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Eirí Amach na Cásca (Part 2)

by Mike McCormack

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The following is abridged from Mr. McCormack's book, "The Road to Rebellion.

As the American Irish and their Irish-American sons and daughters coalesced into a wage-earning community of Diaporadoes, organizations like the **Ancient Order of Hibernians** were formed in 1836 from early Ribbon societies to defend Catholic values. They also nursed a dream of an independent Ireland and maintained links with their Ribbon mentors. In the 1850s, several Ribbon groups in Ireland adopted the AOH name and facing extreme anti-Catholic bias, became effectively a green version of the **Orange Order**. While still supporting Irish freedom, they became more religious-oriented than the militant Irish republican groups around them. However, in America many Hibernians maintained dual membership in the **Fenian Society** which had sprung from the AOH **Emmet Monument Society**. These organizations remained allies as the American AOH raised funds and political awareness to support Irish independence and the Fenian successor, **Clan na Gael**, supported a military approach in union with the **Irish Republican Brotherhood** (IRB). The AOH also created a military sub-committee called the **Hibernian Rifles** to drill and train and serve as a protective honor guard for AOH functions.

The AOH in Ireland eventually became a political force supporting the **Irish Parliamentary Party** (IPP) and Home Rule (a peaceful attempt at limited self-government under the Crown) while the AOH in America grew as a benevolent, but more nationalist society. Administrative and conceptual differences emerged and in 1886 the Order split between the AOH **Board of Erin** (BOE) and the AOH in America. A number of divisions in Ireland, more militant than the BOE leadership, confirmed affiliation with the American AOH calling themselves the AOH **American Alliance** (AA). Around 1907 a split occurred between the BOE and AA over registration as a Friendly Society of the British Empire. The BOE continued to support Redmond's IPP while the AA and the AOH in America remained allied with Clan Na Gael and the IRB indicating that the split was clearly between physical force and constitutional nationalists. The American AOH was also regarded as being less sectarian as it had opened membership to more than native-born Irish so that Irish-American sons could join and limited honorary membership was offered to benefactors. John J. Walsh of the Irish Volunteers in Cork commented on the two Hibernian groups in Ireland saying, *They were in opposition on many matters, but the AA was the more national.*

AA National Director John Joseph Scollan, noting that the American AOH provided for a military sub-committee, organized a Hibernian Rifles company in each Irish division. He wrote, *I started a unit in each division and succeeded in getting about 20 men to join in each. These were all highly selected men. At this time the total number of members of the divisions (in Dublin) were 80, 100 and 150, approximately.* The first recruiting ads appeared in James Connolly's newspaper **The Worker** on 22 November 1913. It stated that membership was open to *all Catholic Irishmen of good character* however, Scollan claimed that the Hibernian Rifles was non-sectarian and that its constitution *did not bar anyone from joining. It was a semi-public organization open to all religions.* The AA national board was supposed to be in command of the Hibernian Rifles but Scollan, as Commandant, directed and controlled the force which consisted of a ranking system of riflemen, captain, vice commandant and commandant. Each company selected its own officers. J.J. Walsh was made Vice Commandant and other officers were Captains Breslin, Garret and Sean Millroy. Sympathetic Irish ex-British soldiers provided instruction in foot drill and military training in the Hibernian Hall at 28 North Frederick St.



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Recruitment was from AA Divisions and ads in their newspaper **The Hibernian** which was published weekly from June 1915 until April 1916 with a national circulation of about 2,500 copies. The Hibernian also serialized a 'Roll of Honor' listing those who had been killed, wounded, imprisoned, deported or served with exclusion orders for republican activity. The paper also carried notices for the Irish Volunteers. The **Royal Irish Constabulary (RIC)** and **Dublin Metropolitan Police (DMP)** kept intelligence files on members of the Order and the DMP applied to the attorney general to have the paper suppressed since it was not registered in accordance with Newspapers Libel and Registration act of 1881.

With the rise of the unionist **Ulster Volunteer Force (UVF)**, Scollan detected *a feeling abroad that something of a counteraction should take place and this resulted in recruiting for our units becoming much easier*. By late 1913 the Hibernian Rifle units had been established in Armagh, Belfast, Castlebar, Cork, Dingle and Dundalk, each with a membership of 30 or 35 from existing AA Division. During the 1913 lockout the Hibernian Rifles sided with the striking workers as many members belonged to Connolly and Larkins's union. Even those AA who were not part of the Union raised money for the strikers. The BOE and Catholic bishops both actively condemned the strike and supported the employers. Scollan applied to the AOH in America to support the strikers and received more than a \$1,000. (\$25,000. today). This money was used to augment the strike pay of Hibernian Rifles members of the union ensuring strong ties with Connolly's Citizen Army.

After Redmond split the Volunteers by offering them to the British Army to fight in WWI, the Irish Volunteers were free from the influence of the IPP and the BOE Hibernians. As a result the Hibernian Rifles and Citizen Army developed a new attitude toward the IRB-dominated Irish Volunteers and all three groups were united in anti-recruiting activity, attending parades and public meetings organized by Connolly, the IRB and the Irish Volunteers.

Initially the Hibernian Rifles had no arms, but after the formation of the UVF, Scollan wrote to the AOH in America seeking arms. He recorded, *"They did not supply any and we received a supply of American Military text books"*. However, in 1914, with money from America, they soon found a source of arms. Scollan wrote, *"There was a division of Enniskillen Fusiliers based in Dollymount and from them we were able to purchase about one hundred rifles"*. Notoriously underpaid British soldiers gladly sold their arms as they would be issued new ones. The Brits would see those rifles again during the Easter Rising – in the arms of Hibernians and aimed at them.

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