

W. S. 918

ORIGINAL

BUREAU OF MILITARY HISTORY 1913-21
BURO STAIRE MILEATA 1913-21
No. W.S. 918

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BUREAU OF MILITARY HISTORY, 1913-21.

STATEMENT BY WITNESS.

DOCUMENT NO. W.S. 918

Witness

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| (a) Thady McGowan, | (a) Culfadda,
Ballymote. |
| (b) Tom Brehony | (b) Carrowreagh,
Keash,
Ballymote,
Co. Sligo. |

Identity.

- (a) Adjutant, 3rd Battalion, Sligo Brigade.
- (b) Captain, Keash Company Sligo Brigade.

Both members of I.R.B., Keash Circle, 1914 - .

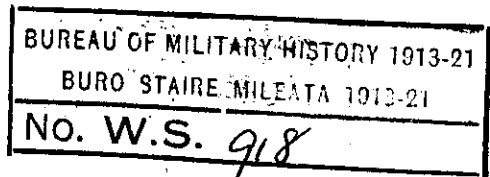
Subject.

National and military activities,
Co. Sligo, 1914-1921.

Conditions, if any, Stipulated by Witness.

Nil

File No. S. 2207

ORIGINALJOINT STATEMENT BYTHADY MCGOWAN, Culfadda, Ballymote, Co. Sligo,

and

THOMAS BREHENY, Carrowreagh, Keash, Ballymote, Co. Sligo.

We joined the Irish Republican Brotherhood in Keash in 1914. Alec. McCabe was the Head Centre of the Keash I.R.B. and its membership was about twenty. The Ancient Order of Hibernians was very strongly organised in this area in 1914 and they took the initiative in forming the Volunteers in 1914. In the year 1915 the Redmondite supporters had control of the local Volunteer organisation. The Republican and I.R.B. Section who were members of the Volunteers at the time broke away from the organisation controlled by Redmond's supporters, and they formed a Republican Company of the Volunteers, and in 1916 Henry Sheeran was O/C of the newly organised Company.

Alec McCabe was the prime mover in organising Sinn Féin and the I.R.B. in our district. In 1918 he was dismissed from his school on account of his Republican activities. In November, 1915, he was arrested at Sligo Station. When arrested he was carrying explosives on his person. He was charged with the offence of being in possession of explosives without a permit, and for his defence he pleaded that he used the stuff for fishing purposes. He was sentenced to a term of imprisonment. Previous to 1916 McCabe procured a number of .38 revolvers which were distributed amongst prominent I.R.B. men.

For Easter Week, 1916, plans were made to capture Keash R.I.C. Barracks, the garrison of which comprised one Sergeant and four policemen. On Easter Sunday evening we were mobilised in a few places, one being an outhouse belonging to Cryan's, and another being near Keash Barracks. On this particular night the Keash Company men that were mobilised were waiting for Alec McCabe, who was in the town of Ballaghaderreen. McCabe, however, found himself unable to turn up as he had arranged and he sent a man named Berreen, who was a Centre of the I.R.B., to take his place. When Berreen turned up, his leadership was not accepted by the Keash Company men and, in the absence of McCabe, the attack on the Barracks was called off. At that time Keash Company had one service rifle, six or seven .38 revolvers and about twenty shotguns. After the calling off of the attack on Keash Barracks, nothing else was planned or attempted in Easter Week.

From 1916 up to about September, 1919, there was very little activity in our locality. Alec McCabe was trying to organise and keep things going. In 1918 Thomas Breheny was appointed O/C, Keash Company.

In September, 1919, a re-organisation of the whole Battalion area of nine Companies was carried out. M.J. Marren was appointed Battalion O/C, Thady McGowan, Battalion Adjutant, and Josie Hannon, Battalion Quartermaster. The following Companies were attached to the Battalion: Ballymote, Keash, Culfadda, Kilavil, Bunninadden, Emlaughton, Kilcreevan, Ballinafad and Derroon. At this stage the Irish Republican Brotherhood took control of the Volunteers. All Volunteer officers elected on the

Battalion and Company staffs were also members of the I.R.B., this idea being part of McCabe's plan for the re-organisation of the Volunteers.

One of the main activities in 1919 and early 1920 was our efforts to procure arms, by raiding for them or by purchasing them.

In December, 1919, we raided a large gentleman's residence in which two Battalions, Gorteen and Ballymote, took part. A raid was carried out on the residence of Charles Graham near Bunninadden. M.J. Marren was in charge of this raid. A very exhaustive search of the premises was carried out and a quantity of arms, etc., obtained, including one Martini rifle, one Lee Enfield rifle, three revolvers, field-glasses, three shotguns, and a large amount of shotgun and other assorted ammunition. This raid, we think, occurred about February, 1920. Another raid was carried out on Temple House, the residence of Major Percival. The late Frank Carty was in charge of this raid and a large number of men took part. Temple House premises were very extensive and we made a thorough search. We got one Peter-The-Painter and a thousand rounds of ammunition, seven or eight shotguns, a large amount of gelignite, and a rifle which proved of little use to us. We also took away a collection of spears, daggers, swords, etc. There was a number of other small raids carried out.

Military Operations:

In June, 1919, Judge Wakely was staying in Hannon's Hotel and, while there, he was guarded by R.I.C. Thady

McGowan went to Hannon's Hotel, accompanied by a number of Volunteers, including, B.J. Keany, J.A. Farry, P.W. Coan, etc. When we arrived at the hotel, we were not able to effect an entrance, as it was barricaded. We searched for the policemen on guard, but failed to find them outside the hotel. We were informed that the policemen were in the hotel. We then fired on the hotel and broke some windows. Judge Wakely put his head out of an upstairs window and enquired what was wrong and what was the meaning of our firing. One of our men informed the Judge that we did not want him or his English law here. We then called off the affair.

On Easter Saturday night, 1920, in obedience to a G.H.Q. order, we burned an evacuated Barracks at Keash and another at Temple House. About a month later we burned Ballinacorney and Mullaghroe Barracks. In the two last-mentioned areas, the local Volunteers failed to do their jobs.

In July, 1920, we planned an attack on the R.I.C. Barracks at Castlebaldwin. The plan adopted was to disarm some of the garrison who were in the habit of frequenting the local publichouse at night time and, with the arms we would capture from the police, we were to rush the Barracks and overpower the remainder of the garrison. Thomas Breheny O/C took part in this operation. Others who took part were Patrick Ballantyne, Bertie Hart, Seán Cryan, John Henry, Harry Sheerin, J. Walsh, J. Neilan, Frank Trimble, Peter O'Connor, M. Coghlan, Patrick Hannon, etc. We went into the pub and overpowered the police who were there but they were unarmed. Having overpowered the police, we went to the Barracks. Our only weapons were some shotguns filled with buckshot and a few home-made bombs.

We fired with the shotguns through the windows and we threw the bombs at the building. The police in the Barracks replied to our fire, which lasted a considerable time. We were not able to create any impression on the garrison who refused to surrender. The I.R.A. suffered no casualties in this operation, but one of the R.I.C. received serious injury. The Barracks were evacuated the next day.

In August, 1920, a party of I.R.A. under the command of the late Frank Carty, proceeded to a position at Kevins. This party numbered about twenty and they waited in position for some time. Four R.I.C. men came along on bicycles. The I.R.A. men pounced on the policemen from their positions and overpowered them. They disarmed the police and got three rifles with fifty rounds of rifle ammunition, a shotgun and cartridges, a Webley revolver, one bomb, four bicycles and four police tunics. The party of I.R.A. included M.J. O'Hara, Charles Gildea, Jack Walker, Joe Durkin, Jim Halloran, Patrick Nicholson, Patrick McCormack, Reverend. Dr. Henry C.F., M.J. Marren, Thady McGowan, Pat Hunt, Frank Higgins and Patrick Coleman.

Ratra Ambush:

We have read the account of this ambush written by Jim Hunt, who was in charge of it, and we have nothing to add to the very accurate description he has given. We would like to state that amongst the attackers at Ratra the following men from Ballymote Battalion were present: M.J. Marren, Thady McGowan, James Molloy, John McManmy, Tom Connolly and Paddy Connor.

The Shooting of Sergeant Fallon at Ballymote:

Sergeant Fallon was a very dangerous enemy of the I.R.A. He had gone out of his way from 1916 onwards to harry men who were active and on the run. This man's daughter was also actively engaged in doing Intelligence work for the British. When Sergeant Fallon's anti-I.R.A. activities had become notorious, orders were issued for his execution. On the 3rd November, 1920, when Sergeant Fallon was on duty at the fair in Ballymote, two I.R.A. men, named Coleman and Mulloy, approached him and ordered him to put up his hands and surrender. Fallon attempted to draw his gun and he was shot dead.

At the end of December, 1920, or early January, 1921, we formed part of an I.R.A. party under Commandant Jim Hunt. We proceeded to Kilfree railway junction, and there we awaited the arrival of the Dublin-Sligo afternoon train. Edward Doherty, the Battalion F.O., had boarded this train at Boyle and travelled on it to Kilfree Junction. At the Junction he gave the waiting I.R.A. party the signal that there was enemy personnel on the train and pointed out the compartment occupied by them. We rushed this compartment where we found the D.I. and two R.I.C. men, and we disarmed all three.

In January, 1921, we formed part of a party under the command of M.J. Marren (deceased). We proceeded to Kilfree Junction and awaited the arrival of a train travelling from Sligo to Boyle. The I.R.A. party was small in number - about six or seven in all - and, when the train arrived at Kilfree, we found that there was a large

party of armed military on board. We waited until the train moved out of the station and, as it was gathering speed, we opened fire on the carriages occupied by the military. They returned our fire and we heard later that some of them were wounded.

Attack on Ballaghaderreen Barracks:

In February, 1921, the Sligo and East Mayo Brigades joined forces to carry out an attack on Ballaghaderreen Barracks. We took part in this operation with the Sligo contingent. The plan adopted for the capture of the Barracks was the use of a large mine which was to be conveyed in a cart to the vicinity of the Barracks and placed against the front entrance. The mine was constructed by the Engineering Section of the Sligo Brigade and contained a large explosive charge. On the night of the attack a large number of Volunteers entered the town of Ballaghaderreen and surrounded the Barracks and the approaches to the Barracks. The cart containing the mine was waiting in an archway convenient to the Barracks, and three men were in charge of it. A patrol of six R.I.C. men, who were out on duty at the time, apparently got to know of the presence of the I.R.A. party near the cart and opened fire on them. Any Volunteers in that vicinity returned the fire of the police. When this firing started, the party of Volunteers close up to the Barracks opened fire on the Barracks and the garrison inside replied to this fire, which lasted for about twenty minutes. As the possibility of getting the mine into position for use on the Barracks was prevented by the outburst of fire, the operation was called off and all withdrew.

Attack on Ballymote Barracks and Courthouse, February, 1921:

In February, 1921, we formed part of a party, with Alec McCabe in charge, that went into the town of Ballymote for the purpose of attacking the R.I.C. Barracks and Courthouse there. The Barracks was a large building, garrisoned by 60 R.I.C. and Tans. The plan adopted for the attack was to explode a mine at the Courthouse, in the hope that the explosion would draw out a party of police or Tans from the Barracks. The mine was placed at the Courthouse and different positions around the Barracks were occupied by the I.R.A. men. After the explosion of the mine, the Volunteers waited for some time, but as no police or Tans left the Barracks, the main body of the Volunteers opened fire on the Barracks and this continued for some time. There were no casualties in this operation.

Disarming of a Spy at Clogher:

An ex-British policeman, named Harrington, lived alone in Clogher and it became known to the I.R.A. that he was doing spy work for the British and that the information he gave to the British was a matter of extreme danger to local I.R.A. officers who were on the run and active. Thady McGowan was one of the party, under the command of Jim Hunt, that went to arrest Harrington. Harrington had extensive preparations made to defend himself in case of emergency, but the Volunteers gained admission to his house and overpowered him before he had time to use the arms he had on his person. He was court-martialled later on and was banished from the country.

In February, 1921, for the attack on Ballaghaderreen Barracks, all roads in the vicinity of the town were trenched and blocked as a safety measure. After the attack, a military lorry ran into a trench placed on the Curry-Ballaghaderreen road. A party of Volunteers, armed with guns and revolvers, were in the vicinity at the time and opened fire on the British force that manned the lorry and numbered about sixteen, armed with rifles. The fire from the British military was heavy and the I.R.A. had to retreat. There were no casualties in this operation.

Attack on Collooney R.I.C. Barracks:

Liam Pilkington, the Brigade O/C, was in charge of this attack. We were members of the party of about thirty men that he mobilised. We proceeded to the vicinity of Collooney Barracks. We placed a large land mine against the entrance to the Barracks without attracting the attention of the garrison inside. The attacking party lay in convenient positions under cover, ready to rush the Barracks when the mine exploded. The mine was then exploded and the entrance to the Barracks was blown away. The rushing party, led by Brigadier Pilkington, got into the front part of the Barrack before any fire was opened by the police or Tans inside, and found that the air at the entrance was completely saturated with dust, to such an extent that it was impossible to breathe in it or see through it. This was due to the effects of the explosion on the dry plaster on the inside walls of the barracks. The police then started to fire and Pilkington and his men were forced to retreat. The firing on both sides lasted

about fifteen minutes when the I.R.A. decided to withdraw as any prospect of taking the barracks had then passed.

In May, 1921, Thomas Breheny, in charge of four others - Bertie Hart, J.J. Breheny, Harry Sheeran and Martin Coughlan - took up an ambush position near the Hill of Keash and waited there for enemy forces travelling on the road nearby. A British lorry containing about fourteen armed men came along. The I.R.A. men were in position about 40 yards from the main Ballymote-Boyle road, at a road trench, and, when the lorry arrived at the ambush position, it was immediately engaged by them. The firing lasted about an hour. Two of the enemy party were wounded early on in the exchange of fire and, at the start of the engagement, a British machine gunner broke his leg when dismounting from the lorry. The engagement was terminated by the arrival of reinforcements and the I.R.A. being forced to retreat.

In May, 1921, Michael J. Marren took charge of a party of I.R.A. men, numbering 43 or 44. Thady McGowan was second-in-command. The party took up positions along both sides of the railway line near Seefin. On one side a bank about 35 feet high, was occupied by some of the Volunteers. A Volunteer scout had been sent to a certain railway station where he was to board a train containing enemy forces travelling in Seefin direction. A train arrived in which Auxiliary and police forces were travelling in the direction of the ambush position. When the train was approaching, the scout gave us the signal that the train contained armed enemy forces. Some of our party

got out on the railway line in front of the train with a red flag and signalled to the engine-driver to stop. The train pulled up to a halt, and a few Volunteers took control of the engine. Marren and McGowan boarded the train and went along to the different carriages to get the civilians out. When they came near the carriage where the Auxiliaries were, the latter opened fire on them and both men took up cover between carriages. The Volunteers on the railway bank then opened heavy fire on the carriages occupied by the Auxiliaries. The firing lasted approximately half an hour, and then 11 Auxiliaries with two R.I.C. men surrendered. The party were disarmed and the train was allowed to proceed on its journey. There were no I.R.A. casualties in this operation.

Michael J. Marron, Battalion O/C, and Thady McGowan, his Adjutant, were both carpenters. In May, 1920, the Battalion Staff made plans to ambush a patrol of police who regularly used a certain route when acting as an escort for explosives used by the County Engineer for blasting work in quarries. Marren and McGowan worked all night making a coffin, so that it would be ready for the planned operation against this police escort the next day. The plans made for this operation were as follows: About 60 or 70 Volunteers, having mobilised at a point on the road where the escort was expected to come, would take on the role of mourners at a funeral, the coffin to be carried on the shoulders of four Volunteers, and a part of the ambushing party were to take up a position at the rear of a sharp bend on the road, facing in the direction in which the escort was coming. The armed portion of the ambush party were to take

up position about forty yards in front of the bend on the road. On the approach of the police, who usually travelled on bicycles, the four men, with the coffin on their shoulders, and the Volunteers at the rear of the bend were to come around the bend as a funeral party. It was expected that the police, who by then should be within a short distance of the bend, would dismount from their bicycles to show their respect for the "funeral" party. It was at this point that their surrender would be demanded by the Volunteers, and fire opened on them if they refused. The Volunteers waited a considerable time, but the enemy escort did not appear. A car, driven by the County Engineer, approached the ambush position and he was called on to halt, but he ignored the challenge. Shots were fired in his direction and he eventually stopped. When the car was searched, a quantity of explosives was found. The fact that the County Engineer was conveying explosives in his car confirmed our opinion that the police escort was not coming in our direction that day.

Some time after this operation, Thady McGowan, Thomas Breheny and a few other Volunteers (M. Coghlan, Batty Harte, J.J. Breheny, John Walsh, John Henry) were walking along the road when they observed a military lorry, in which two soldiers were seated, travelling close on the road near where they were passing. They intercepted the lorry and called on the soldiers to surrender, which they did. The soldiers were unarmed. They were conveying pigeons in crates in the lorry. The pigeons were removed from the lorry and the lorry burned.

Destroying military huts at Culfadda:

In May 1920 we got information that military huts were being conveyed by goods train from the direction of Finner Camp in Co. Donegal, and were destined for Mullingar area. Orders were issued to an I.R.A. officer named Lieut. Patrick McManmy to have the military huts destroyed. McManmy took charge of this operation, and with the help of 9 or 10 men of his Company section he proceeded to Culfadda, held up the train, removed the military huts from the railway carriages and made a pile of them in a bog alongside the railway line and set fire to them.

McManmy and his men waited in the vicinity of the burning hut to ensure their complete destruction. Whilst they were waiting two motor tenders of military came on the scene and opened fire on the party of I.R.A. They, the I.R.A. party, replied to the fire from the military and made their escape from the vicinity by using the cover afforded by ditches.

Alec McCable in May 1920 took over an unoccupied house on Corrick mountain, better known locally as Bridget Rocks, overlooking the Curlew Pass. The house was used for keeping prisoners, and later some of the South Sligo Column did rest in it for the purpose of loading cartridges etc.

The bomb which was captured at the attack on Ballaghaderreen R.I.C. barracks was made by A. McCabe, M.J. Marren and Thady McGowan in Leonard's old mill

Carrowcrory, Keash, and also the one which was used for the attack on Collooney R.I.C. barracks.

Attempted disarmaments of military and R.I.C.:

In May 1920 Alec McCabe and Comdt. M.J. Marren mobilised about 60 men, who were put into concealed positions alongside the roadway to await and disarm a mixed party of military and R.I.C., numbering from 14 to 16, who had been using a particular road as a cycling patrol. This composite force travelled as a cycling patrol in single file formation.

The I.R.A. under McCabe and Marren, awaited them on two occasions, but the enemy did not turn up whilst the I.R.A. were in positions.

Capture of the O/C Bedfordshire Regiment:

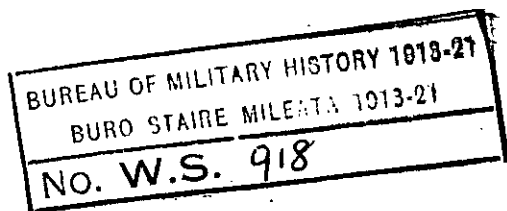
On the 29th June, 1921, Commandant M.J. Marren and a number of men held up the Dublin-Sligo train (mid-day) at Rathmullen between Culfadda and Ballymote. In the search of the train by Comdt. Marren and his men, the officer in charge of the Bedfordshire Regiment was identified as a passenger on the train. This officer was travelling incognito. He was removed from the train and was detained for some time before he was released.

There are many other items of service which we rendered from day to day during the years 1919, 1920 and 1921 which we have not mentioned in this statement. There were certain routine activities which were carried out as a matter of policy, such as blocking roads,

cutting communications and the holding up of postmen and raiding for mails. Those activities were general all over the Brigade area and would not justify devoting space to recounting each of the individual incidents.

For a similar reason we have not mentioned a large number of laid ambushes where we took up positions and waited, in some instances for a considerable time, in hopes of getting a chance of attacking Crown Forces. Those occasions where we waited in ambush positions without results entailed much preparation and care in selecting suitable places for ambush with the precautions we had always to take to prevent the enemy getting information of our plans. All those laid ambushes entailed both worry and danger to the officers and men engaged. It often happened that we lay out awaiting in ambush positions as often as 3 or 4 times before we were lucky enough to have an action.

Before we finish we would like to pay tribute to our numerous friends all over the Brigade area who looked after our comforts in providing food, sleeping accommodation, change of clothes, etc., and also those who looked after our safety in guarding our billets, acting as our outposts and scouts when we moved from place to place. We could not carry on without the unselfish help that those people so generously gave us. They gave us both their time and their goods without thoughts of payment or reward.



Signed: Thady McGowan
 (Thady McGowan)

Signed: Tom Brehony

(Tom Brehony)

Date: 11th Jan. 1954

Witness: Colm O Breitheamhnaigh
 (Colm O Breitheamhnaigh)

11th Jan. 1954.

11/1/54