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ORIGINAL

BUREAU OF MILITARY HISTORY 1913-21

BURÓ STAIRÉ MILÉATA '14

No. W.S. 1091

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BUREAU OF MILITARY HISTORY, 1913-21.

STATEMENT BY WITNESS.

DOCUMENT NO. W.S. 1091

Witness

James Costello,
Trieneragh,
Duagh,
Co. Kerry.

Identity.

Captain Duagh Company I.R.B.
Co. Kerry.

Subject.

- (a) Duagh Company Irish vol's. Co. Kerry, 1914-1921;
- (b) Execution of D.I. O'Sullivan, R.I.C., Listowel,
20th January 1921;
- (c) Execution of Sir Arthur Vicars, Kilmorna House,
11th April 1921.

Conditions, if any, Stipulated by Witness.

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File No. .S. 2398

Form B.S.M 2

ORIGINAL

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STATEMENT OF JAMES COSTELLO,

Trieneragh, Duagh, Co. Kerry.

I was born in Duagh in the year 1886 and was sent to the local National School until I was about 14 years of age.

I joined the Volunteers in April 1914 when they were first formed in Duagh. The drill instructors on the formation of the Volunteers were two brothers named Jerry and Thomas Keane - both ex-British soldiers. We paraded and drilled with wooden rifles for a time. After a speech by John Redmond at Woodenbridge in Co. Wicklow when he called on the Volunteers to defend the shores of Ireland, there was a split in the local company, which ceased to parade and drill for a time. The company, however, did not break up but continued to exist in a loose formation.

Sometime in the year 1914 a man named Humphrey Murphy was appointed school teacher in the local National School and came to stay at my house. Night after night he and I discussed the Irish Volunteers and Ireland's fight for freedom. Murphy, who was then a member of the I.R.B., was a native of Ballybeg, Currow, Co. Kerry.

In the spring of 1916 the company was reorganised by Ernest Blythe who was reorganising the Volunteers in Kerry at this time. A man named Tom Kelly became Company Captain. The strength of the company at the time was approximately twenty-five men. A short time before Easter Week 1916 Tom Kelly, when addressing the company one night, said: "The time is approaching when we will have to be ready to do our part to drive the

English garrison out of Ireland". Humphrey Murphy always went home on Friday nights, but on the Thursday of Holy Week before Easter Week 1916 he went home that Thursday night. As he left he told me that he might not be back again.

Sometime before Easter Week of 1916 we received instructions from the Company Captain to be ready for large scale manoeuvres on Easter Sunday and Monday. We mobilised several times that week awaiting instructions which never came, and, so far as the Duagh Company was concerned, we knew nothing of what was happening in Dublin or other parts of the country. In the company at the time we had a number of shotguns, one or two rifles and a couple of revolvers.

After Easter Week things were very quiet until about the month of March 1917 when the Volunteers were reorganised. At the reorganisation Tom Kelly again became Company Captain, Tom Kenneally became 1st Lieutenant and Jack Sheehy became 2nd Lieutenant. The strength of the company then was about 45 to 50 men. We paraded and drilled with shotguns about once a week up to the end of the year.

During the threat of conscription in 1918 the strength of the company increased to about 200 men. After the scare was over most of the older men left the company, which reduced the strength to about 100 men. While the scare lasted drilling and practice in the handling of arms was intensified. Shotguns in the area were collected around this time; some of the local loyalists, however, sent their shotguns and other arms to Kilmorna House, the residence of Sir Arthur Vicars.

When the company officers heard this they decided to raid Kilmorna House for the guns. Humphrey Murphy took charge.

When we got to Kilmorna House, or the "Great House" as it was known locally, we knocked on the door. We got no answer. We waited for some time but still got no answer. Murphy then broke in one of the panels of the door and called on a Volunteer named James McDonagh to go through the broken panel and open the door. When McDonagh had opened the door we all went into the hall. Soon afterwards Vicars appeared. Murphy explained what we had come to collect - the guns which had been sent in by a number of local people. Vicars replied: "There are no guns in the house". Murphy said: "We will search the house". He (Murphy) and a couple of men tried to open a strong room located off the main hall. The door of the strong room was locked. Vicars was asked for the keys but he replied to the effect that he had not got the keys. Vicars then produced a bundle of pound notes, which he offered to the Volunteers in lieu of the guns. This they refused to accept. After some time he produced a bottle or two of whiskey and some glasses and offered a drink all round, which was not accepted either. The Volunteers then withdrew.

Around this time we subscribed among ourselves and friends a sum of £75 for the purchase of arms. This money was given to a Fr. Daly, C.C., a native of Duagh, who happened to be home on leave from Manchester at the time. Fr. Daly took the money to Manchester and was successful in purchasing a number of rifles there, which were sent to Tralee and received at the headquarters of the North Kerry Volunteers there. These rifles were retained at Tralee and never reached our company although we had paid for them.

Routine drilling continued up to the end of 1918. At the end of this year the general election took place, but here in Kerry the Volunteers took no part in the election campaign as the Sinn Féin candidate was returned unopposed.

The year 1919 was a continuation of drilling and route marches carried out in the previous year. At the end of this year there was a re-election of officers for the company, with the result that a man named Patrick McMahon became Company Captain, Tom Kenneally remained 1st Lieutenant and a man named Dan O'Connor became 2nd Lieutenant.

In March 1920 the Battalion Staff, under James Sugrue, carried out an attack on Ballybunion R.I.C. barracks. Sugrue, who was Battalion O/C, issued instructions to the Company Captain to cut all telegraph wires between Abbeyfeale and Listowel. I, with other members of the company, took part in cutting the wires and later that night I, with some members of the Duagh and Listowel Companies, while armed with shotguns and a few revolvers, took up position in the town of Listowel near the R.I.C. barracks there for the purpose of preventing reinforcements of the Listowel R.I.C. going to the aid of the Ballybunion R.I.C. The attack, which took place on the night of the 13th March, 1920, was not a success in so far as the I.R.A. did not succeed in taking the barracks. No reinforcements were, however, sent from Listowel to Ballybunion. After some time we got word that the attack, which had lasted for about an hour, had been called off. After this we dispersed and went home.

Humphrey Murphy had left Duagh National School by this time. He called to me one day in June 1920 and told me he wanted all roads blocked in the area as the I.R.A. were about to carry out an attack on Brosna R.I.C. barracks, which was about ten miles from Duagh. Humphrey Murphy by this time was on the Brigade Staff of Kerry No. 2 Brigade. Brosna Company area formed part of the No. 2 Brigade.

On the 13th June, 1920, McMahon, the Company Captain, mobilised the company at Rylane. Most of the men were armed with shotguns. After a short consultation he ordered six men - Bob Stack, Michael Lenihan, Jack Mulcaire, Thomas Fitzgerald, James Joy and one other man - into a waiting motor car which we had commandeered, and told them to proceed to Brosna. McMahon and I followed the car on bikes, while the main body of the company followed behind on foot. The roads around had already been trenched.

When the motor car reached Feale's Bridge, which is about two miles from Brosna, it ran into a party of military and R.I.C. which had just arrived by lorry at the spot and had taken up positions near a churchyard and other points near the bridge. By the time we reached the bridge McMahon and I had got in front of the motor car. We were halted by the patrol. McMahon and I tried to get past. As we did so we were pulled off our bikes. I heard the men in the car being questioned. I made a dash for a nearby ditch but was caught by a policeman who grabbed my coat. I managed to escape, leaving my coat in the policeman's hands. I succeeded in making my way back to the main body of the company and explained what had happened. The company immediately retreated to

Duagh. McMahon and the six men captured in the car were taken by the patrol to Brosna barracks. They were later sentenced to terms of imprisonment and afterwards interned until the Truce was signed.

A fortnight later a second attempt was made to capture the R.I.C. barracks at Brosna. On this occasion I assumed command of the company assisted by the Quartermaster, Matt Finucane. It had been arranged that Humphrey Murphy would take charge of the attack. All roads in surrounding areas were again blocked.

We managed to reach the village around 10 p.m. on the night of 19th June, 1920, where we met Humphrey Murphy with his men. We took up positions at various points around the barracks, which was a two storey stone building. With the exception of one man named Lyons who had a rifle, all of the men had shotguns. In addition we had a number of Mills type bombs which had been supplied to us by G.H.Q. Dublin. In all 30 men took part in the actual attack. A number of other men were on outpost duty.

At about 11 p.m. Humphrey Murphy gave the order "open fire". The bombs were hurled at the windows while Lyons and the men with the shotguns concentrated their fire on the building. The bombs turned out to be duds as not one of them exploded. The R.I.C. replied to our fire at once. For two hours we continued to fire random shots at the barracks while the R.I.C. within replied with rifle fire. We could make no impression on the barracks with the shotguns and eventually the attack was called off, after which we returned to our company areas.

Shortly after the attack on Brosna barracks the R.I.C. evacuated the R.I.C. barracks here in Duagh. It was then that a Sinn Féin Court was established here. Fr. Harrington became the judge, a man named Paul Broderick became clerk of the court, while the Company Quartermaster - Matt Finucane, became O/C Police and was responsible for carrying out all orders issued by the court. A disused house located some distance off the main road was used as a prison where several persons were imprisoned for short periods for minor offences and were guarded by Volunteer police.

At a special battalion council meeting in December 1920, at which the Battalion O/C, Robert McElligott presided, an order was received from the Brigade O/C, Paddy Cahill, that an R.I.C. man named O'Sullivan who had recently arrived in Listowel was to be executed. O'Sullivan, who was Sergeant in charge of Kilmallock R.I.C. barracks when it was attacked by the I.R.A. on the 28th May, 1920, had been promoted to the rank of District Inspector R.I.C. on his transfer to Listowel. McElligott asked each Company Captain present to submit the names of any Volunteers in their companies who would be prepared to carry out the order. The names of the companies represented at the meeting were: Listowel, Newtownsandess, Tarbert, Finuge, Behins, Bedford, Duagh, Ballylongford, Beale, Knockanure and Asdee. About a week later the Company Captain of Newtownsandess, Paul O'Sullivan, submitted the names of four men of that company who had volunteered to carry out the order. The four men were Con Brosnan, Jack Ahern, Dan O'Grady and Jack Sheehan. On the 20th January, 1921, these four men carried out the order. O'Sullivan was shot dead as he

crossed the street from the R.I.C. barracks in Listowel towards the opposite side of the street.

About a fortnight after the shooting of O'Sullivan a Flying Column for North Kerry was formed. It was composed of thirty men, most of whom had been on the run for some time. It was at a meeting in my house on the 5th February, 1921, that the column first met and appointed Tom Kenneally as their O/C. Kenneally, who had been 1st Lieutenant in Duagh, had left Duagh by this time and had gone to live at Mooneen. Three men of the Duagh Company - Ger. Lyons, Christy Broderick and Francis O'Keefe - were accepted on the column on its formation.

Some hours after the formation of the column, as the men were about to be billeted for the night, I received information from a member of the Listowel I.R.A. that the Tans and military there were about to make a large scale round-up of the Duagh area. I immediately passed the news to the column, who left immediately for Stack's mountain. Early the following morning before most of the residents in the neighbourhood were out of bed, the Tans and military had arrived. A soldier or Tan was posted outside every house in the village. After several raids during the day the enemy withdrew. It is obvious that their information was first class, as they were certainly aware of the presence of the large number of I.R.A. in the area on the previous night.

The column managed to escape the round-up, and a night or two after were located in the vicinity of Stack's mountain when they were surrounded by military and Tans from Tralee, Listowel and other areas. The column, however, once again managed to elude their

pursuers. This round-up occupied a day and a half. In the meantime I, as Company Captain in Duagh, with the help of members of Duagh Company succeeded in sending supplies to the column while they were located on the mountainside.

For some time before the formation of the column the Company Quartermaster, Matt Finucane, had placed his house here in Duagh at the disposal of the I.R.A. It was from this house, which was a farmhouse, that the column were supplied on Stack's mountain. Later the column used the house as their headquarters, and right up to the Truce it was used to billet members for several days at a time. Shotguns, rifles and revolvers were supplied to the column from the house as required. It was also used for the receipt of dispatches from the Brigade O/C, Paddy Cahill, and others. I had sentries posted there for the twenty-four hours of the day right up to the Truce.

Some time after its formation the column, while on its way from Newtownsandes via Kilmorna to Duagh, received word that a party of military who had been entertained that day by Sir Arthur Vicars were about to return to their barracks in Listowel. The column took up positions on the side of the road which the military would have to travel and waited. As they approached on bicycles, the column opened fire. The military were in extended formation and replied at once to the fire of the column. One man attached to the column whose name was Galvin was shot dead instantly. The military fire was so intense that the column had to withdraw, leaving Galvin behind.

On several occasions before and after the formation of the column I took charge of raids on the mails carried on the Limerick to Tralee trains. These raids were carried out at Kilmorna railway station where the station-master, whose name was Colbert, was very friendly and always assisted the I.R.A. on these occasions. He had it arranged with the fireman of the train that the fireman would always wave a red flag as the train came into the station if there were military or Tans aboard. After seizing the mails they were censored and then placed in an empty house at Foildarrig, from where they were later collected by the local Post Office staff. On one occasion, through some misunderstanding, we were not warned that military were on the train. When the train on this occasion had come to a standstill at the station we spotted the military and rushed off the platform. They, however, had seen us. They rushed out of the train and opened fire all round as we retreated for cover and back to Duagh.

A day or two after the attack on the military returning from Kilmorna House, which took place on the 7th April, 1921, I received an order from the Battalion O/C, Paddy Joe McElligott, to burn down Kilmorna House and to arrest Sir Arthur Vicars and have him shot as he had been sentenced to death for being a spy and for assisting the enemy generally.

I ordered certain members of the Duagh Company to procure paraffin oil and petrol for the purpose of burning down the house. I instructed them to leave the paraffin and petrol at a point near the house. When this was accomplished I ordered about 12 men of the company to report near the spot at 9 a.m. on the following

morning.

At about 9.30 or 10 a.m. on the following morning I, with most of the men selected for the job, approached the "Great House" as it was called locally, and knocked on the door, which was opened by one of the servants - a man named Murphy - who informed us that Vicars was not at home. I said to Murphy "We have a job to do and we are going to do it". Murphy repeated that Vicars was not at home. We took his word for it and decided to put off the job until the following morning.

On the following morning, 11th April, 1921, we again approached the "Great House" as before and knocked on the door. There was no answer. I then went over to a window to the right of the door, which I broke open. Having broken the window I called on James McDonagh, a member of the company, to get through the window and open the main door. McDonagh went through the window and opened the door, which was heavily barred by three strong iron stretchers across the door.

When the door was opened our men entered in a body, most of them making for the strong room which was securely locked. They, however, blew open the door with a shot or two and, to their surprise, found only a few dumbbells and a couple of dummy guns instead of revolvers, rifles or shotguns which they anticipated. While these men were examining the strong room others went on the hunt for Vicars, whom they found in an underground passage which led from the basement of the house for half a mile outside it. He was taken out to the lawn and questioned about various items of information which he had passed to the enemy. He refused to say anything except that he had no

information. Eventually two of our men shot him dead on the lawn where he stood.

In the meantime other men in the company collected the household staff, which numbered about twelve, and took them out on the lawn. The paraffin and petrol were then sprinkled over the house and it was set alight. The house went up in a blaze at once, after which we withdrew. Most of the men were armed with revolvers, rifles or shotguns on the occasion, some of them being on guard duty around the house itself.

From then to the Truce things were quiet except for the trenching and blocking of roads and the demolishing of bridges. One of the bridges demolished around this time was Smerla Bridge over the river Feale between Duagh and Listowel, which had to be demolished by pick and shovel.

After the Truce I joined a training camp near Duagh.

Signed: James Costello
(James Costello)

Date: 14th February 1955
14th Feb. 1955.

Witness: John J. Daly (John J. Daly)
(Investigator)

