

W.S. 1,323

BUREAU OF MILITARY HISTORY 1913-21
BURO STAIRÉ MILEATA 1913-21
NO. W.S. 1,323

ORIGINAL

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BUREAU OF MILITARY HISTORY, 1913-21.
STATEMENT BY WITNESS.

DOCUMENT NO. W.S. 1,323.....

Witness

Martin Needham,
Lorrha,
Nenagh,
Co. Tipperary.
Identity.

Vice-Comd't. 4th Battalion
1st(North Tipperary) Brigade.

Subject.

Lorrha Company Irish Volunteers,
North Tipperary, 1917-1921.

Conditions, if any, Stipulated by Witness.

N11

File No. S.2652.....

Form B.S.M. 2

ORIGINAL

BUREAU OF MILITARY HISTORY 1913-21
BUREAU STAVRE MILITARY 1913-21
NO. W.S. 1323

STATEMENT BY MARTIN NEEDHAM,
Lorrha, Nenagh, Co. Tipperary.

(Formerly Vice Commandant, 4th Battalion,
No. 1 or North Tipperary Brigade.)

I was born on 4th November, 1896, on the farm where I now reside. In my father's time, the holding was a very small one, but it has since been enlarged a good deal by a parcel of land which I got from the Land Commission following the division of a local estate.

I attended school at Lorrha until I was fifteen years of age and was then obliged to leave, in order to supplement the meagre income from our small farm by working for neighbouring farmers.

There was a company of Irish Volunteers in Lorrha in 1914, but this went out of existence after a short while, due probably to the split in the movement in the autumn of 1914 when the majority of the Volunteers followed the leadership of John Redmond. Definitely, there were no Volunteers in our district at the time of the Rising in 1916 and for more than a year afterwards.

My first association with the struggle for Irish independence occurred when Felix Cronin, Lorrha, formed a company there in July or August, 1917. There was only about a dozen members for the first three or four months. Cronin himself was elected

Company Captain. I was the 1st Lieutenant, and James Carroll, 2nd Lieutenant. For drill purposes, we used military training manuals, and occasionally the officers went to James Horan - an ex American soldier - to receive drill instruction from him.

With the development of the Irish conscription threat at the end of 1917, the strength of the Lorrha Company grew considerably and, by the end of February, 1918, there were up to one hundred and twenty men on the rolls. As soon as this threat passed over, these numbers gradually declined until we were left with only forty-five men. Only about half a dozen of these were over thirty years of age. All of those who remained steadfast from the middle of 1918 onwards stayed in the Company until the British left the area.

On orders from Headquarters in Dublin, every man in the Lorrha Company equipped himself with a pike for use in case the British tried to enforce conscription. The material used for making the pikeheads was obtained from the the springs of sidecars and traps. While some of these springs were found as discarded scrap thrown about farmyards, I'm afraid that, in a few cases, they were removed from serviceable vehicles without the owners' approval. The pike handles were made from ash trees which we got sawn in the Portumna Mills. The first lot of pikeheads were forged for us by Paddy Delahunty, Birr, and Jack Sullivan, Redwood, Lorrha, both farriers.

One night while a group of Volunteers were assembled in Sullivan's forge helping him at this

work, someone in the crowd, who happened to go outside, noticed a number of policemen about the place. He warned us of the presence of the police, and everyone made a quick get away. The police did not raid the forge; they had come out to search Sullivan's house for a British army deserter who was reported to be staying there. Apparently, on returning to barracks, the police reported that some form of illegal activity was taking place in the forge because immediately afterwards R.I.C. patrols kept itself and the roads leading to it under close observation.

Coinciding with the incident at Sullivan's forge, there occurred the arrival of a new smith in Lorrha, a man named William Bouchier from Puckane, Nenagh. On finding him to be of the right sort, he was enrolled in the Volunteers, and he finished the job of making the pikes. His forge was only a few yards from the police barracks and he did the work during the day-time, but always had a scout at the forge door to keep a look-out for R.I.C. men.

During the winter of 1917, I was sworn into the Irish Republican Brotherhood by Felix Cronin in the Sinn Féin hall, Lorrha. My brother, Michael, and Denis Brett were also enrolled that night. Subsequently, I can recall having been present at only one I.R.B. gathering which took place early in 1919 in Ryan's barn in Darragh. About twenty men attended, and they were addressed by Frank McGrath, centre for the Nenagh district, and Liam Hoolan, then, I think, O/C, North Tipperary Brigade. The speeches dealt with matters concerning the Sinn Féin organisation.

I formed the impression that the principal purpose in bringing us together was so that McGrath and Hoolan might have an opportunity of meeting us and seeing for themselves what the I.R.B. material in our district was like.

At the end of 1918, the Lorrha Company area was incorporated in the 2nd Offaly Brigade, becoming part of the Birr Battalion, 3rd or 4th Battalion. Our Company Captain, Felix Cronin, was appointed to the staff of the Battalion, and I replaced him. Other changes in the Company officers were: James Carroll became 1st Lieutenant, and Nicholas Forde, 2nd Lieutenant. The transfer of the Company to the Offaly Brigade did not make for any improvement. Felix Cronin soon became involved in disagreements with his colleagues on the Battalion Staff, especially Sean Casey, the Adjutant. Casey was a Clareman and a national teacher in Rathcablin, Birr, and, from what I was able to gather at the time, he developed a strong personal dislike to Cronin which he took to such extremes as having Cronin eventually suspended. I cannot remember now if any charges were preferred against Cronin, but the first I heard of the matter was when I attended a meeting of the Battalion council and was told there that Cronin had been suspended or reduced to the ranks.

This action took place about September or October, 1919, just a short while before the Irish Volunteers were called upon to take the oath of allegiance to Dáil Éireann. A representative from the Battalion Staff came to Lorrha for the purpose of administering that oath to our Company, but the

Company to a man refused to be sworn until Cronin was restored to his post as a Battalion officer. A compromise was effected, and the Company were sworn in on an assurance being given by the Offaly officer that the Lorrha area would be transferred back to the control of the 1st Tipperary Brigade.

Seán Treacy and Dan Breen, who were on the run after the Soloheadbeg attack on the R.I.C., had come into the Lorrha district while the disagreement between Felix Cronin and the Offaly officers was in progress. Cronin urged upon the two wanted men to use their influence with General Headquarters to re-unit Lorrha with North Tipperary. They were sympathetic with his point of view, and promised to support him. While Treacy and Breen were in the locality - about a week - they stayed at James Moylan's in Abbeyville. During their stay, Cronin also sought their co-operation in an attack on an R.I.C. patrol, but this was not forthcoming. After departing, Breen sent word to Cronin to proceed with the attack, saying that he had got sanction for it from either General Headquarters or Brigade Headquarters.

The R.I.C. patrol in question was one which the police in Lorrha carried out nightly along the Lorrha-Carrigahorig road. On the night of the attack (2nd September, 1919), it consisted of a sergeant and two constables, armed with one revolver and two carbines. The attacking party consisted of Felix Cronin (revolver), Jack and Michael Joyce (shotguns), James Carroll (shotgun), Tim Haugh (revolver), and William Bouchier and myself who carried no arms. A sketch of the ambush is given in Appendix "A" to the statement.

Each man had only two cartridges for the shotguns, while, as far as I can remember, there were six rounds in each of the two revolvers.

The patrol left the barracks around nine o'clock. It was then after nightfall and, when they had gone beyond the site selected for the attack, just half a mile from Lorrha, we entered the position. It was behind a stone wall and about a spot on which a bush, heavily covered with ivy, protruded above the wall. The top of the wall was fixed, so as to provide each man with a three-sided opening, uncovered on the top, through which the men aimed.

The police were returning, all walking abreast, at about half-past ten, when Cronin shouted, "Hands up". This order was accompanied by an immediate outbreak of fire which killed the sergeant (Brady) outright and wounded one of the constables (Foley). The third policeman, Constable McCormack, was uninjured, and he promptly returned the fire. His escape could be attributed to the fact that, just before the police arrived at the ambush position, the moon, which was fairly full, suddenly became obscured by a heavy cloud, causing absolute darkness at the time the firing broke out. As all the attackers had fired what ammunition they had, Constable McCormick then had a decided advantage. As well, he was a man well trained in the use of firearms, and he made this apparent by the accuracy of his shooting, sending bullets uncomfortably close to some of us. There was nothing left for us to do but retire which we did, in two groups. Cronin, Bouchier and myself went through the fields to our own

homes in Lorrha while the rest made their way to Carrigahorig. I went to bed shortly after going home.

During the night, extensive police reinforcements arrived in Lorrha, and widespread raiding and searching commenced which lasted for about a fortnight. All the Volunteers, including myself, were closely questioned regarding our movements on the night of the shooting. One Volunteer named Madden was arrested and charged with the murder of the sergeant. One of the police, Constable Foley, swore that he recognised Madden as one of the attackers. An ex soldier and an uncle of the 1st Lieutenant of the Lorrha company also gave evidence involving Madden. This, of course, was all perjured evidence, as Madden had nothing whatever to do with the attack on the police patrol. He was a talkative and boastful type, and on that account was not the class of man who could be trusted. However, he made history at the time. His trial, which dragged on for a good while, eventually ended quite dramatically in the Dublin assizes court. He was defended by Paddy Lynch, K.C., who tore the evidence of the prosecution to shreds and exposed the crown witnesses for what they were worth. The leading counsel for the prosecution, My Wylie, afterwards Judge Wylie, was so disgusted by what Mr. Lynch's cross-examination revealed that he withdrew from the case and, as he did so, handed his brief and instructions to Mr. Lynch, saying, "Make whatever use you like out of these papers". Madden was acquitted and discharged.

After the Lorrha attack on the police, the area, and also the Portumna district in Galway, was brought under military rule. The police garrison in Lorrha was trebled. Curfew was imposed, and people were forbidden to congregate in the prescribed area. The police kept up their enquiries into the shooting of their comrades. In the following February (1920), the 1st Lieutenant of the Company, James ^{Carroll}~~McCormaak~~, was taken into custody and accused of Sergeant Brady's death. He was detained in Limerick jail until the result of Madden's trial was announced, and he, too, was released. It appears that the crown was hoping to secure his conviction on the evidence of his uncle, the ex soldier who figured in the Madden case - the man who had slept in the same bed as Carroll for months up to, and after the shooting, and who was kept, out of charity, by his sister, Mrs. Carroll. That unfortunate creature never set foot in North Tipperary afterwards.

The parish priest in Lorrha condemned the attack on the police in the strongest language, from the pulpit and elsewhere. He denounced the men responsible as murderers, and called upon the parishioners to help the authorities in having them brought to justice. All the men concerned in the attack were attentive to their religious duties and, on account of the attitude of the clergy in the parish, abstained from going to confession for a while. The matter was worrying me a good deal, so I went to Father Porter, then a curate in Portumna, and told him about my trouble. He heard my confession and told me to tell the others to come to him and that he would give them absolution. I believe they all

did so, except James Carroll who went to one of the Cistercians in Roscrea.

The attack also got us into disrepute with our own higher officers in the Offaly Brigade. Shortly after it happened, I was summoned to a meeting of the council of the 4th Battalion and there severely reprimanded for my part in the attack by the Battalion O/C, Michael Kelly, and the Adjutant, Sean Casey. It was the last meeting of that council which I attended.

Early in the spring of 1920, the Lorrha area was transferred back to the control of the North Tipperary Brigade, becoming part of the 4th Battalion. The former captain of the Lorrha Company, Felix Cronin, was appointed Battalion O/C soon after this change, and the other officers were:

Vice O/C	- Bill Hackett.
Battalion Adjutant	- Martin Haugh.
Battalion Quartermaster	- Paddy Carroll.

The following companies comprised the battalion from that date up to the Truce in July, 1921:

"A" - Borrisokane	- Captain - Cannot remember.
"B" - Kilbarron	- " John Whelan.
"C" - Terryglass	- " William Guest.
"D" - Lorrha	- " Myself.
"E" - Eglish	- " Cannot remember.
"F" - Ballingarry	- " Timothy McKenna.

The Battalion O/C was no sooner into his new post than he did everything he could to induce the Brigade Staff to attack Lorrha R.I.C. barracks, which he believed could be captured. He was never able to

have the attack carried out, and it was only a few months afterwards that the barracks was vacated. On the night after the withdrawal of the police, I mobilised the Lorrha Company and demolished the building, with crowbars, picks and hammers. Scouts were posted along the roads outside Lorrha, and those on the Birr road reported the approach of military from the latter town. They had their journey for nothing, however, as the barracks was in ruins before they arrived.

The Borrisokane R.I.C. barracks, about ten miles from Lorrha, was attacked in June, 1920. Our Company helped in the blocking of roads that night between Lorrha and Borrisokane. We felled a number of trees with cross-cuts which made it impossible for reinforcements to get through to the assistance of the police.

In the same month - June - in response to a request from the Captain of the Abbey Company, outside Portumna, I took ten men from Lorrha, mostly armed with shotguns, to help the Abbey I.R.A. men to raid the houses of a number of Orangemen and loyalists around Portumna for arms. We collected four shotguns and one revolver during the night's operations. Later in that year, in answer to a further request, I took another party of eight or ten men into the same area to arrest another Orangeman named Hugh Nesbitt of Ballyshrul, Portumna, who was very friendly with the Portumna R.I.C. and supplied them with potatoes and turf in defiance of an I.R.A. order to everybody in the district to boycott the police. We arrested Nesbitt in his own home at 9 p.m. and released him about three o'clock next

morning. In addition to giving an undertaking that he would have nothing to do with the police in the future, he told us that he knew of two friends of his who had shotguns and actually collected the guns himself for us.

After the evacuation of the Lorrha R.I.C. station, very little was seen of the British forces in our Company area. Though we had only a most modest amount of equipment - about a dozen serviceable shotguns and two or three revolvers - we were anxious to use them on the enemy. I heard of a chance of attacking a police patrol of about ten men who travelled the road between Borrisokane and Cloughjordan, and arranged with Sean Glennon to get the co-operation of some of the companies in the battalion for the job. This attack was fixed to take place early in November, 1920, at Modereeny. In view of our experience after the Lorrha affair, I decided to notify Brigade Headquarters of our intention. Promptly, Sean Gaynor and Ned O'Leary, whose ranks in the Brigade Staff at the time I'm not now sure about, arrived in Modereeny. They inspected the position chosen by us, came to the conclusion that it was not a suitable one, and gave orders to call off the attack. In view of subsequent events, I could never understand this decision, as, in May, 1921, the Brigade Column carried out an ambush successfully in practically the same position. I was not in the latter engagement.

In the autumn of 1920, the Brigade council decided to form a flying column. After being in existence for about two months, it was disbanded, due to the fact that, instead of doing any fighting, it was considered that they were more interested in having a

good time throughout the countryside. All the arms carried by the column were, on its disbandment, dumped in the Toomevara area. The Company Captain there, Widger Meagher, a famous Tipperary hurler, acting on his own initiative, got hold of these arms, sufficient for about twenty men which he had picked out of his own Company, and came into the Lorrha area where he asked for the co-operation of the local Company to attack an enemy lorry at Rockview, halfway between Lorrha and Birr. I was only too willing to help him but, by some means, word reached the Brigade O/C of Meagher's plans and the former issued an order to Meagher to return to his own area and leave back the guns which he had taken out of the dump. This happened just before Christmas, 1920. It was afterwards explained to us that the Brigadier wanted to keep the Lorrha district quiet, on purpose, as he wanted to use it as a place in which a new flying column could be trained in safety and also as a resting place to which the column could retire after a period of active service.

In fact, the flying column was not re-formed until March, 1921, and, at the same time, a special course for officers, which lasted a fortnight, was held at Hough's, Ballymacegan, Lorrha. The latter course started on St. Patrick's Day.

The officers' course was attended by all the company captains in the North Tipperary Brigade, including myself, between thirty and thirty-five men. We slept in Hough's house, beds and bedding having been provided by the people in the district. Meals were obtained in the neighbouring houses. The

course covered all aspects of company drill, with and without arms, care of arms, visual training, aiming exercises, sniping, ambush exercises, night fighting, fire orders, scouting and protective methods. Lectures dealt with discipline, duties of each company officer, the organisation of companies and battalions, flying columns intelligence, preparation of reports and messages and the attacking of enemy posts. Training started each day at 10 a.m. sharp and continued until twelve-thirty mid-day. After dinner, it lasted from 2.30 to 6 p.m. Every night, a lecture, lasting an hour, was given. The course lasted a fortnight and was in charge of a man known to us as Captain McCormick from G.H.Q. in Dublin. He was assisted by Sean Gaynor and Sean McCurtain, Nenagh, both brigade officers. From 10 p.m. to 7.30 a.m., guard was mounted. In the daytime, guard duty was performed by members of the new flying column who happened to be in the locality at the same time for their initial period of training.

The re-formed flying column consisted of seventeen or eighteen men who came from all over the brigade area. Each man had a rifle and the officers were John Collison, O/C, and Sean Glennon, Vice O/C. I did not serve in this column, so I cannot say very much further about it except that, from time to time, the men who belonged to it returned at intervals to the Lorrha district to rest, or for further training. The local company made arrangements for the billeting of the column during such periods.

In April, 1921, the Vice O/C of our battalion was removed from his post, and I was appointed in his place. A month or so later, the O/C of the Battalion

(Cronin) was promoted to the Brigade Staff as Vice Brigadier. Cronin was replaced by Martin Haugh, and the latter's post - Battalion Adjutant - was then filled by Sean Gleeson. As Battalion Vice O/C, I had to make periodic visits of inspection to each of the companies.

During 1921, a levy of sixpence per acre was imposed on every farmer residing in the North Tipperary Brigade area, by orders from the Brigade council. The response to this levy around Lorrha was very good. I can recall only four defaulters, and they were all loyalists - Major Waller, Bellisle, Captain Stoney, Portlaw, Eric K. Kennedy, Kilcarron, and Mrs. French, Redwood. I raided and searched these houses, and warned the owners that this action was being taken because of their failure to pay the levy. In Waller's and Stoney's, we seized a number of British army uniforms and two cameras.

As regards informers and enemy spies, we had two cases in the Lorrha district. The informer I have already dealt with in my remarks about Madden's trial for the shooting of Sergeant Brady and the arrest of James Carroll. The spy appeared while the officers' course was being held in Ballymacegan in March, 1921. A band of tinkers pitched their tents adjacent to the village of Lorrha. In their company was a man so well dressed that the suspicions of the local people were aroused as to what his real errand in the area was. In a few days, orders from Brigade Headquarters required that the suspect be arrested as a spy. The acting company captain, James Carroll, with five men proceeded to carry out this order, but the

"bird had flown". Carroll and his men traced him as far as the town of Birr, and notified one of the I.R.A. officers there what had happened. Next morning, the suspect was picked up by some of the Offaly Volunteers and brought to the training camp in Ballymacegan where he was interrogated by the officers, Captain McCormack, Sean Gaynor and Sean McCurtin, and set at liberty. He made his way to the military barracks in Birr where he reported the incident. From what was learned afterwards, it appears he was unable to say in what district he was after coming from, or in what direction he had been. A few days later, he was travelling in a military lorry through Carrick, outside Birr, when he recognised Michael Joyce, one of the I.R.A. party who had apprehended him and brought him to the training camp. Joyce was interned and nothing more was heard of the suspect.

Towards the end of 1920 and at intervals between that date and the Truce, four times in all, the mail car taking letters from Birr to Portumna was held up by myself, James Carroll and a few other members of the Lorrha company. We removed all letters addressed to people in Portumna and examined the contents. Nothing of importance was ever found. The letters were always re-forwarded via the Lorrha post office and were marked, "Censored by the I.R.A." As a safety precaution, the telephone in the Lorrha post office was dismantled by us shortly after the R.I.C. were withdrawn from the village. A bike kept there for use by the postman was seized as a reprisal against the seizure of bikes from our supporters by the enemy troops.

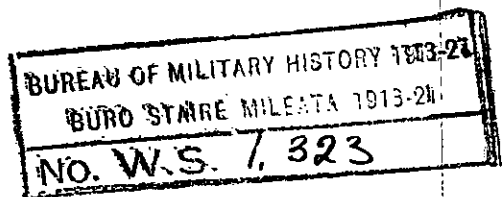
I think the last operation before the Truce which involved me in a position of hazard was when, on Brigade orders, I took five men from Lorrha on bikes into the town of Portumna to secure clothes, boots and a watch for the flying column. We reached Portumna about eight o'clock in the morning. It was garrisoned by a strong force of R.I.C. and Black and Tans who, even at that early hour, were moving about the town on patrol. Even though most of the residents showed no sympathy for the I.R.A. or Sinn Féin, particularly the shopkeepers, I must say that, when we announced the purpose of our call, we met with a generous response. In only two instances were we requested to give receipts for the goods, though we took back with us upwards of twenty pairs of boots, twenty over-coats and the watch.

Because of the withdrawal of the R.I.C., the Lorrha Sinn Féin parish court was able to function without interference for the greater part of 1920 up to the Truce. The members of the court were John Abbott, Lorrha, Chairman, James Moylan, Abbeyville, and Patrick Meara, Curragha; the clerk was Michael Needham. The courts, which were held once a month in the Lorrha Sinn Féin hall, usually at night, were availed of by all classes of people, especially the members of the ascendancy who

prosecuted poachers in large numbers. Though I had no active connection with the proceedings, I was usually present as a spectator. Except in one or two instances when I felt the fines for poaching were too severe, I considered that our amateur justices made a fine effort in administering the affairs of the court.

SIGNED: Martin Needham
(Martin Needham)

DATE: 14th December 1955
14th December, 1955.



WITNESS D. Griffin
(D. Griffin)

LORRHA-
CARRIGAHORIG
AMBUSH.

2. 9. 1919

To
LORRHA

R.I.C. PATROL

- M. NEEDHAM
- BOUCHIER
- CRONIN
- M. JOYCE
- CARROLL
- J. JOYCE
- HUGH

To
CARRIGAHORIG

1.323