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ORIGINAL

BUREAU OF MILITARY HISTORY 1913-21
BURO STAIRE MILEATA 1913-21
No. W.S. 894

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BUREAU OF MILITARY HISTORY, 1913-21.

STATEMENT BY WITNESS.

DOCUMENT NO. W.S. 894.....

Witness

Thomas Deignan,
Ardvarney,
Riverstown,
Boyle,
Co. Sligo.
Identity.

O/C. 5th Battalion, Sligo Brigade, I.R.A.,
1919-1921.

Subject.

Activities of 5th Battalion, Sligo Brigade,
I.R.A., 1919-1921.

Conditions, if any, Stipulated by Witness.

Nil

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STATEMENT BY THOMAS DEIGNAN,

Ardvarney, Riverstown, Boyle, Co. Sligo.

I had been in America for a few years and on returning home I joined the I.R.A. This would be about the middle of the summer of 1919. I joined Gleann Company, 5th Battalion, Sligo Brigade. Patrick Crann was the Company Commander and a brother of mine was a Lieutenant in the Company. The strength of the Company was about seventy at this time. The only armament in the Company was some shot guns. I was a member of the Company for about a month when I was appointed O/C. of the Battalion. It would appear that the Brigade O/C. was not satisfied with the initiations or progress the Battalion was making and thought that I would make a better job of it. Thomas John Conlon of Geevagh was Vice O.C. Patrick Higgins, also of Geevagh, was Battalion Quartermaster and Thomas Mulligan of Gleann was Battalion Adjutant.

The Companies comprising the Battalion were :-

Gleann .. Company Commander Patrick Crann,
Curry or St. James Well .. Captain Michael Rourke,
Geevagh .. Captain John Fallon,
Highwood .. Captain Charles Martin later replaced by Dominick Gildea,
Ballyrush .. Captain Michael Donagher,
Riverstown .. Captain Matthew Leonard,
Sooney .. Captain Peter Keenan,
Glen Arigna .. Captain Robert Joe Cullen. The latter Company was not organised until later in the year. The strength of the Companies was in the neighbourhood of 60 to 70 men each with the exception of Glen Arigna which was around 30.

When I took charge of the Battalion the armament was practically nil. There were a few shot guns and a couple of revolvers with a very limited supply of ammunition. The people around this area never had many shot guns and of what did exist very few were of modern type. Weekly parades were held in all Company areas for training. We had very few men with any experience of training or with British Army experience and so Companies had to do the best they could by using British Army manuals and so forth. The Battalion staff visited the Companies on parade nights and helped them out as best they could. Here again training experience was very limited.

Nothing of great importance took place during 1919 and our principal activities were devoted to training, stopping recruiting for the British Forces and trying to induce the members of the R.I.C. to resign from that force. We succeeded in getting about nine or ten members of the R.I.C. to resign. We also had to do the police work ourselves and this entailed a lot of duty for the Volunteers.

A Brigade was now organised in the county at this time. William Pilkington (now Rev. Father Pilkington, South Africa) was the Brigade O/C. Alec McCabe was Vice-Commandant of the Brigade, Seamus McGowan was Brigade Adjutant and Henry Conroy was the Brigade Quartermaster. The Battalions making up the Brigade were as follows :- 1st Battalion - Sligo town and surrounding districts; 2nd Battalion - Cliffoney area; 3rd Battalion - Ballymote area; 4th Battalion - Gurteen area; 5th Battalion - Riverstown area; 6th Battalion - Tubercurry area; 7th Battalion - Collooney area; 8th Battalion - Ballintogher area; 9th Battalion - Glenfarne area and 10th Battalion - Kinlough area.

The Sinn Fein Courts were now organised and functioning successfully and all the police work in connection with them now

devolved on the Volunteers. This duty, which included many phases of police work including the making of arrests, enforcing the decrees of the Courts and detentions in unknown destinations and keeping order at public gatherings and so forth, put a big strain on the Volunteer organisation, as most of the men were men who had to attend to their own personal work and could only give spare time to Volunteer work. The R.I.C. were no longer recognised by the people as a police force and all the duties formerly carried out by them now became the responsibility of the Volunteers.

The police now evacuated some of their small outlying stations, withdrawing their men to larger posts. On Easter Saturday night 1920, by orders of the Brigade, Ballyfarnan Barracks, which had been evacuated earlier, was destroyed and burned by us and the Income Tax office at Rusheen and the office of the Clerk of the Petty Sessions Court was raided and all the documents were seized and burned. At this time I was on the 'run' as the police were looking for me. A large number of evacuated barracks were destroyed on that night and it was the first indication the people had of the extent of the organisation of the Volunteers. I also believe it was the first big shock the British authorities in this country received. This operation made them realise that they were opposed by a country-wide organisation who were capable of striking cohesively at the same time throughout the country. This operation must have been known to a large number of Volunteers for at least some days before it took place and it is a great tribute to them to say that no one talked and that the enemy were taken by surprise. I was told about the operation a week beforehand. The British authorities were definitely frightened and now ordered the evacuation of many more police barracks all of which were destroyed subsequently. Castlebaldwin, Geevagh and Riverstown were evacuated in this area and subsequently destroyed by us.

Later on in the year 1920, by orders of the Brigade, a general raid for arms was carried out in the Battalion area. This, like the burning of the vacated barracks, was also a country-wide operation. All houses, where any type of arms or sporting weapons were thought to be held, were visited by men of the Battalion and such arms collected. All that we procured in this area was a few shot guns and a few small calibre sporting rifles. In nearly all cases the weapons were given up voluntarily by the owners who were more anxious in many cases that we should get them instead of the military or police. In a few cases, however, resistance was met with. One of these was where an R.I.C. man was home on leave and aided by his brothers he put up some resistance but was overcome and a revolver and shot gun were collected there. In another case a man who was serving in the British Army was at home in the house. The occupants had circulated that they were ready to meet us whenever we came and had avowed they would make us sorry if we ventured to do so. We rushed the house when the occupants were in bed and took them by surprise. In this house we got two shot guns and two revolvers. The Vice Commandant was wounded, but not seriously, during one of these raids. We picked up a few sporting rifles with a small supply of ammunition for same, but otherwise only shot guns were procured and some shot gun ammunition. We constructed dumps where we put the collected arms and where they could be cared for.

In the first week in July 1920, a cycling patrol of four police (R.I.C.) were ambushed at Ballyrush. I was in charge of this operation and I had under me about eight men. We had a few revolvers and the rest were armed with shot guns. We took up a position behind the fence on the side of the road and in an old house. When the police arrived on the scene we opened fire on them. They immediately jumped from and abandoned their cycles. Two were wounded and the other two got away across the fields. We captured

two revolvers and four cycles from this attack. The police did not carry rifles on this patrol. This was the first ambush in this county as far as I am aware. The captured police were not too badly wounded and having helped them all we could, we put them in a house nearby where they were looked after. All the personnel engaged in this ambush were from the 5th Battalion.

After the ambush at Ballyrush we laid ambushes in a few more places, but none of them materialised as the police patrols that were expected never turned up. One such ambush was laid at Kilronan which is situated between Ballyfarnan and Keadue. The police were stationed in Keadue and sent out patrols to Ballyfarnan. We stayed in position covering the road at Kilronan for twelve hours, but no patrol turned up although they did the next day when we were not there. Another ambush was set at Riverstown. A patrol of police were wont to visit Riverstown from Castlebaldwin. In this case we took over a house in the village sending the owner away and although we occupied that house for twenty-four hours, no one in the town was aware that we were there. This patrol usually consisted of eight armed police. Again the patrol failed to turn up. Another attempt was made to ambush a patrol at the Five Cross Roads near Ballingar. This was a police patrol which was usually eight or more strong. We took position in the fences along the road and remained there from seven in the morning until five in the evening, but the patrol failed to put in an appearance.

There was a very strong section of the Ancient Order of Hibernians in this part of the country who were very much opposed to us and inclined to be friendly to the police and British Forces. On one occasion we raided the mails in which we got a letter to the local Order of the Hibernians from their headquarters in Dublin telling them to hold on to their organisation and that when the extremists on both sides had worn themselves out the Hibernians would

come out on top.

In July 1920 the Kesh Company of the 3rd Ballymote Company attacked the Castlebaldwin R.I.C. barracks but did not take it. Later on we fired on the barracks. We took up positions near the Barracks and fired several shots at it. We had no intention of seriously attacking it and only fired on it to create a nuisance value. This worked quite successfully as the garrison fired a large amount of ammunition and continued to do so long after we had withdrawn. At this time the police (R.I.C.) were boycotted. No one would supply them with food and they had to commandeer their supplies. No one would hire them cars or associate or speak to them and anyone doing so incurred the immediate displeasure of the I.R.A. In all they were having a rather bad time from the social point of view. From the point of law or disputes they were a back number.

About September or October the Black & Tan reinforcements arrived for the police and immediately started a reign of terror by raids and burnings and so forth. They burned the following halls in the area - Riverstown, Highwood, Geevagh and Gleann. They looted peoples' property and often stole watches and money from people they held up. They burned my father's house and out-offices amongst which was a hayshed. Underneath the hay in this shed we had concealed a box containing a mine we had made and a few old obsolete revolvers. They set the hay on fire and when the mine went off with a terrific bang they got some shock, but fortunately or unfortunately none of them was near it when it exploded. After this they set fire to the dwellinghouse which was a thatched one. They took cover in the ditches some distance from the house and one Tan approached the house under cover and set the thatch alight then scampering for his life. They believed, after the hayshed, that this also contained mines or explosives.

In February, 1921, an attempt was made to capture Ballaghaderreen Barracks. Michael Fallon, Michael Noone and myself went across there to help. A huge mine had been built into a load of hay which was soaked with petrol. The load of hay was left near the barracks for the next day. This was nothing unusual as it was often done in readiness for the market next day. The police got suspicious ^{OR} and were tipped off by some one and the attack proper never came off. Perhaps the police smelt the petrol on the hay. There was quite a lot of shooting with police patrols, but eventually the attempt was abandoned. Alec McCabe and the local I.R.A. commanders will be able to give more detail than I.

An attempt was made to capture Collooney R.I.C. Barracks in March 1921. This was a Brigade operation, but about seven from this battalion were detailed for duty. These included Michael Fallon, Michael Noone, Tom Conlon, my brother John Deignan and myself. The whole attacking party assembled at Cloonmahan. The Brigade O.C. - Pilkington - was in charge. The plan was to place a large mine at the entrance door to the barrack and on this exploding and blowing the door in to rush the barracks. Collooney Barracks was garrisoned by forty-five to fifty-five men and was strongly fortified. It had steel shutters with loopholes on the windows and was surrounded by a barbed wire entanglement which had only one narrow passage leading to the door. This passage through the wire was very narrow and only admitted one person or persons in single file at the one time. The barrack was surrounded by a high wall on three sides and a low wall and paling in front. Having detailed the various duties to the different parties, Pilkington called for Volunteers to form the storming or rushing party. Michael Noone and I volunteered from this battalion and Harry Brehony undertook to carry the mine, place it at the door and set it off. The remainder of the storming party all told which numbered about nine/were from the Brigade area. The remainder

of the attackers were to take up position on outpost duty on the roads leading into the town with one party armed with rifles on the Fair Green covering us and the front of the barracks. This latter party had instructions not to fire unless firing broke out from the barracks, their main job being to cover us.

All parties moved into position and we were located along the outer side wall surrounding the barracks. This position gave us protection from splinters or debris that would be thrown up by the explosion of the mine. From here Harry Brehony in his stockinged feet ~~only~~, carried the mine in a sack on his back and making his way through the passage in the barbed wire placed it on the doorstep against the door. He then took the cable leads back to our position and attached them to the exploder. We, the storming party, were armed with revolvers only. It was understood that the large garrison had not sufficient accommodation in the barracks and that half of them slept at night, the other half sleeping during the day. When the mine was exploded there was a terrific report and the door and the walls around it were blown in and we (the storming party of which Pilkington himself took charge) could not move until the debris had fallen and the smoke cleared away. The garrison seemed to recover from the shock of the explosion quickly and in a matter of seconds opened up a terrific burst of rifle fire from the barracks which made any attempt at rushing it impossible. We opened fire on the barracks, but that had no effect and we had to retire. There were no casualties on our side and I don't know if the police had any either. If we had been supplied with bottles of petrol I think we could have burned the garrison out as the place could have been easily set on fire. It was a pity that such a gallant effort should have ended up so fruitlessly.

In May 1921 there was an ambush at Cliffoney in the northern part of the Brigade area and about twenty miles from Sligo town. Four

police were killed in this ambush. The police burned a number of houses and shot livestock in that area as a reprisal for the ambush and altogether created a reign of terror complex, in the district. Two of the police who were most active in the burnings and reprisals travelled to Dublin to the Castle about a week later. We got information that they were returning by a certain train on a certain date. Fallon, Noone, John Keaney and I from this area and Tom Scanlon and some others from the Sligo Battalion arranged to intercept them at Ballysodare Station. I was the senior member of the party and took charge. We proceeded into the station via the main road which was frequently patrolled by parties of enemy forces and via Collooney which was strongly garrisoned. We believed that there was almost certain to be other parties of British troops or police on the train also.

When the train pulled into the station we went straight to the carriage where the police were and got them. We then found three soldiers in the next carriage and in the next three officers and this was repeated in the next compartments. We took the whole lot out of the train including the military and disarmed them. We only got two rifles on them: there were also five or six revolvers. Having disarmed the military we let them proceed but kept the two policemen whom we took about one hundred yards away and shot them there and then. They were carrying large envelopes from the Castle which contained descriptions of some of our men who were wanted by the police. These descriptions were very accurate.

The enemy did not carry out any reprisals for this incident. They seemed to realise that this was a reprisal for reprisals particularly so as the military were allowed to go unscathed. By this time the R.I.C. and Tans had orders to shoot us on sight, should they catch up with us or should we be captured by them.

I fell into the hands of the military about the 1st June. Luckily for me, it was not the R.I.C. or Tans who got me. The enemy had instituted a big round up in the Ballymote Battalion area and the night before this started I had gone over there to meet Michael J. Mannon, the Battalion Commandant in that area. The purpose of my visit was to confer with him with the intention of carrying out an operation in that area. The enemy had encircled a large district and I was unaware of this. The local I.R.A. had all gone to ground and were in hiding. John Keaney, who was with me, and I, intended to go into a bog and start working there and pass ourselves off as local residents. We had nearly got to the bog when a train pulled up on the local railway line close by and soldiers jumped out and called on us to halt. I made a dash to get away. Keaney stood his ground and said he was working for a Mr. Ruane. Mr. Ruane verified this. They were both known to each other. I had a narrow escape from being shot. I could not get away and was forced to surrender myself. The military formed a ring around me with the rifles pointing at me. I was handcuffed with my hands behind my back and severely questioned. I gave them my name as Hyland. There was nobody there to identify me and I was taken to the number one barracks in Sligo which was garrisoned by Tans and R.I.C. men. They found out here that my name was Deignan so I had a rough time of it for a while getting punched and questioned several times per day. After two days I was transferred to Sligo gaol. This was about the 5th June, 1921.

In Sligo gaol at this time there were about 160 prisoners amongst whom were Charles Gildea and Frank O'Beirne. They had already been tried and sentenced so they had an idea of their fate. I had not been tried on any charge yet and any day one or some of the British officers and men whom we took off the train at Ballysodare might come into the gaol and identify me for the shooting

of the two policemen. O'Beirne, Gildea and I made up our minds that we were going to get out of there and started to think out ways and means of doing so. We got in touch with a friendly warder who got for us impressions of the keys of our cell doors, also one for the door on the corridor and one for the lock on the door leading into the hangman's yard. We had these conveyed to our friends outside in the town and they made keys for us which were taken in to us together with some files by visitors. Visitors were allowed to us at this time and if the warder on duty with you during the visit was friendly or careless it was possible to pass material and written messages. We got the keys filed down to fit the locks and to open the gates and doors. This was a dangerous procedure as some of them had not been opened for a long time and they had to be taken carefully after being oiled and watered to keep them from making noise. Two openings on to the corridor, along which we would have to pass, were the ends of sentry beats. The sentries met here at the end of their beats and usually had a chat and a smoke sometimes. We would have to wait until they had departed on their beat again before we could get through. We knew if we got into the hangman's yard that we could not be seen from any other part of the gaol. The boys outside in Sligo were making a rope ladder to sling over the wall into the hangman's yard at the right moment and the signal that this was done was to be a man walking along the top of the wall which we could see from our position.

There were twenty-four military on duty in the gaol in addition to the gaol staff and they had two machineguns mounted in position. They paid special attention to night-time as they did not anticipate any attack during the day. We were tipped off by visitors from outside or by our friendly warder when the attempt was to be made. Outside preparations had been made to get us away after we got over the wall and parties had been detailed to cover the approaches to the gaol. Those parties had carts and suchlike vehicles ready to block

the roads to prevent reinforcements reaching the gaol. Arrangements were also made to tap the telephone wires to the barracks in the town.

For a month we waited. There were nine mobilisations for the attempt but each time something happened to thwart the effort and it is a glowing tribute to the efficiency of the local I.R.A. that the enemy never became aware of anything out of the ordinary being afoot. The parties on the road-blocking were armed as also were a party of nine men with rifles who were detailed to cover off the front of the gaol to prevent the military getting out and also to stop reinforcements if necessary. Five men actually took part in the job of getting us over the wall.

Finally on the night that we got out we received the word to be ready and were on the watch. Pilkington got on to the wall of the gaol and actually walked along it. He could not be seen by the garrison in the gaol while doing so. This was our signal to get going. We got out of our cells. In the corridor there was a warder on duty. He was friendly to us but in order to prevent suspicion being thrown on him we gagged him and tied him up. We passed between the British sentries successfully and along the corridor and through the door into the hangman's yard, locking this door after us and so shutting us off from the gaol proper so that we could not be followed immediately. The rope ladder was over the wall and we pulled it down on our side and climbed up. The rope ladder had been made very strong and it was able to take the three of us at the same time. When we got to the ground on the other side there were cycles waiting for us and without delay we mounted and cycled to Clarkes of Tirrearagh. We had tea there and then proceeded to Langs on the mountain side where we rested for a few days. From Langs we proceeded to a shooting lodge on the side of the Coolaney mountain where we stayed for a few days and then came on to Riverstown - Geevagh area. The enemy were after us night and day and we learned afterwards that they had instructions that only our dead bodies were to be brought in.

Some short while after, the Truce came, and this was a great relief to be able to move with freedom, to eat and sleep in comfort again, although none of us believed it would last for long. We in this battalion were in a good position to carry on the fight. There was plenty of good fighting material available amongst the members of the battalion and we now had six Service rifles with a small supply of ammunition, a good number of shotguns and a supply of buckshot cartridges and a vast amount of experience which we were lacking at the start.

An Active Service Unit or Flying Column had been organised in the battalion and this could muster 15 to 20 men mostly armed with shotguns. We had no hand grenades which was a serious disadvantage. This unit was available to reinforce a Brigade Active Service Unit when necessary. An intelligence section was organised within the battalion but this had purely a local value. It was, however, able to do some very useful work all the same. One local man was shot in the area for acting as a spy for the enemy. A British Army soldier or officer who was posing as a deserter but was really on intelligence work for the British authorities succeeded in making his escape before we could pick him up. One man of this nature was picked up by us. He admitted that he was engaged on such work. He was courtmartialled by us, found guilty and shot. Before he was executed his sentence was verified by General Headquarters.

In the Intelligence line there was a Constable Madden in Ballymote Barracks who rendered very good service to us. He was able to give us advance information in many cases about enemy raids and rounds up and so have the boys warned and they could move out of that area or go into hiding.

There were sixty raids on my home place during the period I was on the 'run' and my parents suffered severely and had to put up with terrible abuse from the raiders. This will give an idea of the intensity of the enemy activities.

Signed: Tom Deignan
(Tom Deignan)

Date: 30/9/53

30/9/53.

Witness:

Matthew Barry Comdt
(Matthew Barry) Comd't.

