

W. S. 901
ORIGINAL

BUREAU OF MILITARY HISTORY 1913-21
BURO STAIRÉ MILEATA 1913-21
NO. W.S. 901

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BUREAU OF MILITARY HISTORY, 1913-21.

STATEMENT BY WITNESS:

DOCUMENT NO. W.S. 901.....

Witness

Seamus Finn,
Athboy,
Co. Meath.

Identity.

Adjutant, Meath Brigade;
Vice O/C. and Director of Training,
1st Eastern Division.

Subject.

Irish Volunteer activities, Co. Meath,
1918-1919.

Conditions, if any, Stipulated by Witness.

Nil

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Statement by Mr. Seamus Finn,

Athboy, Co. Meath.

Part 2.

The year 1918 was an eventful one in Volunteer circles in Meath. Early on there were rumours of an effort being made by the British government to enforce conscription of Irishmen into their army for service in France etc. The people organised and local committees were set up in every parish, acting under a central committee in Dublin, to resist the attempt. These local committees were selected at public meetings and were usually composed of leading citizens, presided over by a parish priest or catholic curate. As a body the Volunteers did not act on them, but we placed ourselves at their disposal to do what was necessary to help in the protest. One result of this threat was to increase the strength of our forces considerably, which caused to some extent inconvenience and disorganisation. However, we got over this by appointing our more advanced men to take charge of drilling and training these recruits, and when they paraded in public they presented a fairly smart appearance. Needless to say all our work was done without arms, as the scarcity of these necessary parts of our equipment was a big drawback, and indeed a very big headache to Battalion and Brigade staffs.

An effort was made to find some type of steel

springs of cars, traps and motors and have them converted into pikes. These were readily/and some ^{adopted} reliable blacksmiths here and there were kept busy at this work. A few who come to my mind are Ned Harte of Bohermeen who was a Volunteer, Rispins of Athboy and Reilly of Dunboyne. Where we had men with knowledge of explosives we organised them and arranged for classes under Commandant Eamon Cullen, the Brigade Engineer, at which they received instructions in the making of crude hand grenades. Anywhere that casing or piping of steel or metal could be found it was commandeered for this purpose. For instance, a squad of Volunteers left Athboy one night and travelled to Kilmessan where they cut down and brought home about fifty yards of two inch piping. This was cut into six inch lengths, closed at one end and plugged at the other end with hard wood. In this plug a hole was bored through which a length of fuse was run. The fuse was inserted in a detonator when gelignite was available, or connected with blasting or gun powder when this type of explosive was used.

Our Engineering Section of the 3rd Battalion prepared a number of these bomb cases and we tried out some of them successfully. Everywhere in the Brigade, too, our lads were busy turning out buckshot, but our supply of cartridges was limited. All these types of material were turned out and stored for future use. The menace of conscription passed without any cause for using these stores, but the small supplies of explosives and ammunition were put away in specially

prepared containers which were suggested by our Brigade Engineer, Commandant Eamon Cullen.

During the year 1918 there were momentous happenings in the political world. In 1917 in two by-elections Republican members were elected, in South Roscommon - Count Plunkett - and in Longford - Joe McGuinness. In 1918 a vacancy occurred in East Cavan and resulted in Arthur Griffith, leader of Sinn Féin, being elected. During the Cavan campaign the Volunteers in Meath received a call from Cavan to send some men for police and patrol work. Their duties were to maintain and preserve order and to protect the electorate from intimidation. This move was made to counteract the action of the opposition in assenting to the drafting of British military to the area. The Brigade staff sent orders to the 3rd, 4th and 6th Battalions to pick a number of good men and send them to Bailieboro, Virginia and Cootehill. Seamus Higgins and I went to Cootehill and took charge of the Meathmen who had reported. We established contact with the local Volunteers and directed the movements of our lads in the other areas around. It served us well in training and they acquitted themselves creditably. As far as my memory serves me, we numbered about hundred all told.

Later in the general elections we acted similarly, and the discipline of our men made a deep impression everywhere, even on the political opponents of Sinn Féin. The outcome of this election work

served our men well and it instilled a fine martial spirit in them. The marching, cycle patrolling and general parading in which they took part made a big appeal to them, and when the election fever had abated they took a keener interest in Volunteer work.

During the summer of 1918 there occurred a general strike of farm labour^{ers} in Meath. It lasted for some months and feeling ran high on occasions. About August we were approached by Eamon Rooney, the Labour organiser, who informed us that the employers had asked that some British military should be drafted into the county to protect their interests. We examined his report carefully and submitted it to G.H.Q., who advised that we should be careful not to become embroiled in the dispute. We had already decided to refrain and had issued orders to all ranks that the Volunteer movement should not be used for partisan purposes, but we viewed this request to bring in British military seriously.

Our contacts with the employers could not get a denial from them, so we made it known that this move would force us to take action to prevent it. It must be mentioned that the employers' association was composed of and controlled by men of strong pro British tendencies. When Rooney attended a Brigade Council meeting held in Larry Clarke's, Navan, and produced his proofs that a contingent of military was due to arrive at Navan, travelling by the Great

Northern Railway, we notified G.H.Q. and got their permission to use our discretion in the matter. We again discussed it at another Brigade Council meeting, and it was decided by a majority vote to make an attempt to prevent it.

Receiving the information from Rooney of the probable date of the coming of the military, it was decided to pick a column composed of specially selected men from the 2nd Trim Battalion, the 3rd Battalion (Athboy) and the 6th Battalion (Navan), who were instructed to remove a length of rail at a point near Beauparc, Navan, on the night before the military were due to arrive. It so happened that the engineers in the Athboy area had received a course of instruction in this work, and it fell to them to do the actual removing. The Navan men supplied the information and acted as leaders to show where the necessary tools were stored, while the remainder acted as guards and assisted in the removal of the rails. The total party numbered five from Athboy area, four from Trim and three from Navan. The point selected was at a bend where the line ran at a height of about twelve feet above the surrounding country. The outer rail was removed to make sure that the train would run off the line. To ensure that there would not be any mistake which might cause an accident to the passenger train which travelled this line each morning, we left a notice at the house of one of the linesmen whose duty it would be to walk the lines, warning him that the line was up and to arrange for the stopping of the

passenger train in the event of it passing before the military arrived.

As events turned out he did not get an opportunity of acting on our warning, as a train consisting of empty waggons came first and went off the line and was badly wrecked. The driver and other officials escaped with slight injuries. We felt disappointed and annoyed that this should have happened, and sent word to Rooney to come to our next meeting and explain matters. The strike came to an abrupt ending very soon after this occurrence and the matter dropped, but there was some repercussions inside our ranks and we were given much trouble by some individuals who attempted to make capital out of it and to undermine the discipline and good spirit that existed generally among the rank and file of the Brigade.

Later in this year many of those who had joined up during the conscription menace dropped out and those who remained on fitted into our scheme work of organising, and training went on uninterrupted. During our efforts at training we managed to get in some big movements as, for instance, the Brigade Council arranged mobilisation on the Hill of Tara of men from every Battalion on St. Patrick's Day at one p.m. This proved very successful in that every Battalion took part, and although some men had to come long journeys all were there in good time. They got to know each other and went through every phase of work from Company drill to extended order and manoeuvring. All travelled on bicycles and were given instructions on the procedure of such travelling, dealing with van,

flank, rear and advance guard work. On a later occasion we picked a body from each Battalion consisting of engineers, signallers and a main body of protecting troops, mobilised at Ballinter near Navan and went through a full course of pontoon bridge building, attacking an objective and destroying same by explosives. This was carried out at nighttime, beginning at 10 p.m. and continuing until 4 a.m. All the participating sections were kept in touch by lamp signals and message passing, and the whole operation was very successful. The men taking part were drawn from the 1st, 2nd, 3rd and 6th Battalions. Comdt. Eamon Cullen was in charge of the engineering work, while Comdt. Boylan and I were in charge of the whole job.

And so on to the end of the year 1918, a year which opened so threateningly and ended on a comparatively quiet note. An important event to us was a visit to Summerhill by Michael Collins where he spoke at a concert. Afterwards he attended a Brigade Council meeting, and after a thorough examination of our work and methods of carrying out the business expressed himself as being satisfied with us and our progress.

Following the result of the general elections which took place at the end of 1918, the Volunteers were brought under the control of the Dáil when that body met early in 1919 and the oath of allegiance to the Irish Republic was administered to all Meath Volunteers. During this period some changes were made in the personnel of the Brigade and some Battalion

staffs. Seán Hayes, Vice O/C of the Brigade, was arrested and interned in Ballykinlar, and Seamus Higgins, Brigade Q/M, was also captured and sent to serve a sentence in Mountjoy. While there he took part in a hunger strike and was released but had to keep on the run afterwards. He was in a bad shape after the strike and went to Kilcormac, Offaly, to recuperate where he was the guest of Fr. O'Reilly, Parish Priest, for some months. He resumed activities about August 1919. Commandant Lynam, O/C 1st Battalion, was relieved of his post and replaced by Commandant B. Dunne, while P. de Burca, O/C 4th Battalion, was replaced by Commandant Pat Farrelly.

Towards the end of the year G.H.Q. sent us an officer who took over the advanced training of our men. He came as an organiser of the Dáil Loan but gave us all the spare time at his disposal. His area of activity was South Meath with Trim as H.Q., but did not confine himself to any particular place, and as well as farming officers' classes for lectures he took out whole Battalions and carried out a lot of field work and manoeuvring. His name was Eamon Fleming and he instilled a fine martial spirit into the men everywhere he went, with particular emphasis on Trim where he spent a good deal of time. As well as the loan and Volunteer work, he acted as visiting officer of the I.R.B. and on his report some changes took place in the County Board. Unfortunately he was arrested by the R.I.C. and sentenced to a term of imprisonment in Mountjoy, after which his contact with

us was slight.

Organising work went on with varying fortune. It sometimes happened that failing the receipt of the usual monthly organisation report from an area either Boylan or I would move in to contact the officers and find out that our previous work had been undone by the conscientious scruples of some of the most influential rank and file men, and where we had left a good enthusiastic group of from ten to twenty there would only remain a few willing to carry on. Happy for us these defections were not general, and before the end of the year we found that we could attempt a fairly large sized operation when called on to do so by G.H.Q.

It was in the autumn of 1919 that we decided to strike at some outlying R.I.C. posts. We went over the whole area carefully at Brigade Council meetings, and after receiving reports from all the Battalion Commandants on the strength and movements of the police from each area, we chose four barracks as our objective. These were Summerhill - strength one sergeant and four constables, Ballivor - strength one sergeant and four constables, Dillons Bridge - strength one sergeant and four constables. In deciding on these barracks we were influenced by certain facts, one of which was that Volunteer activity was not so apparent in these places and the R.I.C. had more or less relaxed their vigilance, and also that they were so situated that it was easy to cut off their communication with larger posts. There were other

considerations that pertained in some but not in other areas. It will be necessary to detail the plans laid for each job.

Summerhill comes first and we selected it because there were four very good Volunteers there who were also members of the I.R.B. These were Michael Grehan, Peter Dolan, Patrick Grogan and Edward Kearney. They were anxious that the barracks should be attacked as it menaced a very important line of communication which we used a good deal. This line ran from Dunboyne to Kilcloon, Kilmore, Summerhill, Rathmoylan and Kildalkey and thence to Athboy, Delvin and on to Westmeath and the 5th Battalion Meath Brigade. It was also used by G.H.Q. for contacting Longford and further west as an alternative route. The barracks was attached to another building which was often frequented by members of the R.I.C., and the plan decided on was to seize any of them who were there and to force them at the point of the gun to gain admittance for our men to the barracks. Failing this the barracks was to be attacked by shot gun fire and a demand made for its surrender. This operation was to be carried out by the four men already mentioned, and augmented by others from the 1st Dunboyne Battalion who were to supply transport for the removal of the arms and ammunition in the barracks. This job failed to materialise completely.

Ballivor Barracks was situated in the centre of the village and stood in the centre of a row of

occupied houses. The information about the movements of the police here was very definite. We also knew the names of certain men who foregathered there almost every night, and the plan decided on here was that one of the Volunteers would approach the barracks door and knock. When challenged he would give the name of one of the local men, and when the door was opened it was to be rushed by the other Volunteers who would be lying handy and so gain entrance. The attacking force was to be covered by the rest of the Column, and all roads out of the village were to be picketed and telegraph wires cut. G.H.Q. were asked to send a car with a reliable driver for the removal of arms and equipment which was expected would be captured.

Bohermeen Barracks was a completely unattached building and stood at the junction of four roads. It was a strong stone building and its occupants had a range of view and fire extending about three hundred yards in each direction. Opposite it there was a shop in which a general and licensed trade was carried on. To the north, the junction of the Kells, Navan and Ardracan roads, there was a low ditch which would provide cover for a small attacking party and which was about twenty yards from the barracks. From this position it would be possible to use shot gun and hand grenade fire against the gable end and part of the front of the building. The rear was exposed and could not be approached without being observed by the police. Here, too, there was a possibility of exploiting the element of surprise, as the police were in the habit of

spending much of their time in the shop opposite and we planned to act similarly as in Summerhill by holding up any of them we found there and use them as cover to get into the barracks. This operation was to be carried out by the 3rd Athboy Battalion, and G.H.Q. were asked to supply a car with driver, four revolvers and some hand grenades.

Dillons Bridge, or Lismullen Barracks as it was better known locally, stood in an exposed position *SOUTH* east of Navan on the Dublin road about four miles from Navan. There was some cover in front and rear, and it was planned to post shot guns and a couple of riflemen in these positions while two Volunteers knocked at the door and tried to get in by some subterfuge. Failing this a general attack was to be made and a call for surrender shouted. This was to be carried out by the 6th Navan Battalion.

So for our plans and the night fixed for the four jobs was October 31st 1919 - Hallow Eve.

On the day before - October 30th - the following officers travelled to Dublin to go into all the plans with officers attached to G.H.Q. in Dublin - Seán Boylan, Brigade O/C, Seamus Finn, Brigade Adjutant, Comdt. Mooney, O/C 2nd Battalion, Comdt. M. Fox, O/C 3rd Athboy Battalion and Comdt. P. Loughran, O/C Navan Battalion. Loughran procured a car in Navan, travelled via Athboy where he picked up Finn and Fox, thence to Trim where Mooney joined and then direct to Dublin.

After many hours' delay contact was made with the Adjutant General, G. O'Sullivan, and Eamon Price, and later we were joined by Mick Collins and Dick McKee, as well as the Quartermaster General, S. McMahon, and the Brigade O/C Boylan. The discussion took place in premises in Parnell Square and continued far into the night. Every detail for each job was gone into, and the alternatives suggested by us were sanctioned by G.H.Q. The matter of arms and cars was also considered and G.H.Q. agreed to supply our needs. Only two cars were asked for and Q.M.G. McMahon promised that they would be on hand, one for Ballivor and one for Bohermeen. It was arranged that both these cars would be at the appointed places - Trim and Athboy - at 8 p.m. on the following night. The 3rd Athboy Battalion asked for four revolvers and some grenades and they were handed over before we left the conference. Arrangements were gone into for the contact between the cars and Trim and Athboy on their arrival, and we were told that the drivers would be two men called Cotter. This news gratified us as we had already heard of these men and some of their exploits.

Curfew was in force at this time for cars at twelve midnight and it was almost ^{THAT} time when our talks finished, but further delay was caused by one of our party leaving us and arranging to meet us in a by-street behind the Four Courts. He delayed longer than was anticipated and we had some narrow escapes from military foot patrols. At one time it was necessary

for us to leave the car, arm ourselves with revolvers and grenades and take up positions in doorways. Luckily the patrol passed by the top of the street and failed to see the car. Incidentally, our driver, Gus Joyce of Navan, was not a Volunteer but he acquitted himself throughout with great credit. When we reached Dunboyne Joyce demurred about carrying the grenades and revolvers to Athboy in case we met any more patrols of police or military, and in deference to his wishes we left them at Boylan's of Dunboyne, arranging with Boylan that he would get in touch with Price or McMahon and fix that the car for Athboy would call for them next night.

It was 3 a.m. when we left Dunboyne, and as we had to take circuitous routes to our different destinations it meant that Loughran and the car did not arrive in Navan until almost 7 a.m. Perhaps I should state here that Ballivor was six miles from Trim, Bohermeen six from Athboy and Dillon's Bridge about four from Navan, hence the necessity for the cars. In the case of the Athboy Battalion, it was intended that the car would pick up some shot guns and ammunition near Athboy and bring them to the men who would be waiting near Bohermeen. For this purpose two men were posted on the Dublin road whose orders were to stop the car, bring it to the place where the arms were and then to Bohermeen. A pre-arranged signal had been given to them which would be recognised by the driver. The hour fixed for all the jobs was 9 p.m.

The execution of our plans did not work as smoothly as we anticipated, and in one instance only was a complete success scored. This was in Ballivor where the men from Trim Battalion, under Comdt. Paddy Mooney, succeeded in capturing the barracks, but not before being forced to shoot the policeman who was on guard. The following is an account of what happened. The car from G.H.Q. was late arriving so Mooney and the men from Trim Company started on bicycles, dividing into small groups of two and three to avoid attracting attention to their movements. They met the Longwood men at the appointed place and Mooney detailed each man's duty and post to him. Before they reached Ballivor the car which had been contacted by Pat O'Hagan arrived. Reaching Ballivor the main body approached the barracks and divided into two sections, some of them succeeding in getting to the rear. The others went to their posts at the road junctions and ensured that nobody would leave the town while the attack was taking place. Mooney, accompanied by, I believe, Pat Fay and Stephen Sherry, went boldly to the door, knocked, and on being challenged, answered, giving the name of one of those who were in the habit of calling. The door was opened slightly, and when the policeman realised that it was not the man whose name was given he pulled his revolver and tried to shut the door. Mooney ordered him to drop his gun and open up, and at the same time called to the others of his party to push the door in. There was a rush, then a shot

and the policeman dropped. In the meantime the Volunteers at the rear, led by Harry O'Hagan and Joe Lawlor, attacked the back door and the barracks was theirs. Mooney's first act was to attend to the policeman, but he was dead. He had him removed to one of the rooms before proceeding to finish the job. The other two policemen present were locked up and then all the arms and ammunition and other material of any use were collected and driven to the dump already prepared. The outposts which were stationed at the road junctions around the town had done their job well, and among the people detained was the other policeman who was returning from duty. He was brought to the barracks and put with the others. A search for the sergeant was then made, but although it was diligently carried out he succeeded in hiding himself away so well no trace of him could be found. This was a disappointment as it was intended to give him a lesson which would ensure that his behaviour, which was not so good in raids on the homes of Volunteers in Trim and Athboy, would improve.

The following is a list of the men who took part in this job: Comdt. Paddy Mooney in charge, Paddy Fay, Harry O'Hagan, Joe Lawlor, Mick Giles, John Mooney, P. Duignan, Paddy Lawlor, Joe Kelly, Stephen Sherry of Trim Company, Pat Giles, Larry Giles and two others, M. Fagan and McEvoy from Longwood Company.

Dillon's Bridge: Here the men from Navan area

took up positions at the appointed places and times. An effort was made to get the door open by subterfuge, but luck was not on the side of the lads as the full force of police was inside and the barracks was bolted, barred and shuttered. The enemy became suspicious, and after refusing to open up maintained complete silence. After demanding the surrender the officer in charge, Comdt. Pat Loughran, gave the order to open fire. This was responded to immediately from inside the barracks by the police and a lively engagement followed. As ammunition was limited among our lads Comdt. Loughran again called for the surrender, but the only reply was another volley from the defenders. The attack was kept up until the Volunteers ran out of ammunition, when they had to abandon the attempt and withdraw. Sargeant Matthews who was in charge of the barracks, was severely wounded and lost an eye as a result of his wounds.

Bohermeen was a failure due to a series of disappointments that could not have been foreseen. The men selected for the job assembled at the point arranged. Their names were Comdt. M. Fox, Capt. Jas. Kiernan, Volunteers Jas. Bray from Delvin, Capt. W. Doyle, Lieut. Jas. Doyle, Volunteers Jas. Ward, L. Sherlock, Pat Murray, Peter Reilly, Thos. Martin, Athboy Battalion, Quartermaster P. Carey and Brigade Adjutant Seamus Finn. Capt. J. Martin and B. McConnell were stationed at a point on the Dublin road to make contact with the car. At 8.30 there was no sign of the car, so I sent Martin by

bicycle to Trim to see if the car had come or if any contact had been made with either car. He returned with word that the Trim car had arrived just as he began his return journey but there was no information about ours. There was nothing left to do but wait, which we did rather impatiently. It was intended by us to pick up some guns and bring them along by this car, as it was impossible to move the men from Athboy to Bohermeen if they were to cycle there with guns exposed and have any hope of effecting our objective by surprise.

I rejoined the men at Bohermeen and explained the situation to them and sent Comdt. Fox and James Kiernan and Delvin, to scout the publichouse and round the barracks, and on their return they reported that there was no police activity or any sign of them in the pub. We continued to wait, occasionally sending up a scout to keep in touch with any police movement that might take place, but when 10.30 p.m. came and the car or arms had not made their appearance we were forced to abandon the project. During the two hours wait there were many suggestions made by the men, but none seemed feasible. Some of the bigger and stronger ones offered to approach the barrack door, and if they succeeded in getting it open to jump on and seize the policeman and force a way in. As it seemed a very far fetched plan, with little hope of success and a possibility of fatality among them, Fox and I did not see that we could permit the attempt.

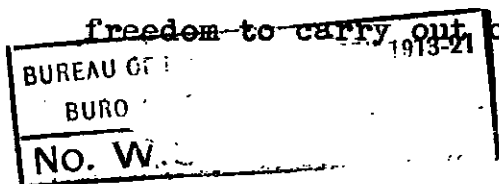
We returned very disappointed men but determined

to make another attempt without relying on assistance from any outside source. The hardest blow fell later when at about 1 a.m. I was aroused by a messenger from my home, who told me that a strange man had called at about 12 o'clock wishing to see me. I was then sleeping away from home so I hurried there as quickly as possible. Arriving there I found a young man endeavouring to answer the many questions being fired at him by my father without giving any information about himself. In a few moments I explained to my people that I was expecting him, and when they had gone to bed I questioned him. He had little to say. He received orders from Eamon Price to come to Athboy, get in touch with me and place himself and his car at my service. He did not get any word to call for arms to Dunboyne and, as far as he knew, Price had no knowledge of any such arrangement. He explained his late arrival by telling me that his car broke down beyond Trim and he had difficulty in getting to Athboy at all.

It was now after one in the morning on November 1st and I had received a despatch from Mooney that they had taken Ballivor Barracks, shooting one policeman in the process. I talked it over with Cotter who was the driver, and as there was no possibility of making any attempt at that hour on Bohermeen Barracks I advised him to get back to town - Dublin - as quickly as possible. As I could not put ^{UP} him ^A owing to my having to sleep away from home, he took my advice and departed.

Following these operations we had, what we now began to look on as routine, raids and questionings by the police and military. The better known officers and Volunteers were vigorously sought after but were lucky to escape capture. The Brigade Officers and most Battalion Officers had to take precautions to avoid arrest and were more or less on the run from then on. Our organisation remained intact although here and there we had murmurings among some of the rank and file. The people, too, did not take kindly to ~~such~~ extreme measures, and it became increasingly difficult to get around on Volunteer work.

The Brigade Council asked the 3rd Battalion to make another attempt on Bohermeen and it was arranged that this would be done early in November, but before the time fixed arrived the barracks was evacuated and the police drafted to Navan and Kells. Ballivor and Summerhill were also closed about this time. Dillon's Bridge was evacuated a few days after the attack. The 3rd Battalion men did the only thing left them to do and proceeded to destroy Bohermeen by burning. This led to further evacuation by the enemy of small stations and G.H.Q. issued a general order that all evacuated barracks be burned. This was early in 1920 and meant that the police were brought into the larger towns to strengthen the garrisons in them and left us more freedom to carry out our training and field work.

Signed: Seamus FinnDate: Nov. 7th 1953Witness: Matthew Barry

(Matthew Barry) Comd't.

(Seamus Finn)

Nov. 7th 1953.