

ORIGINAL

BUREAU OF MILITARY HISTORY 1913-21

BURO STAIRÉ MILEATA 1913-21

NO. W.S. 1305

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BUREAU OF MILITARY HISTORY, 1913-21.

STATEMENT BY WITNESS.

DOCUMENT NO. W.S. 1,305

Witness

Jack O'Mara;
Knockboy,
Ballinamult,
Co. Waterford.

Identity.

Lieutenant Irish Volunteers,
Knockboy, Co. Waterford;
Vice-Comd't. 1st Batt'n West Waterford Bde.

Subject.

Irish Volunteer activities,
Knockboy, Co. Waterford,
1913-1923.

Conditions, if any, Stipulated by Witness.

Nil

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1, 305

STATEMENT BY JACK O'MARA,

Knockboy, Ballinamult, Co. Waterford.

I was born in Knockboy, Ballinamult, on 2nd December, 1895. My parents were farmers and I was educated at the local national school - Tooraneena.

When the National Volunteers, known as "Redmond's Volunteers" (so called after John Redmond, the leader of the Irish Party in the British House of Commons at the time), were started in 1913 in our district, I joined up, in common with many young men here. I remember that our drill instructors were mostly ex-British Army men and our rifle drill was carried out with wooden rifles made locally.

In 1915 I went to the U.S.A., joined the American Army and served in an infantry brigade in France until the conclusion of the 1914-18 World War. I returned to America with my regiment in July, 1919, where I was demobbed.

In the month of January, 1920, I came back to my native place, Knockboy, Co. Waterford, and on the 1st April, 1920, I joined Beary's Cross Company of the Irish Volunteers. Beary's Cross is about a mile from Knockboy. I remember there were from thirty to thirty-five men in the company and we had as officers Jack Whelan, Company Captain, and James Butler, 1st Lt. We drilled in the fields at night, using home-made wooden rifles. So far as I can recollect, there were no guns in the company, with the exception of a revolver which I brought home with me from America.

Sometime about July, 1920, a company of Volunteers was formed in the Knockboy district. James Butler was

Company Captain and I was 1st Lt. There were approximately thirty-five men in the company, about half a dozen of whom had shotguns. Drilling took place in the fields at night on two evenings a week.

The nearest enemy post was at Ballinamult, about three miles west of Knockboy. The garrison, which occupied an old military barracks, consisted of eight or ten R.I.C. and about ten or twelve soldiers.

Early in the autumn of 1920, James Butler, the Company Captain, was arrested by the British and I was appointed to take his place. My first object was to procure as much arms as possible for the company, and with this purpose in mind I carried out many raids for shotguns by night on many farmhouses in the district. Six or eight men usually took part in these raids.

In one instance only was any opposition encountered. The Beary's Cross Company were raiding for arms one night when a hostile farmer met them and, with some of his men, attacked the raiding party with pitchforks. Word was sent to Knockboy and about twenty of us (myself included) went over to the scene of the trouble. We broke in the door and were set upon with the pitchforks by men inside. One of our lads fired a shot, killing one of the attackers. Following this incident there was no further opposition to our raids for shotguns in the locality, and, strangely enough, there was no R.I.C. activity as a result of the shooting. Arising out of these raids there were thirty to forty shotguns in the company. In securing these guns we succeeded in forestalling the R.I.C., who intended collecting the weapons from the various farmers for safe keeping.

The question of an ammunition supply was solved, at least to some extent, by home-made buckshot. This was made in a mould from lead (melted). Powder was obtained from the Battalion Quartermaster, and empty cartridges were then filled ready for use. The buckshot we made in this fashion was never very satisfactory, as, owing to its crude shape, it tended to damage the rifling of the shotgun barrel when fired. However, it helped out in the absence of better stuff. The guns were kept in a dump, which consisted of a dug-out in the side of a hill which was lined and covered with timber obtained from a crossroads dancing stage. This dump was on the edge of a wood and was covered with briars. It was almost impossible to discover by anybody not aware of the exact location. The guns were examined periodically, cleaned and oiled. The ammunition was, however, kept in the men's homes or outhouses, each man being responsible for the custody of his own quantity of ammunition.

During the later months of 1920, along with another member of the company I held up two R.I.C. men one evening who were going to the local post office. My intention was to take their guns, but, unfortunately, we found they were unarmed. Sometime later I held up the local Sergeant of the police who was cycling alone, but again he, also, carried no gun. I took this man's bicycle.

In the first week in January, 1921, I went to the West Waterford Flying Column. I had a parabellum revolver with me. When I met the column, George Plunkett, a G.H.Q. officer from Dublin, was there. George Lennon of Dungarvan was O/C. There were about twenty-five men in the column and, so far as I can remember, all of them had rifles.

Most of the latter had been captured in the successful ambush of military at Piltown, West Waterford, on November 1st 1920.

The column invariably travelled at night-time, on foot, across country, sending scouts ahead. These scouts, in addition to keeping a look-out for enemy forces, would contact the Company Captain in the area in which we were to billet. About half a dozen men from the local company would mount guard at night with a few of the men from the column. The column was paraded twice a day by the O/C and field exercises carried out. Each man carried about fifty rounds of rifle ammunition, most of which was also captured at Piltown.

Burgery ambush - Dungarvan:

My first major action with the column took place at the Burgery, about a mile north east of the town of Dungarvan, Co. Waterford, on the night of March 18th and the morning of March 19th, 1921. About 8 p.m. on the night of March 18th the column approached Tarr's Bridge, which is situated at the junction of the main Waterford-Burgery-Dungarvan road and the Waterford-Clonmel road. It was learned that a British party had left Dungarvan earlier in two cars going east, and it was decided to ambush them on their return to Dungarvan. In view of the fact that the enemy could return to Dungarvan via either the Burgery road or the Clonmel road, it was decided to split up the column. One section, which I was with, was placed in position on the Clonmel road about three hundred yards west of Tarr's Bridge. The other was a similar distance down on the Burgery road south of the Bridge.

At about 11.30 p.m. the noise of lorries was heard approaching Tarr's Bridge from the east. These lorries (actually there was one lorry and a private car) turned to go towards Dungarvan via the Burgery. Next we heard a volley of shots from the Burgery and knew that our lads in that position had made contact with the enemy. Our party, under Mick Mansfield, Vice O/C of the column, crossed the fields towards the Burgery. We got on to the roadway, where we met George Plunkett, Pat Keating, Commandant of the Kilrossanty Battalion, and Mick Shalloe of Dungarvan; the two latter were members of the column. The next thing happened was that Keating shouted "Halt, who goes there?" to people coming down the road. A man with an English accent replied: "It is I, Captain Thomas, looking for buddies". I well remember that. Along with Thomas was Sergeant Hickey of the local R.I.C. and two private soldiers of the English regiment known as "The Buffs" stationed at the time in Dungarvan. The British party then began running down the road towards Dungarvan, pursued by Plunkett, Shalloe, Keating and myself. We caught up with them about 200 yards further on and ordered them to surrender, which they did. They were then disarmed and brought to a nearby cottage. Captain Thomas and the two privates were ordered to remain in the cottage until daylight, whilst Sergeant Hickey was taken away by us.

When we were taking Hickey along the Burgery road we came across a private motor car in which there was a box of grenades. I remember Pat Keating throwing one of the grenades into this car, destroying it. Further along the road we found a British military lorry on fire, the occupants having fled in the darkness when attacked by our lads.

We retired northwards towards Kilgobnet, about a mile and a half from the scene of the ambush, but failed to contact the remainder of the column, which, we subsequently learned, had moved further to the west into the hilly country in the neighbourhood of Bohadoon. Our party, consisting of ten or twelve men, halted at Kilgobnet, where the officers held a council of war to decide the fate of Sergeant Hickey. A decision to execute him was arrived at. The Sergeant was told of this decision and was then taken to the house of the local Catholic Curate, where he, Hickey, received spiritual attention. He was then executed by a firing party. The time was now very early on the morning of March 19th, 1921.

When daylight came, George Plunkett said that there should be a lot of rifles lying around the ambush position of the previous night, as the Tommies had fled in disorder from the scene of the attack. Plunkett decided we should return to the Burgery and see if we could pick up some of these rifles. There were about ten of us present. It was agreed that the attempt should be made, so we proceeded across country towards the Burgery. I was now armed with the late Sergeant Hickey's rifle. I can recollect the names of the following only as being with me that morning: - George Plunkett, Jim Mansfield, Old Parish, Dungarvan, Commandant of the 3rd Battalion, Mick Shalloe, Pax Whelan, O/C West Waterford Brigade, Bill Lennon, Pat Keating, and John Fitzgerald, Captain of Kilrossanty Company. There were a few others there whose names I have forgotten.

As we approached to within a field of the Burgery road, about six men were picked out to cross the field on to the scene of the ambush. Pax Whelan, Bill Lennon and myself

were placed in position behind a ditch along by this field, over which our six (or seven) men were advancing in extended formation, with Plunkett in charge. It soon became obvious that the enemy had seen our men advancing, because when our boys were about midway in the field heavy rifle fire was opened on them by troops lining the ditch on the Burgery road. In the first volley John Fitzgerald was killed outright and Pat Keating badly wounded. Our lads returned the fire and Plunkett shot dead a soldier who showed himself at a pillar of a gate on the roadside. Firing continued for ten minutes or so, when our lads began to retreat as their position was most dangerous. They eventually got back to where we were stationed.

Plunkett then called for volunteers to bring back Pat Keating, but Jim Mansfield objected and said it was suicide to attempt to rescue Keating. We pulled out then, but Plunkett and another man, whose name I cannot recall, remained behind to see what could be done for Keating. They did succeed in getting him away from the place and into a house in the district, ^{to} where a doctor was brought. The poor fellow died of his wounds the same night.

The body of John Fitzgerald was taken away by the British to Dungarvan. It was subsequently handed over to his relatives for burial.

After the Burgery ambush our section of the column retired to Bohadoon and lined up with the main body. The whole party then retired to Bleantas at the eastern end of the Nire Valley in the Comeragh Mountains.

In April, 1921, I was ordered to return to the Touraneena Company as Company Captain for training purposes, and about

the end of that month was appointed Vice Commandant of the 1st Battalion, West Waterford Brigade. The Commandant was Paddy Curran, now in the U.S.A.

The battalion area embraced the districts Dungarvan, Cappoquin, Ballinamult, Knockboy, Kilbrien, Ballymacarbery and The Nire. There were upwards of six hundred men in the battalion. At a later date (October, 1921) the four last named districts were formed into a separate battalion, known as the 7th Battalion.

In late April the Touraneena Company lay in ambush in the locality to attack an R.I.C. escort with the body of an R.I.C. man who died in Ballinrobe, Co. Mayo, and which was being interred in Touraneena. The remains of the deceased policeman arrived but no escort accompanied it.

In mid May, 1921, a cycling column of British military were camped early one morning at Scart, near my home at Knockboy. I was not sleeping at home for some considerable time because of frequent raids on my place. However, on Ascension Thursday in that month I returned home in the morning-time to get a change of clothing. I thought the military weren't doing any raiding and that it would be safe for me to chance it. I did not know that there was also a raiding party of troops from Dungarvan out our way, and still less was I aware that these troops were hidden in a graveyard opposite my house. As I entered my home I was immediately made prisoner by the military, who emerged from the graveyard. Luckily for me, I had left my rifle and revolver behind before setting off for home that morning. The house was searched most carefully and a Volunteer membership card of mine discovered. I was taken in to Dungarvan barracks, where I was kept for two days, during

which time I was closely cross-examined as to my Volunteer activities. From Dungarvan I was taken to the military barracks in Waterford, where I was again closely cross-examined by some officers, including one by the name of Yeo. This fellow Yeo was notorious for his ill-treatment of republican prisoners and I have certainly good cause to remember how he treated me. This man hurled abuse at me for being, as he said, "concerned in the murder of a decent man, Sergeant Hickey of Dungarvan". This blackguard, Yeo, then proceeded to beat me savagely with a stick on the head, face, neck, back and arms. Following the beating, I was thrown into a cell, where I had to lie on the floor on my stomach, it being impossible for me to lie on my back because of the beating I had received.

When in gaol I was told that the military authorities were waiting for a soldier witness who was at the Burgery ambush in March, 1921, to identify me as being present when Sergeant Hickey was captured and brought away for execution. Before the witness turned up the Truce of July, 1921, was signed. I was kept in Ballybricken gaol until Xmas, 1921, when I was released.

On my release I returned home to Knockboy, and in the month of April, 1922, was ordered to report to a training camp at Aglish, Co. Waterford. From Aglish I was sent to Ardmore barracks, and from there to Ballinacourty Coastguard Station, Co. Waterford.

I was in the party of I.R.A. which took over Dungarvan barracks on behalf of the Provisional Government. After some time there I returned home again.

Civil War.

Early in August, 1922, I was recalled to Dungarvan, where I was put in charge of about twenty I.R.A. and ordered to take them up to Dan Breen at Nine-mile-house, Co. Tipperary. While in that area we had an engagement with Free State troops at Windgap, Co. Kilkenny.

At the end of August, 1922, I was instructed to return to my battalion in West Waterford (now the 7th Battalion) to form a Flying Column. I did so, and had about thirty men with me armed with rifles and a Lewis gun. We fought actions with Free State troops at the Halfway House, Ballymacarberry and Mullinahurka. There were four enemy casualties in those encounters. We suffered no losses.

In January, 1923, a further engagement with the Free State forces took place at Two-Mile-Bridge, south west of Dungarvan. In February, 1923, my column acted as guard at an Army Executive Council meeting held at Bleantas in the Nire Valley. Amongst those who attended that meeting were: de Valera, Liam Lynch, Tom Barry, Humphrey Murphy, Liam Deasy, Seán Hyde, Seán MacSwiney, Tom Crofts, George Power, Bill Quirke and Seumas Robinson. In April, 1923, I was appointed Vice Brigadier of the Waterford Brigade and was nominated to act as substitute for Pax Whelan (in gaol) on the Army Council.

On April 9th, 1923, I went to Glosa, two miles west of Ballymacarberry, with Bill Quirke and Seán Hayes and met Frank Aiken and Liam Lynch. We went on to Newcastle, and at about 4 a.m. on April 10th scouts informed us of advancing Free State troops. We started up the mountain at daybreak and saw the troops. When about 400 yards ahead of them

they opened fire on us. Firing ceased for a while, then one shot rang out. Liam Lynch, who was 50 yards to our rear, shouted he was hit. We went back and carried him for 20 yards or so, but he begged us to leave him down as he was suffering too much from a wound on his right side. We took his papers and gun from him and left him. He was subsequently taken by the Free Staters to Clonmel, where he died that same night.

The remainder of our party went on to Mount Melleray. The troops did not follow after finding Liam Lynch. I then brought Aiken, Hyde, McSwiney, Bill Quirke and Seán Hayes to my own battalion area.

Later in the month Bill Quirke and I were at Dyrick, five miles east of Mount Melleray. I entered a house owned by people named O'Keeffe, where, to my surprise, I found about six Free State soldiers. The Sergeant in charge of the Free Staters went for his rifle. I shot him and backed out of the house. We were followed by the soldiers but escaped through snow into the hills.

After staying in the curate's house in Touraneena for three days, I moved to Ros^{sg}reen, Co. Tipperary, where I attended an Army Executive held in a dug-out. On the proposition of Frank Aiken, it was agreed to issue a "cease fire and dump arms" order. The date was 20th April, 1923.

I returned home to Knockboy again in May, 1923, but was arrested and taken to Clonmel gaol, from where I escaped in July, 1923, through a tunnel made by the prisoners.

I then went to America, where I remained for ten years, and eventually returned to my home at Knockboy.

Signed


(Jack O'Mara)

Witness: 

Date: 6-12-55