

Twelve.

The popular rising against the second Protectorate began on the morning of Christmas Day, with an incident so localised that no-one anticipated the speed with which the rising was to spread.

Throughout Scotland there had been heavy snow overnight. In the Highlands railways were blocked by huge drifts at Drumochter and Tyndrum, while herds of deer came down into the villages to forage for food. Edinburgh lay under two feet of snow. Buses were abandoned in the streets, and in the ruins of St. Giles outlaws and deportees sheltered at fires under cover of sacks and canvas sheets.

Further south too, there were freezing conditions and heavy snowfalls. At Berwick and Newcastle the rivers were frozen solid in the upper reaches and in their estuaries slabs of ice elbowed for position and outlet to the sea. At York the points froze and all train services came to a halt. All down the Pennines drifts blocked the roads, brought down power lines and swamped sheep and cattle folds. Much of North Wales was snowed in, along with the higher land in the Cornish peninsula. And in the estuary of the Thames, shipping movements in the channels were badly disrupted by drifting ice, incessant snow and extreme cold. In London itself, some Daniels froze to death on the Embankment, and work parties of clerical volunteers were treated for frostbite at many of the mainline railway stations.

In Fife, however, the weather was particularly severe. Just before dusk on Christmas Eve a convoy of trucks bringing seasonal foodstuffs, liquor and Christmas mail to some of the remoter mining villages was forced to a halt by the weather. It was soon obvious

that it could not be dug free until the weather moderated. The convoy's escort of Militia half-tracks promptly abandoned it, for fear of similar entrapment. Two hours later, the trucks were looted and set on fire by one of the heavily-armed outlaw bands which frequently raided Fife from the direction of the Perthshire hills. People on the coast claimed that they could see the flames of the burning trucks until midnight.

As a result, the mood in the villages had turned ugly by the following morning. In the mining village of Pitmungo in particular, the loss was keenly felt. There was even talk of a strike, despite the ferocious penalties in place for such action. Urgent reports were telephoned from the Militia post in Pitmungo to the sub-regional headquarters at Cupar. But before reinforcements could be sent, the village - on Christmas morning - exploded in violence.

Pitmungo lay in a ring of low hills, where the people of the settlement had long poached rabbits and other small game during the agitations and strikes for which Pitmungo had been famed over the centuries that coal had been dug there. The village consisted of little more than three principal streets of poorly-built two-storey houses, from which a warren of alleys ran at all angles. There were a few shops, a school, two churches, a miners' welfare and union building, a public house, a post office and a police station. There was also a football ground, and a single-line rail station at the pit, from which the coal was carried in open side-tipper trucks to the coast. On a prominence at the back of the village stood the modest mansion which had once housed the owner of the pit and village, and in later years - when the owner had moved to some distant city - his overseer. For some time it had stood empty, and had then been taken-over by the Militia detachment stationed in the village.

The overseer had been taken away in the early days of the Protectorate, along with the headmaster of the school and both of the clergymen. None had ever returned, though it was said that the overseer had secured a post with the Militia in the Yorkshire coalfields, and that one of the clergymen had become an adviser to the religious police. But nobody could be sure, of course. And nobody - except the old women - missed the influence of the clergy too much. In any case, unlicensed preachers sometimes visited Pitmungo under cover of darkness. One had been there days earlier, and had convened a meeting in the snowy hills around the village. He had taken as the theme of his meeting some verses from the Book of Daniel and had spoken of the imminence of apocalyptic change and a new reign of universal justice in the world. Or so the old women whispered among themselves. But by Christmas morning, when the trouble started, the preacher had gone.

This trouble started in the pit itself, which stood some two hundred yards beyond Pitmungo. The winding gear for the downcast shaft, along with its associated engine room, baths, and lamp cabin, was nearest to the village. Beyond that, and clustered around the upcast shaft gear, was the timber yard, the ventilation power plant, and the washers and screens for delivering coal to the side-tipper trucks below. There were also buildings which housed the blacksmiths' and carpenters' shops. Directly at the top of each shaft there was a search-and-arrest blockhouse staffed by Paramilitaries: for theft of coal had become widespread in the village since the militarisation of the industry, the introduction of piecework and the six-on one-off pattern of shifts.

Some thousands of feet below ground, at the number two face, the night shift was approaching the end of its twelve hours of

work. As Pitmungo was an old and marginal pit, conditions at the face were primitive. The low-quality coal was filled by shovel and carried away in pony-drawn tubs. Pitmungo number two (number one had closed fifty years earlier after a devastating rockfall) was also subject to serious flooding, and the main roadway and many of the galleries were often under six inches of water. Protests had been made the previous summer about these conditions. But the three men who had represented these grievances to the regional coal administration in Dunfermline had shortly afterwards been arrested at night, with their families. As no word had since been heard from them, the remaining underground workers kept any other grievances strictly to themselves.

Trouble began at the principal face shortly after it had been cleared of coal and drilled for explosives. The shotfirer was sent for, along with his container of dynamite, so that the face could be blown in time for the next shift. The men would not have attacked a shotfirer or overman from their own community or own region. But all shotmen and overmen, in every pit in the country, were specifically recruited from areas distant from those in which they worked, and were frequently moved for fear of fraternisation with the local workforce. At Pitmungo, as a consequence, the shotfirer and overman were hated.

They arrived at the face in the company of three armed Paramilitaries and a Militia officer. The officer passed the key to the overman, who passed it to the shotfirer: and as he knelt to unlock his canister of explosives a razor-sharp coal shovel split his head wide open. A moment later, a ripper slammed a jack-screw into the face of the overman: and when he fell, the strongest hewer in the pit dropped a prop-bar across the man's neck, thereby breaking it

audibly and visibly. As the Militia officer scrambled for his revolver, the same hewer took him quite gently by the neck, lifted him off the ground, and calmly squeezed the life out of the man. With a style of equal gentleness, he carefully laid the body on the gallery floor, as if he might shortly wish to prepare it for burial: and turned to face the rifles of the Paramilitaries.

This was the turning point of the entire rising: the one point at which it could have failed. The three Paramilitaries might have kept their nerve and retreated down the main roadway of the pit to the base of the upcast shaft, and there alerted the underground security unit. The unit might have belled the engineman above, retreated to the surface of Pitmungo number two, and cut the power to the lights below. They might also have cut the power to the ventilation fans and to the sump pumps: at which point, the miners below would have had no option but to surrender, or face slow suffocation and mass drowning.

But at two thousand feet down, in the groaning galleries of the principal coal face, and surrounded by miners armed with shovels and prop bars, these three Paramilitaries surrendered in absolute silence and without the slightest sign of resistance. Now, with three rifles, one revolver and a great deal of dynamite and fuses in their possession, the miners decided to take the underground Militia post by stealth or storm, make their way to the surface en masse, and take possession of their Pitmungo village by force of arms.

The initial object of the men was to seize control of telegraph and telephone communications with the enginemen on the winding gear, up at ground level above. These controls were in the area of the pit floor set aside for the exclusive use of its underground security force. A young girl had just started work in the pit: she was

sent to speak to the pony-men, who took the tubs of coal to the bottom of upcast shaft. It was one of these ponymen, able by virtue of his duties to move throughout the mine, who passed the word to the men elsewhere in the pit. Meanwhile the original rebels made their way towards the Militia post.

Two sticks of dynamite blew it apart: and the survivors were shot down at once. The remaining underground Paramilitaries immediately began to converge on the site: but so too did every miner in the pit, and a very short, but very bloody, melee ensued. When the Paramilitaries were overpowered, the surface was belled and the two-deck cage sent down for the first of the upcoming shift. As soon as the last lift of miners came to the surface, the cage was sent down again, to take up the pit security force. There was no response from below, however: and after some hesitation the cage was brought up very slowly. It contained a single Militia man, who had been stripped and very badly beaten in the struggle below, but who had managed to crawl into the cage. It was at this point that the security forces occupying Pitmungo village realised that something was very seriously wrong with the morning.

By this same point, however, the miners at the surface were in the process of taking control of the entire pithead installations. As soon as it became clear that there had been rebellion below, the men on the surface very quickly refused to obey their overseers and deputies. The new shift refused to go underground: but there was no violence yet.

A giant meeting in the shelter of the screens - the biggest, the wheezing old men of the village said, since the spring of 1926 - was convened. The Militia officer on pit-head duties and the surviving

Paramilitaries quietly withdrew back to the old mansion, and nearby barracks, which stood up on the edge of the hills.

The oldest man in Pitmungo had taken part as a boy miner in the great strikes of 1911. He it was who called the meeting to order. He proposed that a list of grievances be compiled. This list soon grew long, and as it grew the meeting began to grow stormy. But there was still no talk of violence. Working conditions in the pit were worse now than ever. Someone demanded that the winding machinery be replaced, for it had been the cause of many savage accidents in the last year alone. Someone else wanted a first-aid post in the pit, and demanded that the baths be re-opened. Another miner called for the destruction of the worker-management council, and for independent representation of miners' interests. Everyone wanted a reduction in the six-day twelve-hour pattern of work, to at least to a five-day ten-hour pattern. Everyone wanted an end to piecework and its iniquities. And everyone demanded an end to the penalties of the new labour-discipline code.

The chairman enumerated these penalties: though his lungs were long ruined with dust, and he stopped frequently to gasp for breath and cough with desperate energy. In the fearful silence, this terrible death-rattle could be heard in the furthest corner of the screens. Then, the ancient man would begin to speak again.

The new code allowed of a two year sentence in a labour camp for refusal to obey an overman's order. And three years without right of correspondence for absenteeism from work. The miners wanted an end to the death penalty for secret agitation in favour of an independent union. They demanded the release of those who had led the union before the days of the Protectorate.

They demanded an immediate withdrawal of all Militia and Paramilitary forces from the pit.

And finally - by a unanimous howl of acclamation - the miners of Pitmungo wanted an immediate end to the new truck system, which had abolished cash wages in favour of colour-coded tokens redeemable at the Militia store-house on the hill.

Another patriarch wanted to speak. This man had once been something of a militant - many years earlier he had served nine months for knocking the hat of a constable. But he began quietly enough, and his listeners crammed forward in tense silence to hear what he had to say. He began with the urgent matter of boots. Once, miners bought their own boots, with their own money. But now they had no money, nothing but damn tokens in fancy colours, and even if they had money, there would be no boots to buy with them anyway! That was why the hewers and fillers at the faces and the men on the tub-runs, had no boots; though the floor of the pit was often half a foot deep in water! That was why an issue every six months of imported boots so enraged the men - felt and rubber rubbish that fell apart after a matter of weeks. The miners of Pitmungo wanted leather boots, at least every three months: and they wanted them now.

Or consider the question of the brattices. Since time immemorial, ventilation in the pit had been controlled by brattice air-gates. But now they had been removed, to allow Militia fascists a direct line of fire in the roads. Or consider the issue of dilution of labour. Ancestral lines of craft demarcation had been abolished. And now children were back in the pits, expected to do the work of their fathers. For a hundred years, the miners of Pitmungo had campaigned to keep children out of the mines. Already fourteen-

year old boys were employed as ponymen, and soon they would have thirteen-year olds, boys and girls, employed as loaders' assistants! But the miners of Pitmungo should remember their history, the history of their movement! Their grievances went far beyond mere complaint about material conditions of labour and existence. Their principal grievance - if they would but know it - was political in nature. And those grievances could therefore be answered only by political changes in the way the industry was organised. What they wanted was an end to occupation of the village by the Militia and their Paramilitary allies. What they wanted was the free and independent organisation of labour. What they wanted was free political organisation of the workers of the land. What they wanted was a government of and for the people. And they would only get that if they took control of the state!

A vast peace lay over Pitmungo for some long moments after the old man finished speaking. Every listener knew that he had by his speech transformed a minor riot by hungry and over-worked miners on Christmas morning to something much more deadly, much more dangerous. But the bloody implications of his demands did not become apparent at once.

A motion was put and accepted by acclamation that the Militia be driven at once from Pitmungo. A second motion was accepted that the day be declared, with immediate effect, a holiday for the working man. And a third declared that the miners would march in procession from the screens to the football pitch at the north end of the village, and then down the main street of Pitmungo, to the old miners' welfare and union building. Delegates were also elected and sent to the commanding officer of the Militia, with the warning that he should have his his men out of the village by dusk.

It was at this point that the Militia began to fire on the miners, with a medium-calibre machine-gun. It was a tripod-mounted and water-cooled affair, which had, during the speeches below, been carried to the north gable of the old pit-owner's mansion on the hill. At first the firing was high, but quite quickly the gunner found his range and ran short bursts through the crowd, from left to right. The first man to fall was a banksman, with much of his head shot away. Then a popular miner was torn in half by the fire: and the crowd scattered for shelter among the pit-head buildings.

At that moment it began to snow, and in a few minutes it was snowing very heavily. The mansion disappeared from view, and though the gun kept chattering into the snow, its aim was wild and the fire could be heard crying overhead and burying itself in the hillside rocks to the rear of the pit-head. Then the gun stopped abruptly: and an extraordinary peace settled on the community. The snow now was heavier than ever: and it gave the miners the opportunity their leaders sought.

Ambulance squads, formed from among the men with elementary medical skills, commandeered doors and props from the timber store, and headed in a steady stream towards the village with the wounded. Three hundred men from the day shift, under the command of one of the older men, disappeared into the hills to the north of the mine installations. Of the remainder, some hundred men were left to defend as well as they might these installations, while the rest, in three fighting groups, groped their way through the timber yards for the football ground somewhere in the snow ahead. Once there, they were within striking distance of the village itself.

One unit, armed with rifles taken from the Militia men in the pit, smashed its way into the boarded and burned chapel to the north of

the miners's welfare building, and made its way at once to the steeple. Another group took possession of the welfare building itself, and prepared to defend it in hand to hand fighting with such weapons as they had taken from the pit head. The rest made their way down through the main street of Pitmungo and disappeared into the warren of alleys and wynds of which the village mostly was composed. One group took over the upper floor of the public house: it too was armed with rifles. A second, in the strange silence of heavy snow, presented itself at the police station. The Paramilitaries there promptly surrendered, and while their weapons were taken possession of, their previous owners were locked in the cells.

The miners then settled in for what was expected to be a long wait. When the snow stopped, they would storm the mansion on the hill, burn the Militia command post, take possession of the supplies depot below it, and for good measure seize the small Paramilitary barracks beside the Militia post.

In the occupied church steeple, the men peered into the whiteout. Intermittently the roofs of the village could be briefly seen, and then they disappeared again. Once, an orange glow lit the snowstorm, somewhere towards the hills to the east. Perhaps it was a flare from the Militia post: or had the men who had fled to the hills stormed the post, and set it on fire? Then the orange glow faded and died, and hope died with it.

One of the younger lads said, 'We should have cut the telephone lines to the Militia. They will phone out, and they will send reinforcements when the snow stops'.

But an older miner smiled. 'No son, we thought of that first', he said grimly. 'We took the phone lines down this morning before the trouble started. Do you think we're stupid?'

At that moment, the Militia counter-attacked. In the early stages of this assault, they were entirely unopposed. They quickly took possession of the empty school, and the village's second abandoned church. At the police station they found a dozen Paramilitaries locked in the cells, with their firearms in the possession of the miners. The troopers felt their way into the wynds and alleys of Pitmungo's eastern side, vengefully smashing houses in search of their prey. Then a single shot rang out, at very close range, and a lieutenant in the Militia dropped on the cobbles. Someone screamed that the shot had come from the upper windows of the public house, and the troopers swarmed towards the building. Three bundled sticks of mining dynamite fell among them, and exploded with force sufficient to smash in the doors and windows of the place. And at the moment, the principal force of miners, armed for the most part with no more than shovels and pit-props, raced into Pitmungo's main street, and engaged the enemy in ferocious hand-to-hand fighting in the snow.

Somewhere in the distance the machine gun could be heard again, and its ammunition screamed overhead: for in the very close confines of the village it was useless as a weapon. Once or twice, the muffled explosions of dynamite were again heard: and then a curious peace, by stages, began to fall on the main part of the village.

To the south west, however, there was still the sound of struggle: for a detachment of Militia troopers had made its way in a flanking movement round Pitmungo, and was now attacking the

welfare and union building. The fighting spilled into the nearby graveyard, or New Yard as it was known locally, where some centuries of local accidents and disasters were recalled in the headstones. In the dense and violent snowstorm, shovel fought bayonet: and the miners were stronger, and faster and more desperate, with an instinctive, almost telepathic, sense of communal organisation.

Within half an hour, the battle of New Yard was over. The Militia vanished as a fighting force: either dead, or wounded, or surrendered, or scattered in the storm. Some stumbled around in the hills all night, before freezing to death in the coldest hour before the dawn. Others groped their way onto the road leading out of the village, and made their escape by that route.

Then the dense snow lightened, and to the eastern side of the village - where earlier an orange Militia flare had glowed - a much larger, and brighter glow lit the sky. Moment later, the snow stopped altogether. The Militia mansion was on fire. Then miners could be seen swarming from the Paramilitary barracks, firing captured weapons in the air. And almost at once explosive charges blew open the front of the military supplies depot, in its barbed-wire compound between the school and the burning mansion.

The battle of Pitmungo was over. Hundreds of women and children swarmed from the village and headed for the welfare and union building. Even as they did so, lines of miners could be seen carrying loot from the stores depot in the same direction. Others dragged a handful of captured Militia officers and Paramilitaries with them.

A chaotic meeting, characterised by a wave of immense elation, overwhelmed the welfare building. Older men endeavoured

to establish and keep some order: but it quickly reverted to a free-for-all when the looters arrived with bundles of military-issue leather boots, crates of whisky, and twelve live turkeys which had been destined for that day's luncheon table of the Militia commanding officer and his subordinates. Someone had even recovered copies of a recent newspaper: a treasure in Pitmungo, for newspapers were strictly banned in areas subject to militarisation of labour. Some of the youngsters had acquired a radio receiving set from the Paramilitary barracks. They carried it in triumph towards the welfare building, for Pitmungo - apart from the visit of the wandering Daniel preacher - had had no news of the outside world for weeks.

When the Militia prisoners arrived, the mood turned ugly. Some of the women wanted to lynch these men there and then. But again older miners calmed the meeting and ordered that there be trials before any sentence could be passed. The bulk of these prisoners were therefore sent under heavy guard to the cells in the police station. Only the senior Militia man to have survived the battle was prepared for immediate trial.

His captors stood close around him with shovels raised, for fear that he might even then attempt an escape.

And then the trial began.