

Rescue from Louth County Gaol 14th & 16th August 1922

At 4 a.m. on Monday the 14th August 1922 as the civil war raged a large body of men of the 4th Northern Division, all Anti-Treaty soldiers, entered Dundalk and attacked the Military Barracks. Many of these soldiers including their leader in the attack, Frank Aiken, had escaped from the County Gaol in the breakout on the 27th of July, less than a month previous. They took possession of the barracks and made prisoners of the Pro-Treaty soldiers therein. A small number of deaths occurred on both sides during this attack and others were injured. The barracks and its occupants were taken completely by surprise. At the time, the staff in the County Gaol were pro-treaty soldiers and all prisoners were anti-treaty. Having control of the military barracks the anti-treaty side then turned on the gaol and ordered the small number of pro-treaty soldiers who were guarding the prisoners to open the gates. This was done after the anti-treatyites fired a number of warning shots. There was no serious attempt by the guard to defend the prison. The anti-treatyites then released their comrades to freedom. According to the gaol register a total of 201 prisoners availed of this opportunity to walk out.

The surrendered pro-treaty soldiers in the military barracks, approximately 200, were then marched 'bareheaded' and under heavy escort to the County Gaol, a distance of just over a mile. On arrival there they were lodged in the cells that the anti-treatyites had vacated. Forty-eight hours later at about 7.30 p.m. a large force of the 5th Northern Division, pro-treaty soldiers, advanced on Dundalk with a view to taking control of the town. Those entering the town from the west side took up positions adjacent to the gaol on the Ardee and Carrickmacross Roads with the intention of releasing their comrades. Again a volley of shots was fired over the gaol to draw reaction from any anti-treatyites who may have been in the buildings. There was no response and when the rescue party's entered the gaol they found the keys on the ground at the front door. The anti-treatyite 'warders' had gone from the buildings. The army prisoners who had spent 48 hours in captivity were then released and once again there was more jubilation, this time with the Free State Forces.

On arrival at the military barracks, the 5th Northern Division discovered that all anti-treatyites had vacated the site, and the same could be said for the rest of Dundalk.

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