thought he was being waved on. As he accelerated away, a soldier assumed he was trying to escape and fired four shots at his car. One hit Wrynné in the head; he crashed his car into a ditch. His wife Mary, in the passenger seat, escaped uninjured. The couple had been married only the previous September. Wrynné underwent emergency surgery in a Dublin hospital and eventually recovered.

The bodies were taken out of the woods around noon on Saturday after the state pathologist, Professor John Harbison, had conducted a post-mortem.

Corporal P. J. Higgins and Private Patrick Kelly had been great pals as well as comrades-in-arms for many years. By coincidence, Higgins had, on that Saturday morning, been detailed to take a section of eight soldiers and provide security around the forensics personnel and others who were working at the hideout. ‘I only saw it from a distance. It wasn’t a dugout. Plastic [was] strung from one tree to another. It wasn’t a big hole in the ground, it was a plastic-covered shelter. There was this small enclave just for them to settle into but there was no big hole five or six feet down.’⁴

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7. The bodies of Private Patrick Kelly and Garda Gary Sheehan being removed from Derrada Wood.



8. Local man John Gerard Wrynne's crashed car at Gorravagh. The morning after Tidey's rescue Wrynne, an innocent man, was shot by a soldier in the mistaken belief that he was trying to speed away from a security checkpoint.

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Around midday, as he remembers it, the ambulances arrived for the bodies. He was less than fifty yards away. 'The saddest thing I ever saw, to see Paddy Kelly's body being taken from Derrada Wood under a plastic bag, a polythene bag,' he says. 'I saw Corporal John Ruane bringing out Paddy Kelly's body. There was about six men carrying the stretcher and John Ruane was at the front on the left-hand side. And when he came out of the woods he turned left and headed towards the ambulance.'

'Paddy Kelly, I think his knee was bent, I'm only judging by the bag. It wasn't an actual body bag, it was like a lump of polythene, white polythene. And they come out of the woods and they turn to the left and the ambulance is facing out and they put him into it. The two bodies came out together. It's enshrined in my memory. Never forget it as long as I live.'

The previous evening there had been a few pit stops along the way before Don Tidey was returned to the bosom of his family. With Eugene O'Sullivan driving the car out of Derrada, Inspector Somers decided their VIP should be brought straight to Ballyconnell garda station, some twelve miles away in Co. Cavan. They would drive into Ballinamore and keep going.

'Ballyconnell was the local garda headquarters,' O'Sullivan explains. 'Now, the world's press were in Ballinamore, on the street, and I drove up the street nice and gently, Don Tidey in the back. A camera crew walked across in front of me. I stopped to let them go by and they walked by and we just went nice and easy through the town and on [for] Ballyconnell without anybody noticing that Don Tidey was in the back of the car.'⁵

From Ballyconnell a call was made to garda headquarters

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in Dublin that Tidey had been rescued. The message was conveyed through garda channels to the minister for justice, who made a statement in the Dáil saying the hostage had been freed but that there had been casualties.

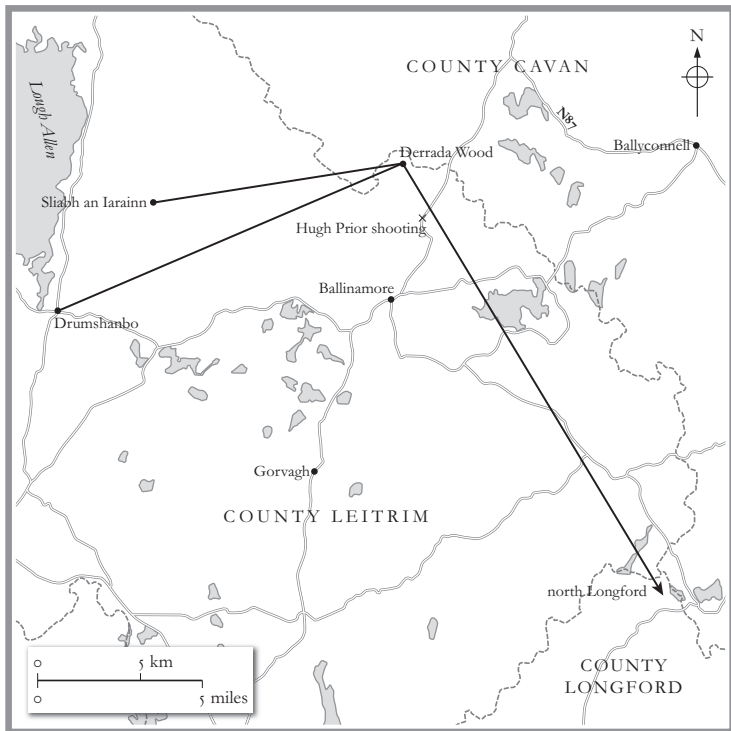
Some time later Tidey was escorted away, to be taken to Cavan garda station. But by then the press posse had descended on Ballyconnell station. As O'Sullivan, Tom Conroy and Bill Somers ushered their ward to the waiting car, photographer Peter Thursfield captured the image that would make the front page of the *Irish Times* the next day. It became the iconic photo of the saga. Tidey was examined by a doctor at Cavan station. Later that evening O'Sullivan and his colleagues drove the businessman back to his home in Woodtown, where he was reunited with his children.

Back in Ballinamore, the search for the kidnappers continued. The terrain that needed to be covered was expanding with every minute that they remained at large. From funneling down to Derrada Wood on Friday morning, the gardaí and army were now looking at an expanse of mountain and bog and field and forest all around them. The fugitives could have scattered in any direction; there were so many places for them to hide.

The 60,000-acre Ardmoneen Wood was one possibility. Army Rangers personnel with night-sight rifles were dropped in, but the forest was big enough for the kidnappers to go undetected, if they were there at all. Other Rangers waited on top of a concrete tower to cut off the retreat if the gang was spotted.⁶

Soon the weather turned against the searchers. Fog and mist lingered in the following days; visibility was down to thirty yards in places and the army helicopter could not be

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Aftermath of Don Tidey's rescue – key locations

Derrada Wood: Don Tidey is rescued here on 16 December.

Ballinamore: Following his rescue, gardaí discreetly take Tidey through Ballinamore, away from the awaiting press.

Ballyconnell: Tidey is driven to the local garda headquarters in Ballyconnell, Co. Cavan, twelve miles from Ballinamore.

Drumshanbo: Following their stand-off with security forces at Derrada Wood two of the kidnappers escape west in the direction of Drumshanbo.

Sliabh an Iarainn: The remaining kidnappers escape towards Sliabh an Iarainn, which links Drumshanbo to Ballinamore via a winding network of narrow roads.

Hugh Prior shooting: Shortly after the Derrada shoot-out security forces open fire on a car driven by local man, Hugh Prior. They believe it contains the kidnappers and are unaware it has been commandeered by two gardaí. The three occupants narrowly escape serious injury.

Gorravagh: The morning after the Derrada shoot-out a local man, John Gerard Wrynne, is shot by a soldier while going through a checkpoint.

North Longford: Five days after Tidey's release two kidnappers make their way to north Longford where local republicans help them to reach a safe house.

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flown. Publicly, the gardaí were telling the media that they were confident their quarry was within a 'ring of steel', a phrase concocted by the press at the time and one that Chief Superintendent J. J. McNally was also happy to deploy. McNally was the leader and public face of the search operation. He did not demur when a figure of 2,000 gardaí and soldiers was quoted by the press. In reality, at any one time, the number on the ground was a lot smaller. A grim, sardonic mood descended on the searchers, many wondering if they would get home for Christmas. One Task Force detective mentioned with gallows humour 'Lovely Leitrim', the sentimental song by the country and western star Larry Cunningham that had been a smash hit in the 1960s. The lyrics portrayed the county as a sort of bucolic paradise. But this particular searcher, and many more of his fellow toilers, were finding the place far from 'lovely' during those arduous days and nights. 'When all this is over,' he drawled, 'I'm going to shoot Larry Cunningham. Lovely Leitrim my eye. This is definitely the last place on earth – God what I'd give right now for a chance to put my feet up before a fire.'

The security cordon, said the RTÉ journalist Brendan O'Brien, was more like a 'rubber band' than a ring of steel, and rubber bands are inclined to snap.⁷ Privately, gardaí feared their manhunt was already in vain. Support for the Provisional IRA locally was sporadic and mainly confined to patches of the rural hinterland. But it was sufficient to enable the kidnappers to hide out from the authorities if they needed food and shelter or perhaps a guide through the local terrain.

The last putative sighting of the gang was three days after the release of Don Tidey. A detective spotted two men entering one of the many woods after nightfall. An army infantry

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company was summoned, this one from Galway, bringing to six the number of companies operating in the area. Search parties had to wait until the following morning before beginning. By then the two gang members, if they were in the wood, had disappeared.

There were certainly four kidnappers, possibly five. Early in the escape they had split up and headed off in different directions. One pair headed west in the direction of Drumshanbo towards Sliabh an Iarainn, which links Drumshanbo to Ballinamore via a winding network of narrow roads through the mountain parish of Aughnasheelin.⁸ Another individual may have availed himself of his local knowledge by making his own escape towards Sliabh an Iarainn.

Gardaí let it be known they were looking for four IRA members in connection with the kidnapping. Three of the suspects – Brendan ‘Bik’ McFarlane, Gerard McDonnell and Tony McAllister – had escaped during the mass breakout from the Maze prison in Belfast the previous September.⁹ A fourth man, Oliver McKiernan, had escaped from Portlaoise prison in 1974 and had been living under an assumed name in a mobile home near Aughnasheelin for a number of years.

Subsequently, Seamus McElwaine, a notorious multiple murderer from Monaghan who was shot dead by the SAS in 1986, was named as a fifth suspect in the abduction and killings at Derrada Wood.

According to one account of the manhunt, two of the kidnappers called to the house of a republican sympathizer looking for John Joe McGirl. A native of Aughnasheelin, McGirl was by far the most prominent and senior Sinn Féin/IRA activist in the region. A vice-president of Sinn Féin, he was a long-time member of Leitrim County Council and ran a pub and undertakers on Main Street, Ballinamore.

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Active in the IRA border campaign of the late 1950s, McGirl was elected to the Dáil in 1957 while serving time in prison for membership of the organization. After the Maze breakout, McGirl busied himself finding safe houses for escapees who fled across the border into the Republic. At one stage gardaí suspected that twelve of the fugitives were living locally. This was a concentration of experienced manpower that the IRA could call on for operations in the South. The kidnapping of Don Tidey was one such operation.

It was surveillance of McGirl's movements by the security forces that ultimately brought the national search for Tidey to the Cavan–Leitrim border, and thence to Derrada Wood. McGirl had been tracked in his car for a number of days driving to and from this remote location; it was believed he was bringing supplies of food and other materials to the kidnappers.¹⁰

He wasn't available to meet the two IRA kidnappers when they called to the safe house that Friday night/Saturday morning. McGirl had been arrested on Friday morning along with three other known republicans who lived locally. A phone call he'd made to a prominent Sinn Féin member in Northern Ireland, possibly on the night of the fifteenth, had been recorded by intelligence officers in the RUC because the callee's phone had been tapped; a transcript of the conversation was swiftly passed on to their police counterparts in the South.¹¹ It was this development that led to his arrest on the morning of the murders at Derrada. The four republicans were held for forty-eight hours.

Instead, at the safe house, the runaways were introduced to Francis McGirl, a nephew of John Joe. Three years previously, Francis McGirl had been acquitted on a legal technicality of the 1979 bombing at Mullaghmore, Sligo, that

killed Lord Louis Mountbatten, two boys and an eighty-three-year-old woman. Francis McGirl had grown up in Aghnasheelin and knew the terrain well. He took the two men on foot to a wood between Aghacashel and Drumshanbo. They spent the night of 16 December hiding out in the woods. In the early hours of the following morning, two men from Drumshanbo teamed up with the fugitives and guided them into Arigna, a neighbouring mountain where coal had been mined for decades. They were now well beyond the ‘ring of steel’. From there they were taken by car to Sligo and on to Mayo.¹²

The second opportunity to catch the kidnappers came just three days later. On Tuesday night, 20 December, Francis McGirl and his two accomplices were stopped at a check-point in Ballycroy, Co. Mayo. Sergeant Des O’Rourke and gardaí Anthony Dempsey and Martin Lavelle were looking for Christmas bootleggers of poitín.

O’Rourke turned his flashlight into the back seat and noticed a firearm on the lap of one of these strangers. Immediately a man got out of the car and pointed a machine gun at him.¹³ The three gardaí were tied up with their own belts and made to lie face down on the road. Sergeant O’Rourke’s car was commandeered.

A local republican, Mary McGing, then a member of Sinn Féin’s ard comhairle and the party’s candidate for Connacht-Ulster in the following year’s European elections, had arranged for the three to stay in a house in Claremorris. She had asked a schoolteacher, Colman O’Reilly, who was an officer in the local Fianna Fáil cumann and not a supporter of the Provisional IRA, if he could loan her the keys of his new and unoccupied bungalow for a purported meeting of

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