

ORIGINAL

BUREAU OF MILITARY HISTORY 1913-21

BURO STAIRÉ MILEATA 1913-21

No. W.S. 574

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BUREAU OF MILITARY HISTORY, 1913-21.

STATEMENT BY WITNESS

DOCUMENT NO. W.S. 574

Witness

Commandant John McGonnell,
Clones,
Co. Monaghan.

Identity.

Member of Newbliss, Co. Monaghan, Irish Volunteers,
1917 - ;
Battalion Quartermaster 1921.

Subject.

- (a) National activities, Co. Monaghan, 1917-1922;
- (b) Military engagements, Co. Monaghan, 1920-1921.

Conditions, if any, Stipulated by Witness.

Nil

File No. S.1832

Form B.S.M. 2

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Statement of Ex-Commandant John McGonnell,
Clones, Co. Monaghan.

I joined Newbliss Company of the Irish Volunteers in April 1917. Patrick Boyle was Captain of Newbliss Company in 1917-1918. I was appointed Captain in September 1918, Pat Boyle being then transferred to the Brigade Staff. In 1918 when I took over as Company Captain there were twenty-one members in the Company.

In the years 1917-1918 the usual routine of the Company was drilling and training. In the year 1918 Sinn Féin meetings were being proclaimed and were being held in defiance of the British proclamations. At the efforts to hold proclaimed meetings in defiance of the British efforts to suppress them, the Volunteers scouted the vicinity where meetings were being held to prevent surprise by the undetected arrival of British forces.

In the year 1919 about February, we carried out a raid for arms in Drum area. In the General Election of December 1918, a number of Volunteers got beaten up on polling day. The Volunteers who were beaten up included Dan Hogan. About two months after this we raided a number of Unionist houses for arms and got a good many shotguns, some, however, not very serviceable. We carried out another raid for arms on the Duke of Abercorn's place in County Tyrone. I was on this raid, but I regret I have no clear recollection of the raid. As far as I can recollect there was nothing much got in the place.

Before the attack on Ballytrain R. I. C. Barracks in February 1920, a consignment of hand-grenades and revolvers came in a box of hardware addressed to Messrs. McHenry & McQuire, Hardware Merchants, The Diamond, Clones. I was instructed by General O'Duffy to take charge of the hand-grenades and have them conveyed to Newbliss Company area. There were thirty-six hand-grenades in the consignment. Later I was instructed to call on Miss R. Tumman and collect a parcel and convey same to the residence of Mr. John Donnelly (now deceased), then a road ganger at Killeevan. I got the parcel and tied it on the carrier of my cycle and proceeded with it to Donnelly's residence where I arrived at midnight. I found him waiting for me with two large pots of water boiling on the top of a range. Donnelly took the parcel from me and opened it up. It contained about fifty pounds of gelignite which was in a frozen condition. The two pots of water were awaiting the arrival of the explosive to be de-frozen. Donnelly took off his coat and commenced on the de-freezing process, which proved both tedious and dangerous. It was 4 a.m. before he had the work completed. We then tested a small portion of the de-frozen explosive on an old disused house on the following night and found it satisfactory. Some of this stuff was used to blow up Ballytrain Barracks.

The week prior to the attack on Ballytrain the officers of the various units were asked to attend a meeting at the residence of Mr. Tom Cosgrove, Newtownbutler Road, Clones. General O'Duffy and General Dan Hogan came to the meeting, accompanied by a young gentleman we did not then know, and introduced him to us as Mr. Ernie O'Malley from Headquarters of the I.R.A. in Dublin. O'Malley gave us a lecture on attacking a military post, and at the end of the

lecture he and we proceeded to go into the details as to the various positions for the attack on Ballytrain Barracks.

My orders for the night of the attack were to mobilise my Company and proceed to Ballytrain, travelling by bicycle. I was to procure a car and convey the explosives and hand-grenades to the vicinity of the Barracks. Accompanying me on the car to Ballytrain were, John Donnelly and Mr. Patrick McDonald, now an ex Sergeant in Civic Guards. Those two men knew all about explosives and were to lay the charge to the barrack wall. When we arrived in Ballytrain I was ordered into Mitchell's house opposite the Barracks, and to proceed upstairs with a number of others to open the attack on the police Barracks with rifle fire. My recollection now is that General O'Duffy called on the police to surrender on two occasions during the attack which they refused to do. After the second call to surrender the mine at the barrack gable was exploded and the police immediately afterwards signified their surrender by throwing their rifles out of the barrack windows. We then rushed the Barracks and took possession of the building.

After the surrender of the Barracks we got a number of cars which we had available in the vicinity and which we loaded up with arms and ammunition, etc. which we removed to safe destinations. The garrison of the Barracks was one Sergeant and four Constables.

In September 1920, we carried out the general raid for arms all over the country. In our Company area we attacked three houses and only got two shotguns, one revolver and an old rook rifle.

In September 1920, two R.I.C. men from Ballybay came into the village of Newbliss on bicycles and were having some drinks in McGinn's public-house when I heard about it. I discovered that both the policemen carried revolvers and ammunition. I organised a party of five Volunteers and we proceeded to a place named Doapey where we lay in waiting to disarm the police. The two R.I.C. men got intoxicated and were unable to ride their bicycles and they engaged a motor car to convey them back to Ballybay. The car they engaged belonged to the McKenna family and the driver knew we were lying in ambush for the police. This particular car was fitted with an exhaust whistle and the driver started to blow it when the car came near our position on a little hill at Doapey. When we started to rush at the car the driver pulled up and we jumped on the running-boards on each side of the car, pulled the two policemen out and disarmed them on the roadside. We got two Webley revolvers with 36 rounds of ammunition for each revolver and we also commandeered their two cycles.

Later on that month I joined the North Monaghan Flying Column, of which Dan Hogan was Column O/C. The following as far as I can remember joined this Column -
 Dr. Paddy McCarville, Phil Marron, Paddy McCarron, Comdt. Mat Fitzpatrick, Frank Tummon, James Winters, James Murphy, Thomas Cosgrave, Comdt. Paddy McGrory, Thomas Clerkin, Billy McMahon. I joined the Column at its formation in Derrygannon Hall near Roslea, Co. Fermanagh. We remained at this place for about two weeks, receiving instructions and training. After about two weeks Comdt. Mat Fitzpatrick, Frank Tumman and myself returned to our own Company areas for some reason which I now cannot recollect. We separated, and Tumman and Fitzpatrick went to Wattlebridge Company area. The night following our

Leaving the Column, the Column Camp at a place named Knockatallon was surrounded, by British military and R. I. C. Dr. Patrick McCarville was captured. The remainder of the Column escaped. This affair took place during night time. After this attempt at capturing the Column, we were only mobilised for the carrying out of an actual military operation and remained mobilised only during the carrying out of such operations.

During the latter part of 1920, we carried out a number of raids for mails. The first of those was a raid on a mail train at Glasslough Station. We took the train crew off, collected such mails as we considered necessary, then sprinkled the train with petrol from the engine back to the guard's van at the rear of the train and set the petrol alight. Dan Hogan then mounted the footplate of the engine and started the train going on line towards Clones. Hogan stepped down from the engine when it had properly started. The train proceeded on its way burning fiercely, and when near Monaghan town stopped - probably for want of water in the boiler - and had then practically burned itself out. This train was carrying Belfast goods, and its destruction with its cargo, ~~was~~^{was} part of the plans to enforce a boycott on all Belfast goods.

About a month later I was ordered by Dan Hogan to carry out a raid on the Post Office in Clones at 3 a.m. on a Monday morning. The mails arrived at Clones Post Office from the railway station at this time. I and about seven of my men waited around the corner from the Post Office in Carra Street until the van containing the mails arrived at the yard gateway. When the yard gate was opened we followed the mail van into the yard and seized the Post Office caretaker. We then shut the yard gate, over-powered

the men with the van, opened all the mail bags and took out all letters and mails. These we packed into a car we had waiting, and I conveyed them to Latton, Ballybay, where I handed them over to General O'Duffy and the Brigade who immediately commenced censoring the mails.

Later on in January 1921, I carried out another raid on Clones Post Office in much the same manner and again I conveyed the mails to Latton where the same procedure was carried out by Owen O'Duffy and his staff.

Those raids for mails gave General O'Duffy and the Brigade staff most valuable intelligence about the activities of some civilian spies who were giving information to the British in our Brigade area. Information obtained in one of those raids resulted in the execution of two British spies - Kitty Carroll from near Scotstown and Arthur Treanor from Tydavnet direction. In both of these cases I heard that cheques were actually enclosed in letters in payment for services rendered. I know for a fact that both of those people were executed as a result of information got in raids on mails which left no doubt as to their guilt. After Kitty Carroll was shot Lloyd George made a statement in the British House of Commons in connection with the execution and the Press reports stated that he wept when he described the callous disregard which the I.R.A. displayed for the niceties of civilised warfare in executing a woman.

A young man named Larmour of Rockcerry Company of the I.R.A. was arrested by Crown Forces and conveyed to Belfast Prison about the end of January 1921. Under severe beatings whilst a prisoner in Belfast, he divulged the names of the Volunteers who had taken part in the attack on Ballytrain Barracks. After he gave the information he

was released from Belfast Prison and returned home to Rockcorry where he was arrested by the I.R.A. and tried by courtmartial. He was found guilty and was executed at a place named Latnamard together with another young man named McPhillips. This McPhillips was suspected of giving information to the R.I.C. about local Volunteers whose homes were being regularly raided by Crown Forces. Two I.R.A. officers dressed themselves in police uniform and met McPhillips on his journey home one night and they questioned him about all the local I.R.A. men whose houses had been recently raided. He willingly gave all the information that he knew about them and their whereabouts. This information was conveyed by the men impersonating the policemen to the Battalion staff, which confirmed the suspicions which already existed as to this man's guilty association with the enemy, and he was courtmartialled and executed.

Sometime in January 1921, a Unionist named Lester was fired at and wounded in Roslea. Some few nights after this occurrence the "B" Specials in Roslea area made an attack on the Catholic residents in Roslea and two Catholics were wounded and a few of their homes burned or partly burned. The Catholic Curate's house was attacked by an orangeman who attempted to break in the door with the butt of a service rifle. There was a round of ammunition in the breach; the rifle went off and shot the orangeman dead on the Curate's doorstep. A week or so later it was decided by the I.R.A. Command to carry out reprisals in the Roslea area on the houses of members of the "B" Specials and prominent orangemen. The area over which reprisals were ordered were Roslea, Smithboro and Scotstown.

I was in charge of Newbliss Company and accompanied by Commandant Mat Fitzpatrick went to Agafin district between Newbliss and Roslea. We attacked a number of houses in that district. One Unionist named Magwood was killed and his house burned. Commandant Mat Fitzpatrick was wounded in the attack on this house. John McKenna and Jim O'Donohoe procured a pony and trap locally from a man named McQuade, Drumadrane, Stonebridge, and conveyed the wounded man to the residence of Mr. Joseph O'Duffy, Annagoes, Newbliss. They then obtained the services of Dr. Canning of Rockcorry who first gave surgical attention to the wounded man. Dr. May Kearns, Glynch House, Newbliss, attended the wounded man each day and on several occasions twice per day. The I.R.A. began to feel after a time that the presence of Commandant Fitzpatrick in the house was becoming known to too many and he was conveyed to a quieter house in the same district belonging to Joseph Beggan. The wounded man was visited occasionally by members of the I.R.A. On one particular night Benny McMahon, Captain of Clones Company, cycled from Clones to see him. On his return journey to Clones he was intercepted by a mixed party of military and police and they arrested him. They traced his bicycle tracks back on the wet road from the point he was arrested at to Beggan's house and found Fitzpatrick there. The police soon discovered that Fitzpatrick was too ill to remove in the ordinary way and they obtained a stretcher and conveyed him on the stretcher in a motor tender to Monaghan Infirmary when he was placed in a ward and a military guard of one Corporal and nine soldiers were posted on guard. One injured or sick R.I.C. man was put into a bed alongside of Fitzpatrick's bed.

After Fitzpatrick's capture, several meetings of the Divisional Staff with Brigade and Battalion Officers present,

were held to discuss the pros and cons of trying to effect his rescue. Eventually Dr. Con Ward brought a scheme forward after discussing it with a Mrs. Buckley who was then matron of the Monaghan Infirmary. Mrs. Buckley was the widow of an R.I.C. Sergeant, was friendly, and she promised Dr. Ward her co-operation in the plan or scheme he put forward, and was made aware of the main details.

Mrs. Buckley's part in the rescue plan was to leave a certain door leading into the ward unlocked for the rescue party to make quick entry to the ward, and was a vital part of the plan, which she agreed to do.

On the night of the rescue the I.R.A. mobilised at a place named Greenan's Cross, having previously commandeered three motor cars. All engaged in the operation had tea in a house at Greenan's Cross and then the rosary was recited and we set off about 1 a.m. in the three cars for Monaghan Town. When we arrived to about 500 yards from the Infirmary, the cars were halted and every man taking an active part in the rescue took off his boots and we proceeded cautiously and directly straight into the Hospital. The sentry inside the main door of the hospital was asleep sitting on a chair with his rifle between his knees. After the sentry's rifle was seized he gave a yell. This yell alerted and alarmed the main portion of the guard who were in a room convenient. When we rushed this room the two leading men got in safely but the third man, Paddy McCarron, was wounded in the arm by a rifle bullet fired by a soldier as he entered the doorway. We overpowered the guard - a corporal and six men - and we tied them up with cords. Whilst we were dealing with the soldiers in the guard room Phil Marron and another party were proceeding towards the ward where Fitzpatrick was lying. They were met by rifle fire from the sentry placed on the

top of the stairs leading into the ward, and they were forced to retreat down the stairs. We then got the captured soldiers from the guard room and forced them up the stairs towards the ward in front of us and shouted at the sentry at the top of the stairs to have a good look at what was approaching him before he again opened fire. He left down his rifle when he saw his comrades coming up the stairs as prisoners. We then all entered the ward, and as soon as we went in Commandant Fitzpatrick told us that the policeman in the next bed had a revolver under his pillow with which he had threatened to shoot Fitzpatrick when he attempted to get out of bed on hearing the noise downstairs. We disarmed the R.I.C. man and took Fitzpatrick out of the hospital on a stretcher and was conveyed to a place named Annyalla where the local company of the I.R.A. took charge of him and guarded him until he recovered from his wounds.

The following took part in the Fitzpatrick rescue: Dan Hogan, officer in charge; James Flynn, Monaghan, Paddy McCarron, Monaghan, Jim O'Donohue, Aghabog, Pat Monaghan, Aghabog, John McGonnel, Newbliss (myself), Joseph McCarville, Newbliss, John McCarville, Monaghan, James Winters, Clones, Phil Marron, Monaghan, Paddy McKenna, Scotstown, Paddy McGrory, Tyholland, Frank Tumman, Wattlebridge. The men driving the cars were John McKenna, Newbliss, and two others, probably James Nolan, Clones, and - Maloy, Monaghan. The two stretcher-bearers were James McConnon and Patrick Keirns, both of Corcaghan district.

For this operation all the roads with the exception of the main road leading towards Clogher were blocked. After the rescue, when the alarm was raised, the

Crown Forces proceeded along this road and commenced an intensive raiding of the Bragan district which is a mountainous country. This raiding lasted for about two days.

During the months of May and June, 1921, and up to the Truce, we were active in various ways, sniping at police patrols and sniping at R.I.C. Barracks. At this time the police were all concentrated in large block-houses and they rarely came out in lorry patrols except in such numbers that we could not successfully deal with them. There was an intensive raiding by Crown Forces for I.R.A. men in all active areas, and the effort to evade capture was a primary duty to all our men. Coming on close to the Truce a lot of our men had been arrested and some of those men had been courtmartialled and were awaiting execution, and others were serving long sentences of penal servitude. At the Truce the large number of arrests made during the previous nine or ten months left the number of active men attempting to carry out operations, small.

Soon after the Truce - 11th July, 1921 - a divisional training camp was set up at Laughbawn for the training of divisional and brigade officers. I attended a course of instruction at the camp for two weeks. When the course for the Divisional and Brigade Officers finished all the junior officers in the Brigade and the Battalion Officers did a two weeks' course, and then Company Officers did a course. Also during this time courses of week-end camps were started in all battalion areas for the training of the rank and file in the Companies, and those week-end training courses were carried on all through the summer and autumn of 1921.

Some time in January 1922, the Monaghan County Gaelic Football team was due to play Derry County in Derry City. The Monaghan team were travelling by motor cars to Derry City on a Saturday evening and they were intercepted and halted at Dromore, Co. Tyrone, by a party of Special Constabulary. Most of the County Monaghan team were officers of the I.R.A. and it was discovered that they were carrying revolvers. All the armed officers were arrested and lodged in Derry Prison. The men arrested included Dan Hogan, Eamon O'Carroll, Paddy McRory. At the time of their arrest the officers made a vigorous protest against the indignity of being held up and searched by British Crown Forces in Northern Ireland. The arrest of the officers was reported to us early the next morning by Billy McMahon who was present when the arrests were made, and being unarmed was allowed to return home, arriving in Clones early on Sunday morning. Later on Sunday a meeting was called of all the available Divisional and Brigade officers. At this meeting of officers it was decided that Commandant Mat Fitzpatrick should act as Divisional O/C., Jim O'Donohue to be Divisional Adjutant, and myself as Divisional Quartermaster. The Battalion Vice O/C., Joe McCarville, took over command of the Battalion. No other new appointments were considered necessary. At this meeting various proposals were put forward as a means to effect the release of the imprisoned officers. General Owen O'Duffy who was at this time Assistant Chief of Staff, was in Dublin, and we sent a message to him acquainting him of the position and of our plans, which included widespread attacks on British Crown Forces in Northern Ireland. General O'Duffy agreed on the principle involved in our plans but asked that the carrying out of our plans should be deferred pending official

negotiations with a view to securing the release of all the officers by peaceful methods.

On the 8th February, 1922, we received permission from General O'Duffy to proceed with our plans, one party of which I was a member, commanded by Commandant Fitzpatrick, proceeded to Wattlebridge and captured a Crossley Tender. We intercepted the tender containing a number of Special Constabulary and we opened fire on them. The men in the tender jumped from it and ran away, leaving the tender to us. On the main Clones-Newtonbutler road a second party of our men ambushed 2 Crossley Tenders of Special Constabulary at a place about midway between both these towns. The result showed no casualties on our side and we didn't know what casualties, if any, were suffered by the enemy. We did not succeed here in capturing the tenders.

On the evening of the 11th February, 1922, we got a message stating that a party of Specials had come off a Belfast train at Clones Railway Station. Commandant Fitzpatrick decided to investigate and he ordered me to accompany him. He also ordered Commandant O'Donohoe to mobilise all the men in the Barrack and have the Railway Station surrounded. Commandant Fitzpatrick, myself, Paddy Rooney and Billy White went to the station by car. When we arrived at the station Captain J.J. Smyth was on the platform. Commandant Fitzpatrick, after a few words with Captain Smyth, decided that he and Captain Smyth should interview the Sergeant in charge of the Specials. Commandant Fitzpatrick proceeded along the carriages and I followed him. He came to a compartment with one policeman in it. He stopped and I proceeded past him to a point underneath the stairway crossing the line leading from the No.1 platform to the Island platform. I saw

Commandant Fitzpatrick put his head inside the carriage window. I later heard a shot and on looking again I could see no sign of Commandant Fitzpatrick. I was armed with a Thompson sub-machine gun and had 100 rounds of ammunition in the magazine. I saw that three compartments of the train directly in front of where I was standing were filled with Specials or policemen. Just after the first shot was fired and when Commandant Fitzpatrick disappeared from my view, a terrific fire was opened by the police in the carriage. All the windows on the station were broken. I opened fire on the three compartments opposite me with the machine-gun and continued firing until all movement in these carriages had ceased which proved to me that all the occupants were either killed or severely wounded. I looked around and saw the arm of a policeman with a sergeant's stripes on it, stretched out in the act of opening the carriage door from the inside. The sergeant emerged from the carriage with a rifle in his hand and proceeded towards the exit from the station leading towards the town. I put up my gun and gave him a burst of its fire and finished him. I then examined the machine-gun and I found the magazine was empty. An engine was being backed up towards the stationary train and being propped on to it. I got on to its footplate and I ordered the driver to unhook from the stationary train and to take his engine away towards the railway gates. I got off the engine, went down the main street and obtained another drum of ammunition for the machine-gun from one of our motor cars on the street. I then contacted Jim O'Donohue and told him all I knew to have occurred. He and I then proceeded to the station entrance. We both shouted in a loud voice for all policemen in the train to come out on the platform with their hands up and that there would be no more shooting. Two

policemen dismounted on to the platform with their hands up and were taken prisoner. All the other police with the exception of one man who escaped, were either dead or so badly wounded that they were serious hospital cases. The man who escaped went to the local R. I. C. Barracks and obtained refuge there. He was the only policeman alive on the train to escape capture as far as I know.

We carried out a search for Commandant Fitzpatrick and we found him dead lying between two carriages on the railway line. He was shot through the head and death must have been instantaneous.

After Commandant Fitzpatrick's funeral on the Monday following his shooting, we carried on and did not make any appointment to fill his position on the Divisional Staff. We organised and carried out a widespread raid in many Six County areas and we captured a large number of hostages. A number of those hostages were men of standing in the political or official life in their local areas. The capture of those hostages was carried out as a reprisal for the arrest of Dan Hogan and his arrested officers. These were sent to Trim Barracks where they were detained.

Some time after the arrest of all those hostages we received information that General Hogan and his officers were being released. Their release was effected by the orders of the General Officer Commanding the British Forces in the Six Counties area. The Northern Government Authorities refused to release our men on the representation of the British Government and the British Military Authorities had to effect their release by direct action. The officers were handed over by British Military to General Joseph Sweeney, O/C. 1st Northern Division, at the

County Donegal - County Derry Frontier.

Concerning the various ranks I held in the I.R.A. both pre and post Truce - before the appointment of Mat Fitzpatrick as Battalion O/C. in 1920, I occupied that post for about two months. I think that my appointment as Battalion O/C. was due to the arrest of Dan Hogan who had been Battalion O/C. I was appointed Battalion Quartermaster early in 1921. About March 1921, I was appointed Brigade Quartermaster. After the Truce I acted as Divisional Quartermaster for a short time, and a few days after Mat Fitzpatrick's funeral I was appointed Battalion O/C. and I held this rank up to the time the National Army started to operate.

SIGNED

John McGoanell

DATE

18th Sept 1951

WITNESS

John McBoy.
18/9/51.

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