



## **60<sup>th</sup> Anniversary of the Niemba Ambush by Colonel George Kerton (Retd)**



### **Introduction**

At approximately 1330 hours on 8 November 1960, an eleven-man patrol from Number 2 Platoon, A Company, 33 Infantry Battalion departed their base at Niemba, under the command of Lieutenant Kevin Gleeson. Niemba was 140 kilometres from the Battalion Headquarters at Albertville, in the Province of Katanga. Personnel from the platoon had occupied the Niemba post since 8 October.

### **Patrol's Mission**

The patrol's composition was one officer, three NCOs and seven men. The patrol was armed with two Bren light machine guns, four Gustaf sub-machine guns, and four Lee-Enfield No 4 Mk 2 rifles. The medical orderly was unarmed. The patrol travelled in a Land Rover and a VW Pick-up truck. The patrol's mission was to carry out reconnaissance on the southern route from Niemba village towards Kiamba and Manono, to check the state of the track, and to clear obstacles if possible. Having departed Niemba, the patrol cleared a number of obstacles along the route.



### **Luweyeye River**

At approximately 1500 hours, the patrol arrived at a crossing point some twenty kilometres from Niemba, where the road from Niemba crosses the Luweyeye River. The patrol dismounted from the vehicles and moved forward to see if the bridge could be repaired.

### **Ambush**

Within a short space of time, the patrol was surrounded by a large number of Baluba tribesmen located on both banks of the river. The Balubas attacked without warning.



Lieutenant Kevin Gleeson ordered the patrol to disperse, and to try to escape from the ambush. They were overcome by sheer weight of numbers.

### **Casualties**

Nine of the patrol died, eight at the ambush scene, and another member of the patrol was subsequently killed a few days later. Two members of the patrol miraculously manage to escape from the killing zone. The nine fatalities were the first operational casualties suffered by the Defence Forces since the Civil War in 1922 - 1923.

The nine who were killed, serving the cause of peace under the Blue Flag, in what became known as the Niemba Ambush were:

- Lieutenant Kevin Gleeson, 2 Fd Engr Coy, aged 30 from Terenure,
- Sergeant Hugh Gaynor 2 Mot Sqn, aged 29 from Leixlip,
- Corporal Liam Dougan 5 Inf Bn, aged 24 from Cabra,
- Corporal Peter Kelly 5 Inf Bn, aged 25 from Templeogue,
- Trooper Anthony Browne MMG 2 Mot Sqn, aged 20 from Rialto,
- Private Matthew Farrell 2 Hosp Coy, aged 22 from Swords,
- Trooper Thomas Fennell 2 Mot Sqn, aged 18 from Donnycarney,
- Private Gerard Killeen CTD (E), aged 27 from Rathmines, and
- Private Michael McGuinn 2 Fd Engr Coy, aged 21 from Carlow.

Two members of the patrol, Private Joseph Fitzpatrick (then 21) and Private Thomas Kenny (then 24) survived the ambush. On the night of 10 November, Private Patrick Davis 2 Fd Engr Coy died, following an accidental shooting, during an alert at the Niemba post.

### **Recovery of Trooper Browne MMG**



In the two days following the ambush, during the subsequent recovery operation, the bodies of eight of the nine missing in action were recovered. Almost two years to the day after the ambush, Trooper Browne's body was recovered from the bush in the vicinity of the village of Tundula less than five kilometres from the actual ambush site.



On 7 November 1962, Commandant Jack Gallagher (Operations Officer) 37 Infantry Battalion, accompanied by Captain James Lavery (Armoured Car Group), Commandant Thomas McMahon (Legal Officer) and Commandant Brendan Heaney (Medical Officer) from 38 Infantry Battalion, escorted by a platoon drawn from the Malayan contingent, located the remains of the last soldier missing soldier from the Niemba ambush. Subsequently, the remains were transported by road to Albertville. On 8 November, the remains were brought to Elizabethville, where an anthropologist at the Ruasi University identified the remains as those of Trooper Anthony Browne.

### **State Funeral – 19 November**



On 19 November 1960, those who died in Niemba were accorded a State funeral and were buried with full military honours in the Army Plot in Glasnevin Cemetery. According to media reports, the funeral attracted over a half a million people, and was one of the largest crowds seen in Dublin since the funerals of Daniel O'Connell, Charles Stewart Parnell, and Michael Collins.

### **Commemorative Cross - Niemba**



In October 1961, 1 Infantry Group redeployed from Kamina Base to Nyunzu, in north eastern Katanga, some 48 kilometres from Niemba. The Group Commander, Lieutenant-Colonel John C. O'Donovan decided to erect a memorial at the site of the Niemba ambush. A cross was cast in cement by Sergeant William McLoughlin from the Engineer Section, and the inscription was carved by Private Patrick Appleby. On 5 November 1961, the cross was erected close to the Niemba ambush site, and Mass was celebrated by the unit chaplain Father Phelim McCabe CF.



### Court Case

On 13 November 1961, one year after the Niemba Ambush, five men from the Niemba area were tried at Elisabeth District Court Penal Sitting for their part in the ambush. Two received sentences of three years, and three received two-year terms of penal servitude.

### Military Medal for Gallantry



Trooper Anthony Browne survived the initial attack but was subsequently killed. Trooper Browne was posthumously awarded An Bonn Míleata Calmachta with Distinction (Military Medal for Gallantry). He was the first recipient of the Military Medal for Gallantry, the Defence Forces highest military award. Trooper Browne’s citation reads:

*He endeavoured to create an opportunity to allow an injured comrade to escape by firing his Gustaf, thereby drawing attention to his own position, which he must have been aware would endanger his life. He had a reasonable opportunity to escape because he was not wounded but chose to remain with an injured comrade.*

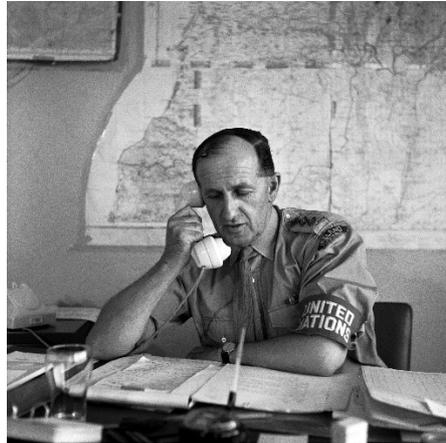
### Annual Commemoration



Since 1961, the Organisation of National Ex-Servicemen and Women (ONE) has hosted the annual commemoration ceremony in Cathal Brugha Barracks on the first Saturday in November. The ceremony includes Mass in the Garrison Church, followed by a wreath laying ceremony at the Memorial Garden. Due to government restrictions arising from Covid-19, the 60<sup>th</sup> Anniversary commemoration hosted by the Minister for Defence was deferred to a later date. However, a restricted wreath laying ceremony took place in Cathal Brugha Barracks, on 8 November 2020.



## **CS Felix Grant DSM and Col Justin MacCarthy DSM**



Four weeks before the Niamba Ambush, Company-Sergeant Felix Grant DSM, B Company, 33 Infantry Battalion ONUC, died at the King Albert Hospital, Albertville on 03 October 1960, three days after an operation for appendicitis. At the age of 43, he was the first member of the Defence Forces to die while on active service with the United Nations. CS Grant DSM was buried with full military honours on 26 October 1960, in Saint Patrick's Cemetery Clonmel, County Tipperary.

On 27 October 1960, ten days before the Niamba Ambush, Colonel Justin MacCarthy DSM, Chief of Staff, HQ ONUC died. Colonel MacCarthy was the first Defence Forces officer to die while on active service with the United Nations. He was buried with full military honours in the Army Plot, Glasnevin Cemetery on 14 December 1960.

## **Defence Forces in ONUC**



From 28 July 1960 to 11 May 1964, twelve Defence Forces units and a total of 6,191 individual tours of duty, served with Opération des Nations Unies au Congo (ONUC). One Military Medal for Gallantry and sixty-five Distinguished Service Medals were awarded to Óglaigh na hÉireann personnel who served with ONUC.

The nine deaths from the Niamba Ambush remains the highest toll from a single action, suffered by the Defence Forces in the cause of world peace. Twenty-six members of the Defence Forces died while serving with ONUC. Of the thirty troop-contributing countries,



Ireland had the fourth highest number of fatalities after Ghana (49 deaths), India (39) and Ethiopia (28). Of the twenty-six Defence Forces fatalities, sixteen died as a result of hostile action, seven died in accidents, and three died from natural causes.

135 of the 234 ONUC deaths were designated “malicious acts” by the United Nations - i.e. caused by hostile action. ONUC personnel were killed in attacks by tribal elements, by the National Congolese Army - Armée Nationale Congolaise (ANC), or in operations against the mercenary-led Katanga Gendarmerie aided by the European community.



*End*