

ORIGINAL

BUREAU OF MILITARY HISTORY 1913-21

BURO STAIRÉ MILÉ TA 1913-21

No. W.S. 605

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COSANTA

BUREAU OF MILITARY HISTORY, 1913-21.

STATEMENT BY WITNESS

DOCUMENT NO. W.S. 605.....

Witness

John Cosgrove,  
Letmacollum,  
Lisnadill,  
Co. Armagh.

Identity.

Member of Ballymacnab Company (Co. Armagh)  
Irish Volunteers, 1917 - ;  
Captain same Company 1918 - .

Subject.

- (a) National activities, Co. Armagh, 1917-1924;
- (b) Opposition to Irish Volunteers by Hibernians  
Co. Armagh, 1918;
- (c) Attempted raid on Tassagh Post Office, April 1921;
- (d) Plans for Rising, Northern Ireland, 1922.

Conditions, if any, Stipulated by Witness.

Nil

File No. S.1834.....

Form B.S.M. 2

Statement by John Cosgrave,

Letmacollum, Lisnadill, Co. Armagh.

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BUREAU STAIRS MILITARY 1913-21

STATEMENT BY JOHN COSGRAVE, NO. W.S. 605

Lettmacollum, Lisnadill, CO. Armagh.

I joined the Volunteers about the end of 1917 when the reorganisation after 1916 took place. I then joined the newly formed Ballymacnab company. Harry McKenna was Company O/C. At the start the company numbered six men; after a week's recruiting our strength rose to 16 men. This number remained static until the truce in 1921. In a short time after the truce was declared the company strength rose up to about 100 men and we took in new areas such as Markethill and Hamilstownbawn where sections of the Volunteers were started.

About 1918 I was appointed Company O/C. of Ballymacnab Coy. The Armagh Battalion was then formed and Harry McKenna was elected battalion quartermaster. Our armament in 1918 - Ballymacnab Company - were six shotguns, a few short and long Martini rifles - an Italian rifle. Later on we purchased a few other Italian rifles. We had also a few .320, .380 and .450 revolvers. In the years 1918-1919 the local Volunteers engaged in the usual training and drilling practices.

In Ballymacnab Company area we had a small pocket of Catholic houses situated in a predominantly Unionist area. In the Catholic district a percentage of the people were Hibernians and, as such, antagonistic to Republicanism and the Volunteers. In 1918 and 1919 the Volunteers got more annoyance and opposition from the Hibernian organisation than from the Unionists. This opposition to local republicans by the Ancient Order of Hibernians came to a climax during the South Armagh election campaign in January and February, 1918. We then saw the unusual spectacle of Hibernians and Orangemen travelling together in the same public conveyance with the green Hibernian flag and the Orange union jack flying side by side. The Hibernian election slogan "Up Donnelly" was supplemented by the Orange section with the additional war cry of "To hell with

the Pope". This unholy alliance between orange and green was the start of an intense opposition by the Hibernians to everything republican in our area. In those days South Armagh embraced Ballymacnab and Cladymiltown. Those districts are now mid-Armagh.

After the South Armagh election the feelings between the Sinn Fein organisation and the Hibernian organisation became most antagonistic. I often saw the Hibernians refusing to pass the spot where a Sinn Fein flag was flown on their way to Mass on Sundays. This intense hatred by the Hibernians to everything republican did a lot of harm from 1918 up to the truce and it paved the way for the later partitioning of the country. The idea of partition was in the campaign for Home Rule in 1912 and 1913 and was wholeheartedly agreed to by Mr. Joe Devlin the Hibernian leader at that time.

We carried out some raids for arms in 1919. One of these raids was on a Unionist house belonging to the Cope family at Dromilly, Loughgall. During the raid the lady of the house attempted to open fire on us in the hallway of the house. I got a grip on the shotgun she was attempting to use and deflected the charge to the roof of the house and I took the gun from her. The butler then came on the scene with a lovely .45 revolver which we took from him. We made a thorough search of the house but failed to locate the expected haul of arms and ammunition which we heard the house contained. This whole operation had to be carried out with the utmost secrecy, as the local R.I.C. barrack was only a stone's throw from Dromilly House. We must have taken about 3 hours in our painstaking search of such a large mansion. The Cope family, which comprised 3 young girls, the butler and the other inmates, were taken into a conservatory where we kept them during the raid. At the start of the raid the Cope family assured on their word of honour that there was no store of arms in the house. At the end of our search

before leaving the house, the Cope family expressed their appreciation of our kindly treatment of them during the raid.

In or about February 1920, Harry McKenna, Mick Toner, Peter McNally, Paddy Beegan and myself together with several others travelled to Newtownhamilton to take part in an attempt to capture the R.I.C. Barracks there. This attempt took the form of a ruse. Volunteers dressed in British army uniform and equipment and carrying rifles approached the barrack door and sought admission as being sent to Newtownhamilton on a raiding expedition in which the co-operation of the R.I.C. was necessary. The policeman on duty in the barracks refused admission and the attempt was called off so that the garrison would not be unduly alarmed and make proper preparation to repulse a future attempt to capture the barracks.

In May 1921, we again mobilised to take part in a full scale attack on Newtownhamilton R.I.C. Barracks. Our part in the operation was the blocking of all roads leading from Armagh to Newtownhamilton. The blockade was erected at a place named Bullstrack, situated in our area where two roads leading from Armagh city branch on to the Newtownhamilton road. We properly blockaded the roads, but no movement of military or R.I.C. came in our direction.

In or about April 1920 an attack was planned on Glasslough Barracks. Frank Aiken came to our area and brought out our whole company and we blocked the Armagh-Monaghan main road. In addition to felling trees on this occasion we made trenches across the road. For some reason this operation on Glasslough was called off.

In April 1920, we got orders to proceed to Armagh city to take part in the burning of the Income Tax offices there. As strangers in the city we were placed on the street near Palace Row and at Barrack Hill near the military barracks to hold up

up any person likely to interfere with the operation. The Armagh company were to do the burning. We remained in our positions awaiting the signal to commence holding people up. We got no orders and the burning of the offices was not carried out. We remained in our positions until 3 a.m. when we took it for granted that the carrying out of the operation was abandoned. We then went home.

There was another incident took place which I can't even approximately date. A Catholic tenant in an Protestant house in an Orange district was wounded by being fired on through his kitchen window, receiving a charge of small shot. This man's name was Mallon, a thatcher, who was a member of the Hibernian organisation. A battalion council was called to consider this shooting, and it was decided to carry out reprisals. The reprisals decided on were the burning of the following houses:- Leeman's, The Navan, Proctor's near Ballinrea, Orange Lodge, and Lee's Blacksmith's shop on the Killea-Armagh road. Our part in those reprisals was the burning of Lee's. This house was situated about 7 miles from Ballymacnab. When on our journey to Lee's, and about a mile from it, we encountered a patrol of 'B' Specials and an exchange of fire took place. At the time we encountered the patrol the other two houses had been fired and were burning. The shooting with the Specials kept us engaged for some time and when we got clear of them the opportunity to carry out our part in the reprisals had passed.

8 or 9

In or about April 1921, I, in charge, accompanied by others went to Tassagh Post Office to raid the mails and search for fire arms. The postmaster in Tassagh was a Unionist and a British Intelligence Officer. We arrived at the post office after night-fall and entered the kitchen part of the premises where two men and the postmaster's daughter were sitting at the kitchen fire. On our entry into the kitchen the girl shouted "Daddy, do not shoot", which was apparently an arranged password, as immediately shots came from a little room behind the kitchen fire where the

business of the post office was carried out. The lights in the kitchen went out and one of our men, Haughey of Ballymacnab, received a gunshot wound in the arm. The postmaster had police or Special constabulary with him in the room from which the firing came and their fire was directed through a wooden partition which separated the kitchen from this room. We could not see who was firing on us and the fire was well directed, as it did not endanger the girl or the two men who were sitting in an angle of the fireplace and were out of the line of fire. We opened a heavy fire on the partition and during this firing I got wounded in the hand. The revolver which I was using was shot to pieces in my hand. Hgughey, who was in a serious condition, had to be carried away and we were forced to evacuate the premises. Some of the men taking part in the attack wanted to set fire to the post office which had a thatched roof. I would not allow this, as it would mean that all the inmates of the house would perish - innocent and guilty - alike. The two men sitting at the kitchen fire put up their hands when we entered first and ordered them to do so and, as far as we knew, took no part in the subsequent action. The old postman, to say the least of him, was a brave man.

The next problem was to get the wounded man to a place where a doctor could attend to him. We carried him to a house and when we arrived there people of the house got frightened of the idea of keeping a wounded man on the premises, so we then carried him to my own house. Dr. Walter McKee attended him and later removed him by motor car to the Mater Hospital, Belfast. The bullet was extracted in the Mater and, after its removal, the hospital authorities would not agree to keep him in the hospital. Haughey refused to remain in Belfast and he eventually came home on his own against the advice of the local I.R.A. officers. I went to Belfast in connection with Haughey's treatment in hospital and his after treatment, if he could be prevailed on to remain in Belfast. I came home by train three

days after the attack on the post office and, when passing on the street near the post office in Armagh, I was arrested by police and taken to the R.I.C. barracks. I was searched in the barracks, interrogated and, after a short time, released. On my way home at Lisnadill Church I was overtaken by a lorry load of Special constabulary who, when they came up to me, jumped out of the lorry and commenced to give me a savage beating. They then put me into the lorry and took me to my own house and searched it. Finding nothing incriminating in the house, they took me back to Armagh city. On the journey back they raided James Trodden's of Irish St. I had called at Trodden's on my way home that evening and this may have prompted the Specials to raid it. I was then taken to the military barracks in Armagh and was detained there for seven weeks. I was then sent to Belfast prison. I was courtmartialled in Victoria military barracks and sentenced to 12 months' imprisonment. I was charged at the courtmartial with having a mask in my pocket when I was arrested. This supposed mask was a piece of cloth which I wore on a sore foot underneath my stocking and had two small holes worn in it which the R.I.C. claimed were the eye holes in a mask. I was released in Sept. 1921.

After my release from prison I attended a few training camps - one for a few days at Derrynoose, and another at Ballymacnab. We started an engineering section at Ballymacnab where we made concrete land mines. We filled those mines with explosives. We made lead pellets, buckshot, for use in shotguns. During the end of 1921, and in the early months of 1922 we devoted all our energies to training and equipping the Volunteers and preparing for the struggle which we hoped would soon be resumed against the British forces occupying the six northern counties.

From the truce was declared in July 1921, an epidemic of robberies and acts of criminal violence against householders who were old or infirm took place all over our area. The R.I.C.



took no notice of those incidents. When, however, a number of those crimes were carried out under the name of the I.R.A. serious notice had to be taken by us. We got our Intelligence to work on several of those happenings and we soon got to know the persons responsible and we made two arrests. In both these cases we located some of the stolen goods which were identified by the people who were robbed. Those two individuals were tried by I.R.A. courtmartial, both found guilty and were sentenced to be chained to a tree opposite the chapel gate at Ballymacnab with a history of the crime each man was guilty of attached to his person. Those incidents and the method of punishment inflicted caused a complete cessation of similar crimes.

Some time in April 1922 we were informed that arms in large quantities were to be supplied to our area from Divisional Headquarters in Dundalk. John Garvey was our brigade quartermaster and, under his instructions, dumps were prepared for all the war material which was expected locally. We also received orders to be responsible for the safe custody of all munitions passing through our area to other places until such material was taken off our hands by the people it was consigned to. I don't know if our expectations as to the quantities of arms intended for us was unduly optimistic, but when the arms arrived we felt somewhat disappointed. We received, however, sufficient arms to equip all our trained and active men with a rifle and revolver each, and also sufficient ammunition and hand grenades to carry on with. Our dumps were made in some cases underground and in other cases overground in outhouses, sheds, etc. The stuff was placed in small quantities in dispersed places so that the detection of large quantities by Crown Forces would be difficult. That none of this stuff was captured is a tribute to the loyalty of our men and the care and forethought with which they handled the work.

A very large motor lorry conveyed the arms etc. by road from Dundalk to Ballymacnab, and what was allotted to us was handed

over together with the stuff for the other companies in the battalion - Derrynoose, Keady, Armagh. We also had to take temporary charge of the war material intended for the Lurgan Battalion area.

The organisation for the transport, the distribution and the dumping of the stuff worked perfectly and according to plan. All the material was got into safe dumps in the different company areas without the loss of even a round of .303.

The importation of the arms and ammunition into Northern Ireland was made in preparation for a planned general uprising of the I.R.A. in the Six Counties area and was timed to take place on the night of Monday, 22nd May 1922. Countermanding orders calling off the Rising arrived in Armagh about noon of that Monday and we received those orders later that evening.

As far as I now can remember, the local plans for this rising for the Ballymacnab Company were first to take over a newly erected house - a residence for the local clergyman - as an hospital. We were then to join up with the Lislea section of the Armagh Company and the Markethill outpost of the Ballymacna Company and to deal with any local opposition from the Lisnadill B/Specials and from B/Specials in Markethill and Red Rock areas. After dealing with any local opposition we were ordered to move in the direction of Armagh city where we should join up with all the other battalion units from Armagh, and when the local military garrison was subdued we were all to move in the direction of Lough Neagh from where the 3rd Brigade would launch an attack on the town of Portadown which was we understood was a key point in the British defences.

A round up all around North Armagh area took place on the night of the 22nd May 1922. In fact, this round up was general all over the Six County area, and in every district

all active I.R.A. men were raided for and many arrests were made

On this night - 22nd May - my house was raided by Royal Ulster Constabulary and Special Constabulary. I was in bed when the house was raided; I was hauled from the bed about 7 a.m. The unexpected arrival of the police at my house was a particular shock to me as I had some war material in the vicinity of the house which I was afraid that a careful search might disclose. I was asked by the officer in charge of the raiders if I required anything to eat, and as I wanted to get them off the premises as soon as possible, I said I required nothing. They immediately took me away and I was conveyed to near Henry McKenna's place and I was kept there sitting on the road whilst other houses were being raided. Henry McKenna and I were the only I.R.A. men captured from the Ballymacnab Company and, with about 15 others from other company areas, we were conveyed to Armagh and put into the Courthouse, into an underground latrine where we were confined and compelled to live and sleep for 3 days. During those 3 days we got only one shack of tea. What was probably responsible for this was that some of the Cumann na mBan girls who came to us with food passed some disparaging remarks about our jailers and after this we were locked up in strict confinement without any more eats.

After 3 days in Armagh we were all removed to Belfast Prison. We remained there until the 22nd July 1922, when we were amongst the 500 Republican prisoners removed from Belfast prison to the prison ship Argenta anchored in Belfast Lough. I remained, as an internee, in the Argenta, or later in Larne Workhouse up to November 1924. Henry McKenna was released shortly before me in August 1924.

During our internment in the Argenta we were offered facilities to go before a commission which was set up to deal with imprisoned members of the Republican organisation. Any prisoner going before the commission was questioned about his

membership of the I.R.A., his knowledge of arms dumps and I.R.A. officers and men active in the prisoners area. The commission could recommend the release of any prisoner who gave the required information and who signed an undertaking not to again take up arms against the Northern Government forces. The conditions of release also included the question of giving bail to be of good behaviour and in some cases confinement in a stated area, such as a 5 mile limit around the released person's home. In many cases of release a prisoner was required to report to the local R.U.C. Barracks a few times a week and in other cases a person's release was conditioned on his deportation from the Six County area and his re-arrest and imprisonment if he returned.

The overwhelming majority of the internees refused to appear before the commission and others who were before them refused to answer the questions or to give any information. Out of the internees from Co. Armagh who were members of the Irish Republican Army - about 40 men, I think, - there were only about 4 or 5 who went before the commission.

Signed:

*John Cosgrove*  
(John Cosgrove).

Date:

*Lady Callaghan*

2/11/51

Witness:

*John McCoy*  
(John McCoy)  
2<sup>nd</sup> Nov. 1951

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