

N.S. 1, 303
ORIGINAL

BUREAU OF MILITARY HISTORY 1913-21
BUREAU STAIRÉ MILÉATA 1913-21
No. W.S. 1303

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BUREAU OF MILITARY HISTORY, 1913-21.

STATEMENT BY WITNESS.

DOCUMENT NO. W.S. 1,303

Witness

John Whelan,
Knockboy,
Ballinamult,
Co. Waterford.

Identity.

Captain Knockboy Company 1st Battalion
West Waterford Brigade.

Subject.

Knockboy Company I.R.A.
1st Battalion West Waterford Brigade,
1918-1921.

Conditions, if any, Stipulated by Witness.

Nil

File No. S.2622

Form B.S.M. 2

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STATEMENT BY JOHN WHELAN,

Knockboy, Ballinamult, Co. Waterford.

I was born in August, 1896. My father was a farm labourer and was a member of the Fenian Brotherhood when he was in America, in his young days. I attended the local national school and was a member of the local hurling and football clubs. When the National Volunteers were started in Knockboy, sometime in 1914, I joined up, but about the time of the split in the movement I was working in Tallaght, Co. Dublin, with a man named O'Toole who was in the Irish Volunteers. I was not a Volunteer when the Rising in Dublin broke out and I took no part in it. I did, however, go in to Dublin with O'Toole on the Wednesday of Easter Week, 1916.

I remember being in O'Connell St. where the firing was very heavy. We were there watching for about an hour. We then went to the South Dublin Union, where O'Toole thought that some of his company might be. At the gate of the Union we met a man whose name, I think, was Lawless. This man was, so far as I can remember, a clerk there and used to do business with O'Toole, whom he recognised. Lawless brought us into the building and showed us the bodies of six Volunteers lying on some sort of a table. The bodies were covered by a sheet. He turned down the sheet and we saw that the dead were all young lads. There were no Volunteers in that particular part of the building, so O'Toole decided we should go to the Marrowbone Lane district and try and contact a Volunteer unit there. We went towards Marrowbone Lane, where heavy firing was going on, but, so far as I can remember now, O'Toole did not contact any of those he wanted to meet, so we left the city that same evening and returned to Tallaght.

I returned home to Knockboy, Co. Waterford, at Xmas, 1917, and joined the local Volunteer company early in 1918. My first Company Captain was Jack Whelan from Beary's Cross, near Knockboy. There were about thirty in the company. I was 2nd Lieutenant. We had three or four shotguns. We drilled at night in the fields and had no trouble from the R.I.C. The nearest police station was at Ballinamult, three miles west of Knockboy. The garrison of this barracks consisted of a Sergeant and three constables. Later on this was increased by a party of about a dozen soldiers.

During the year 1918 our time was mostly taken up in drilling and general training. A number of recruits joined up at the time of conscription and most of them remained on when the threat of it passed. In late 1918 it would be safe to say we had upwards of sixty men in the company.

Although we had very few guns at this time, we started to make ammunition for the few we had. We melted lead and poured it into a mould specially made for turning out buckshot. When the liquid was cold, the contents of the mould was removed in the form of buckshot. This ammunition was not much good, as it was not properly formed and damaged the gun barrel when used.

The first item of interest occurred at Four-mile-water Catholic Church in August, 1918, when the R.I.C. were prevented by Volunteers from removing a Sinn Féin poster. As a result of this, the military and R.I.C. carried out raids and arrested four Volunteers.

During late 1918 I helped in making a collection in our area for the purpose of raising funds to purchase equipment. All Volunteer units helped the Sinn Féin

candidates in the general election of December, 1918.

During the early part of 1919 I took part in many night raids for arms on farmhouses in the district. It was learned that the R.I.C. were going to collect these guns, so it was necessary to get in before them. As a result of these raids, we increased our store of shotguns by about twenty.

Dumps to conceal the guns were constructed in the company area. One of these was made in the corner of a wood. A large hole was dug and the sides of it lined with timber. The whole lot was then covered with timber and camouflaged with briars and bushes. The guns were examined regularly to make sure they were keeping in good condition.

In addition to raids on private houses for arms, the local postman was frequently held up and letters examined. So far as I know, nothing much of value in the way of information that would be of use to our Intelligence section was obtained from these hold-ups.

It would be about the month of August, 1920, when ten men from the Knockboy Company, including myself, with Jack O'Mara in charge, lay in ambush at Crough, about four miles south of Knockboy on the main Clonmel-Dungarvan road. The object was to ambush a military patrol from Dungarvan which was expected to pass Crough that night. I was armed with a shotgun, as were the others in our party. I might say here that the majority of the guns were old and in poor condition. The cartridge casings were swollen from dampness and did not fit the guns properly in several instances.

We went across country and arrived at Crough about 8 p.m. We got into a position behind a ditch near the turn

of a road. We had a man with a horse and cart inside a gate to a field at the turn. When he got a signal he was to push the cart on to the road to form a blockade. We remained in position until 4 a.m. the following morning, but the military did not put in an appearance.

On several occasions we lay at night in ambush for the R.I.C. in Ballinamult barracks who used to patrol the district, but we never contacted them. There was, however, one occasion when a solitary R.I.C. man was held up by two of our lads from Knockboy. He carried no gun but his baton and whistle were taken from him. Following this hold-up, R.I.C. patrols ceased and the police remained in their barracks at Ballinamult unless they were escorted by military, a party of which took up quarters in Ballinamult barracks early in 1920.

In the middle of the year 1920, during daylight, Jack O'Mara, the Company Captain, and myself held up two R.I.C. men cycling. We were both armed with revolvers. I remember that my gun was of the bull-dog type, which I had got from a friend of mine. We had hoped to capture the R.I.C. men's guns but again we were unlucky. They carried no weapons. We took away their two bicycles.

In one raid for shotguns in our area we met with serious opposition from the farmer and some of his men. The raid was carried out by a neighbouring company from Beary's Cross. When the raiders knocked at the door of the farmhouse, they were attacked by men inside carrying pitchforks. The Beary's Cross men sent word to us at Knockboy as to what had happened, and about twenty of us, with Jack O'Mara in charge, went to see what all the trouble was. When we reached the farm and heard what had happened, it was decided

to break down the door (which would not be opened for us) and force our way in. We did so, and were met by men who lashed at us with pitchforks. In the excitement, one of our lads (I cannot say who he was) fired from a revolver, killing one of the men who were attacking us. In the commotion which followed the shooting we withdrew from the house. I do not know whether any shotguns were got as a result of the affair.

On March 26th, 1921, I joined the West Waterford Active Service Unit under the command of George Lennon of Dungarvan. The column was, at the time, in billets at Bleantas, at the foot of the Comeragh Mountains and about a mile and a half north east of Knockboy. There were about twenty-five men in the column so far as I can remember; practically all were armed with rifles, some had revolvers also.

I remember crossing the Comeragh Mountains with the column eastwards to the Kilrossanty district of Co. Waterford when we received word that an ambush was taking place at Ballylinch, about four miles to the east. We proceeded across country on foot as quickly as possible, but by the time we reached Ballylinch the engagement had finished and our lads had left the place.

Cappagh train ambush:

I was with the West Waterford Column on the day the attack was made on a train containing troops coming from Fermoy to Waterford. It was in June, 1921. There were about thirty West Waterford men there on that occasion, and, so far as I can remember, all carried rifles. I also was armed with a rifle. In addition, we had about a dozen men

from the East Waterford Column with us, under the command of Paddy Paul. At about 4 a.m. we moved into position at Cappagh level crossing, which is about five miles north of Dungarvan on the main Dungarvan-Clonmel road. I myself was in position about forty yards from the railway crossing. Before the time the train was expected to pass, I and two other men were ordered to go to a railway depot nearby to get sledges and bolt cutters to destroy the railway line at Cappagh opposite our position. We had only commenced our job when the train was heard approaching, so we quickly returned to the firing position allotted to us. We had just got down into a firing position when the train came along. As it entered Cappagh station, heavy rifle fire was opened by all of us. The train did not stop but crashed through the level crossing gates and went on in the direction of Waterford.

I cannot say whether any enemy casualties were inflicted or not. I do know that no firing came from the carriages as the train dashed through. George Lennon of Dungarvan, O/C of the West Waterford Column, was in charge of us that morning. The time the train was attacked was somewhere about 8 or 9 a.m. I cannot now remember definitely.

Following the affair at Cappagh, I lay in ambush with the column for periods at Halfway, Beary's Cross, Lackendarra, Kilmanahan and Ballinamult, all in the North West Waterford district, but on no occasion did we succeed in bringing off an attack on the enemy. They either didn't turn up at all or went by some other road out of sight of the ambush positions.

In the month of June, 1921, I remember helping to

collect a levy made by orders of the Brigade O/C, Pax Whelan of Dungarvan. This levy was meant to help in buying arms and equipment. The amount was fixed on the valuation of a person's holding. In the Knockboy district the amount collected was somewhere about £150. This was passed on to the Brigade Quartermaster.

When the Truce came in July, 1921, I had been appointed Captain of the Knockboy Company on the arrest of Captain Jack O'Mara in May, 1921. Following the news of the Truce, the column disbanded and I returned to my company at Knockboy.

When the Civil War broke out I took the Republican side and went with a party under Jack O'Mara to Nine-mile-house, Co. Tipperary, where we met with Dan Breen's men. We moved towards Tipperary Town and had a three hours' fight with the Free State troops. Further engagements with Free State troops followed in north west Waterford at Mullinahurka, Halfway and Ballymacarbery.

I was in my own district when the cease fire order was given in June, 1923. I was arrested about a month afterwards and kept a prisoner in Clonmel and Kilkenny gaols. I was later interned at Hare Park, The Curragh, where I got rheumatic fever. I was released from there at Christmas, 1923, and returned to my home at Knockboy.

Signed:

John Whelan
(John Whelan)

Date:

6-12-55

6.12.55

Witness: *T. O'Gorman* (T. O'Gorman)
(Investigator)

