

W.S. 1.168

ORIGINAL

BUREAU OF MILITARY HISTORY 1913-21
BURO STAIRE MILEATA 1913-21
No. **W.S. 1.168**

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BUREAU OF MILITARY HISTORY, 1913-21.

STATEMENT BY WITNESS:

DOCUMENT NO. **W.S. 1,168**.....

Witness

John O'Keeffe,
54 New Street,
Carrick-on-Suir,
Co. Tipperary.

Identity.

O/C. Carrick-on-Suir Coy. Irish Volunteers;
Comd't. 8th Batt'n. South Tipperary Brigade.

Subject.

Carrick-on-Suir Company Irish Volunteers,
South Tipperary, 1917-1920.

Conditions, if any, Stipulated by Witness.

Nil

File No. **S.2471**.....

Form B.S.M. 2

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STATEMENT BY MR. JOHN O'KEEFFE,

54, New Street, Carrick-on-Suir, Co. Tipperary,

Commandant VIII Battalion, 3rd Tipperary Brigade.

I was a youth of 17 years of age when the Insurrection took place in Easter Week of 1916. I had just finished my school-going days and had commenced to assist my father in his hardware business in my native town of Carrick-on-Suir. There was then no unit of the Irish Volunteers in Carrick-on-Suir. There were, however, in the town a few nationally minded people, such as Dr. Murphy, Maurice Hickey and some members of the Dowley families, who had broken away from the Redmondite Party and the Irish National Volunteers when the split took place in that body a few years before, but, as far as I am aware, no effort was made to establish an Irish Volunteer company. On the other hand, Carrick-on-Suir held amongst the towns of Ireland the unenviable distinction of, in proportion to its population, giving the second highest percentage of recruits to the British Army.

A short time before Easter of 1917 a small group with which I was associated came together and formed a committee, with the object of collecting subscriptions and to arrange to have a High Mass offered in the Church of St. Nicholas, Carrick-on-Suir, for the repose of the souls of the executed leaders and of those who died for Ireland in the previous year of 1916. The intention was to have the Mass offered on a date as near as possible to the date of the first anniversary of the Rising. Shopkeepers and business concerns

were canvassed to close their shops on that particular morning so as to permit their staffs to attend the High Mass. The various schools in the town were also requested to permit the school children to attend. On the morning the Mass was offered, one shopkeeper, a Unionist business man, refused to close his shop, so a few of us called on him and compelled him to close his doors.

Shortly after this a Volunteer company was started in the town. We had about 40 members in the company at the start and we drilled regularly in the Town Hall. A man by the name of Tom Hickey was the first Company O/C, and I was his Lieutenant or 2nd in command. Hickey had been arrested with the late Kevin O'Higgins when they were both caught tearing down British Army recruiting posters. He had served a prison sentence for this episode, and this gave him a certain status or standing amongst the members of the company.

About this time, too, a Sinn Féin Club was founded. The Sinn Féin Club was composed mainly of the members of the Volunteer company, the position being that one night we might be on parade with the Volunteer company and the next or so we would be attending a meeting of the Sinn Féin Club, and invariably it was the same faces one saw at both.

Later on in 1917 an Irish Ireland concert was held in the Town Hall, Carrick-on-Suir, and was attended by the Countess Markievicz. The Countess came, as far as I can recollect, on the invitation of Dr. Philip Murphy of Castle St.; at least, Dr. Murphy acted as her host during her visit. During the concert she spoke on her experiences during the Rising of 1916, and she

stressed the importance of organising and maintaining a strong virile local Volunteer force and Sinn Féin Club.

The Countess received a most hostile reception in Carrick-on-Suir from what we then called the "separation" women. These were the wives and dependants of British soldiers and they were in receipt weekly of large sums of money, known as separation allowance, from the British government. So hostile was the attitude of these people to the Countess that it was necessary for the Volunteers to provide her with an escort on her way to and from Dr. Murphy's house.

On the night of the 16th March, 1918, a large quantity of shotgun ammunition and gelignite was taken by the Volunteers from the premises of three hardware firms in Carrick-on-Suir. This operation was carried out in conjunction with some members of the Tipperary town Volunteers, one of whom, John Carroll, had worked in Carrick-on-Suir for some years before going to Tipperary town. Some of the assistants in these firms were members of the Volunteers, and it was arranged with them to have as much as possible of the ammunition and gelignite stocked by their firms packed and left in a convenient position on the premises for seizure on the night of the raid. This capture, which weighed well over 15 cwt. of ammunition and explosives, was removed to and hidden in an old quarry about half a mile from the town. Later in the same week the major portion of it was taken to Tipperary town. We in Carrick-on-Suir retained about one-third of the gelignite, which I had removed from the quarry and securely dumped in the grounds of Carrick Castle. This gelignite was subsequently used in the manufacture of grenades or small bombs which were made in a backroom

of the Town Hall to a formula supplied by a man named O'Meara.

During the years 1917 and 1918 we, i.e. the Volunteer company in Carrick-on-Suir, were in no way affiliated with or in touch with any other company, battalion or brigade, nor had we any means of communication with G.H.Q.

We were simply a unit acting on our own. We had no visits from organisers in other areas. This was perhaps due to the geographical position of Carrick-on-Suir, situated as it is in the south eastern corner of Co. Tipperary and on the borders of both Co. Kilkenny and Co. Waterford. About the month of November, 1918, at the time of the 1918 general election campaign, Mr. Frank Geary, now Editor of the "Irish Independent" came to Carrick-on-Suir in connection with the election. I cannot say what position exactly he held at the time but he was certainly working on behalf of the late Pierce McCann, the Sinn Féin candidate for this constituency. He took charge of the Volunteer company on some of the parades to and from some of the Sinn Féin election meetings. On the occasion of one of these parades he addressed the company and told us that we were only wasting our time while we remained a separate unit and advised us to get into the organisation properly by becoming a unit of one of the nearest battalions or brigades which had then been formed in Counties Tipperary, Kilkenny and Waterford. This was exactly what we had wanted to do for some time previously, but we did not know how to go about it or whom we should approach in the matter. At that time Tom Hickey, whom I have previously referred to and who was a married man living some distance from the town,

rarely attended the Volunteer parades and I had taken charge of the company.

When the parade which Frank Geary addressed was over, Willie O'Meara, myself and a few others gathered around him and asked him to tell us what we should do and whom we should get in touch with so that we might arrange for the linking up of the company with a battalion. He suggested that we get in touch with some of the battalion officers in Clonmel.

On polling day a party of Sinn Féin supporters came into Carrick-on-Suir by motor car to record their votes. At the end of New St. and almost outside the R.I.C. barracks they were attacked by a party of pro-Britishers and Redmondites. The R.I.C. made no attempt to interfere. Tom Reidy, the driver of the motor car, was a Volunteer and was armed with a revolver. To disperse the attackers Reidy fired a shot in the air. The R.I.C. immediately surrounded the car and arrested Reidy. For being in possession of firearms and for firing the shot he was sentenced to two years' imprisonment. As this incident occurred about six weeks prior to the ambush at Soloheadbeg, the shot fired by Reidy must have been one of the first shots, if not the first, fired in the War of Independence, those fired in Easter Week of 1916 excluded. In other parts of the town this mob attacked Sinn Féin voters. As the R.I.C. refused to interfere, we mobilised all available Volunteers, who, armed with sticks, cleared the pro-British mob from the streets.

Through a cousin of mine I contacted Frank Drohan and William Lyles, who were then some of the senior Volunteer officers in the Clonmel area, and, as a result,

early in 1919 the Carrick-on-Suir Volunteers became 'A' Company of what was then known as the Clonmel Battalion. The company officers at this time were as follows:

Company Captain	-	John O'Keefe (myself)
" Lieut.	-	William O'Meara
" Adjt.	-	John O'Keefe (namesake but no relation)
" Q/M	-	Robert Walsh
" Int. Off.	-	Patrick Power.

Still early in 1919 Willie O'Meara and myself were called to a brigade meeting which, as far as I can now recollect, was held at Maher's farmhouse near Blackcastle. At this meeting we met Seumas Robinson, the Brigade O/C, the late Seán Treacy, then Brigade Vice O/C, and some others who were later to figure prominently in the War of Independence. O'Meara and I were commissioned at this meeting to put the work of organising the Volunteers in the outlying districts of Carrick-on-Suir in hand and for the present, at any rate, to treat any such new units as sections of the Carrick-on-Suir or 'A' Company. Acting on these instructions and assisted by my namesake, John O'Keefe, the Company Adjutant, we organised Volunteer units in Faugheen, Grangemockler, Mothel, Clonea, Rathgormack, Ballyneale and Windgap, Co. Waterford. Later on the battalion officers visited the company and the various sections. They distributed drill books but no arms.

In June, 1919, the 8th Battalion of the 3rd Tipperary Brigade was formed. The area of this new battalion consisted of Carrick-on-Suir and the areas already referred to where we had organised sections. These sections now became companies. The organisation

and staff was as follows:

Battalion Commandant	-	John O'Keefe (myself)
Battalion Vice Comdt.	-	William O'Meara
" Adjutant	-	John O'Keefe (my namesake)
" Q/M	-	Robert Walsh
" Int. Off.	-	Patrick Power
'A' Coy. (Carrick-on-Suir)	O/C -	Denis J. O'Driscoll
'B' " (Faugheen)	O/C -	William Power
'C' " (Grangemockler)	O/C -	Patrick Butler
'D' " (Mothel)	O/C -	Maurice McGrath
'E' " (Clonea)	O/C -	John Hassett
'F' " (Rathgormack)	O/C -	Michael Daly
'G' " (Windgap, Co. W.)	O/C -	Edmond Byrne
'H' " (Ballyneale)	O/C -	Thomas Carberry.

Later on in 1919 the Brigade C/C, Seumas Robinson, accompanied by Seán Treacy, the Brigade Vice O/C, visited the battalion and administered the oath to all ranks. D.J. O'Driscoll, who succeeded me as O/C of 'A' Company, had only been residing in Carrick-on-Suir for a short time. He had previous experience as a Volunteer officer in Charleville, Co. Cork. Seán Treacy knew quite a lot about him and was anxious that he should be appointed as Company O/C. This confidence of Seán Treacy's was not misplaced for O'Driscoll proved himself to be a very efficient officer.

Late in 1919 or very early in 1920 we destroyed two vacated R.I.C. barracks, one at Clonea and one at Slatequarries. Both were old buildings and we had not much difficulty in demolishing them. What I would like to point out, however, is that both of these barracks were demolished well in advance of the general order for the destruction of all evacuated R.I.C. barracks at Easter 1920. The job was done solely on the initiative of the Battalion Staff.

Just before Easter 1920 I received from the Brigade H.Q. an instruction to raid all Income Tax

offices in my battalion area and to destroy all Income Tax papers and records found in these offices. I did not, however, receive the instruction about the destruction of evacuated R.I.C. barracks which, I believe, was issued at the same time. In accordance with the instruction, I, with four or five other Volunteers, raided the office of Mr. Drohan of Turkstown, who was the collector of Income Tax for this area, on Easter Saturday night of 1920. We took away all the papers and records and destroyed them by burning.

About a week later I attended a Brigade Council meeting at which Ernie O'Malley, a G.H.Q. officer and organiser, was present. O'Malley asked me if there were any vacated R.I.C. barracks in my area. I replied that there was one, at Carrickbeg, but that there was a family residing in it. He instructed me to have it destroyed within a week. Before destroying this barrack at Carrickbeg we had to remove the residents, an R.I.C. man's family, their furniture and goods to a safe distance. A County Council employee who was a Volunteer and who had experience in the use of explosives, then exploded a charge of gelignite which demolished one of the walls of the barracks. We then set the place on fire and left it to burn out.

Our greatest enemy around this time (early 1920) was lack of activity, due principally to lack of arms. Drilling and training becomes monotonous after a time, and the Volunteers were keen on activities of some order or another. With a view to keeping up the morale of the Volunteers, the Battalion Staff decided to hold up the mail train from Waterford at Ballydine and to seize

the mails. Frank Roche, one of 'A' Company officers, was then employed on the railway and his assistance in this undertaking was a great help. This hold-up took place about March 1920. There was no police or military guard on the train and we had little difficulty in seizing and taking away the mails when the train halted at Ballydine. An examination of the official letters revealed nothing of importance to us, so we returned the bags of mails at a later stage.

Still on the subject of mails, I might mention that from time to time rural postmen were held up and the letters taken for examination. This was done to ascertain who, if any, amongst the rural population were in correspondence with the R.I.C. A tribute to the loyal people of the Carrick-on-Suir area is the fact that only on one occasion did we capture a letter going to the R.I.C. It was from an old ex-British soldier, and, as we regarded him as harmless, we considered that a warning to him to stop writing to the R.I.C. was sufficient to meet the case.

On two occasions steel shutters for the windows of the R.I.C. barracks at Piltown arrived at the local railway station and lay there awaiting delivery. Frank Roche was able to tip us off about their arrival, so on both occasions we raided the railway station and seized the steel shutters. These we removed to Lethel where subsequently they were used as material in the construction of an 'arms' dump.

One of our greatest headaches was to get arms. With this object in view we organised a feis and a dance, from which we realised a sum of £150. This money we

sent to the Brigade Arms' Fund. In return we received from the brigade one rifle. It was one of a number which had been captured at Ballingarry R.I.C. barracks. I took this rifle to my own house and, without her knowledge, hid it under the mattress of my sister's bed. A few nights later my home was raided by police and military. They only searched my bedroom and, as they left her room untouched, the rifle luckily escaped capture.

Brigade Council meetings which I attended were occasionally held at Maher's farmhouse near Blackcastle. One fine Sunday during the summer of 1920 I attended one such meeting. It was held in a haybarn at the back of Maher's house. The meeting had been in progress for some time when a party of Lancers (British cavalry) were seen approaching on horseback a few fields away. Some of the scouts must have slipped up, for the first we at the meeting knew of the Lancers coming was when we actually saw them from the haybarn. Those present at the meeting immediately started to move away, either to get away as best they could or to seek suitable hiding places until the danger was past. I left the haybarn with Seán Treacy, who was then a much-wanted man. At a low wall in the haggard he opened fire with a long parabellum revolver at the Lancers, who immediately dismounted and sought cover. This action of Seán Treacy's enabled most of those present at the meeting to get away. Three officers, namely Seamus O'Neill, Cashel, Edmond McGrath, Cahir, and my namesake and Adjutant - John O'Keefe, Carrick-on-Suir - were captured.

In the autumn of 1920 general raids on shops and

private houses for arms were carried out in the battalion area. In Carrick-on-Suir about six revolvers and some shotguns were got. I took charge of the raids in the Rathgormack Company area, where I should say we got in all about 15 shotguns. These arms were retained in the battalion dump and were the first arms of any consequence which we possessed.

Two other incidents which occurred before my arrest and imprisonment come to mind. One of these concerns the seizure of a motor cycle, the property of an R.I.C. man who came on holidays to his native Faugheen, using the motor cycle to do so. As far as I know there was nothing particular against this R.I.C. man other than that he was a member of the enemy forces, so we were content to take his motor cycle. This machine was subsequently used by I.R.A. dispatch riders.

The other incident was that in which we destroyed a British Army motor car which had been left on the Waterford-Carrick-on-Suir road about two miles from Carrick-on-Suir. This car, in which a party of British officers were travelling, developed engine trouble and the party were unable to get it going again. They left the car unattended and walked into the town to seek assistance. Meanwhile I had received word of what had happened, and collecting two or three other Volunteers in the town we went out the Waterford road to the car and we soon had it burning fiercely. We returned to town by the banks of the river Suir and thus avoided the British party going back to the car.

On Saturday, 20th November, 1920, I received

word from "C" Company (Grangemockler area) that Seán Hogan and Seán Hayes were in that area and that they were planning^a/surprise attack by the Grangemockler Company on Glenpower R.I.C. barracks. I understood from the messenger that the attack was to take place next morning. My help was sought in the matter and I was also asked to commandeer a motor car and to bring what arms I could to Grangemockler.

I commandeered a motor car in Carrick-on-Suir, and after collecting whatever small arms were available I went to Grangemockler and met Seán Hogan and Seán Hayes at Cahill's of the Five Roads. I then found that the plans and arrangements for the attack on the barracks were not complete. There was no hope of it taking place next morning, so I returned to Carrick-on-Suir that night and returned the car to its owner.

At 8 a.m. next morning (November 21st, 1920) my home was raided by British military and police. I managed to get out the back before the raiding party entered by the front door, but as the whole block of buildings was surrounded by British Forces I was soon a prisoner. Tom Hickey, whom I have previously referred to, was arrested that same day.

We were detained in the local barracks for 10 or 12 days, when we were moved under armed escort to Kilworth Camp. From Kilworth I was transferred to Ballykinlar Internment Camp, where I was held prisoner until the general release which followed the signing of the Anglo-Irish Treaty in December, 1921. I took no part in the Civil War.

Signed:

John O'Keefe
(John O'Keefe)

Date:

May 19 1955

Witness:

Grace (J. Grace)
(Investigator).

May 19th 1955.