

W.S. 1,362

ORIGINAL

BUREAU OF MILITARY HISTORY 1913-21

BURO STAIRÉ MILEATA 1913-21

No. W.S. 1,362

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BUREAU OF MILITARY HISTORY, 1913-21.

STATEMENT BY WITNESS.

DOCUMENT NO. W.S. 1,362

Witness

William Roche,
Skeheen,
Mitchelstown,
Co. Cork.

Identity.

O/C. Mitchelstown-Ballygiblin Sub-
Battalion, Cork II Brigade.

Subject.

I.R.A. activities,
Mitchelstown, Co. Cork, 1918-1921.

Conditions, if any, Stipulated by Witness.

Nil

File No. S.2687

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STATEMENT BY WILLIAM ROCHE

Skeheen, Mitchelstown, Co. Cork.

I was born at Skeheen, Mitchelstown, in April 1890. My parents were farmers. I was educated at Christian Brothers School, Mitchelstown, until I reached the age of 16.

Shortly after leaving school of 1906 I went to Australia where I went to work on a fruit farm. I was engaged on this work for about two years when I joined the Department of Lands in Queensland as an inspector. After a period of two years in this service I joined Queensland Mounted Police, in which force I served until 1916. Early in 1916 my brother, who carried on the farm here at home, was accidentally shot and, at the request of my parents, I returned home to take over the farm at Skeheen, Mitchelstown, where I still reside.

I joined Mitchelstown Company of Irish Volunteers early in 1918. The strength of the unit was about fifty and, as far as I can recollect, the officers were:- O/C. Dan O'Keeffe; 1st Lieut. Mick O'Sullivan; 2nd Lieut. Sean Keane.

There was an increase in the strength of the company later in the year when the enforcement of conscription was threatened by the British, but there was no change in the officers. During this period several raids for arms were carried out. Nearly all members of the company took part in these raids at one time or another. The arms seized in the raids were mainly shotguns. In addition to the normal training in close order foot drill, at this time, we were engaged in making buckshot and refilling cartridges with same. We were also engaged in watching the activities of R.I.C. and other enemy forces and reporting the details to our Battalion H.Q. We were, at this time, attached (I think) to

Castletownroche Battalion, Cork Brigade.

There was no exceptional activity during the latter portion of the year 1918.

Early in 1919, Cork Brigade was divided into three brigades. The original brigade embraced the whole of Cork County and was made up of some twenty battalions. Our battalion (Castletownroche) now became a unit of Cork II Brigade. The other battalions in this brigade which covered north Cork area were:- Fermoy, Mallow, Kanturk, Newmarket, Millstreet and Charleville. The officers of the new brigade were:- O/C. Liam Lynch (Fermoy); Vice O/C. Dan Hegarty, (Mallow); Adjutant Tom Barry (Glanworth); Q.M. George Power, (Fermoy).

Tom Barry was appointed adjutant, but retained this post only for a matter of weeks when he returned to his own area to take charge of Castletownroche Battalion. He was replaced as brigade adjutant by George Power who, in turn, was replaced as Q.M. by Jerh. Buckley (Mourneabbey).

The officers of Castletownroche Battalion now were, as far as I can recollect: O/C. Tom Barry; V.O/C. Ned ^{CREED} ~~and~~; Adjutant Dan Shinnick; Q.M. Sean Curtin.

The companies in Castletownroche Battalion were:- Glanworth, Castletownroche, Mitchelstown, Kildorrery, Doneraile, Shanballymore, Killavullen, Ballindangan.

There was no unusual activity of a military nature during 1919. Normal training was, however, carried on and all members were getting trained in musketry with the aid of .22 rifle. All Volunteers took part in the collection of Dáil Éireann Loan during the summer and autumn of 1919.

At Easter 1920, all members of Mitchelstown Military Barracks (evacuated) in accordance with H.Q. General Order.

On this occasion I was engaged in blocking the Fermoy-Mitchelstown road.

When Ballylanders R.I.C. Barracks was attacked by the men of East Limerick Brigade in April 1920, the members of our company (Mitchelstown) were engaged in blocking roads and cutting enemy lines of communication. We were on the direct line of approach of enemy reinforcements from Kilworth Camp. and Fermoy and so had a big job to ensure that all possible avenues of approach to East Limerick area were closed. I was a member of an armed guard for a strong party which was engaged in blocking the Mitchelstown-Ballylanders road.

When Kilmallock R.I.C. Barracks was attacked during May 1920, all members of Mitchelstown Company were engaged in a similar capacity.

During the summer of 1920 I took part with different members of the unit in several raids on the local mails, but, as far as I can recollect, no information of military value was obtained.

As far as I was concerned, I carried out the normal duties as a Volunteer in Mitchelstown Company up to early March 1921, when I was appointed O/C. The officers of the company now were:- O/C. William Roche (witness); 1st Lieut. Sean O'Neill; 2nd Lieut. Tom Roche.

Shortly after my appointment as O/C. of Mitchelstown Company, it was decided to subdivide the Castletownroche battalion into four sections as follows:-

- (a) Mitchelstown and Ballygiblin Companies - O/C. William Roche (witness).
- (b) Castletownroche, Killavullen and Ballyhooley Companies - O/C. Jack Lane.
- (c) Doneraile, Shanballymore Companies - O/C. Dick Smith.
- (d) Glanworth, Kildorrery, Ballinlough " - O/C. Tom Barry.

I was now O/C. of Mitchelstown and Ballygiblin area sub-battalion. Some of the rifles in the Castletownroche Battalion were distributed amongst the sub-battalions, but most of them were kept in (d) area which was in the centre of the battalion where they would be readily available if urgently required. The rifles distributed to the sub-battalions were used to train the members of the local companies.

At this time all companies were regularly engaged in the destruction of enemy lines of communication, blocking roads, destroying bridges, cutting telegraph wires and generally endeavouring to hinder the movements of enemy forces.

Regular meetings of the Battalion Council were now held at different venues in the area. As O/C. of Mitchelstown-Ballygiblin sub-battalion, my attendance at these meetings was necessary. At a meeting held about mid-April, arrangements were made to demolish Ballygiblin bridge before the end of the month. In this connection I sent a dispatch to Mick O'Sullivan (a section leader in Mitchelstown company) to mobilise his section. About 80 men were mobilised for the job, but Mick O'Sullivan and Paddy Clifford of Mitchelstown Company were arrested on their way to the assembly point by a party of military. Both men were armed and, in addition, my dispatch to O'Sullivan regarding the mobilisation was found on him. This indicated to the enemy that Ballygiblin Bridge was to be demolished and they were now aware that our forces (I.R.A.) were being mobilised for this job. As large enemy forces were available at Kilworth Camp and Fermoy, the enemy took immediate steps to surround the area in which we were due to assemble (Ballygiblin Bridge). Large forces began to converge on Ballygiblin area within about an hour of the time at which O'Sullivan and Clifford were captured and it was due

to the efficiency of our scouting arrangements that we managed to get through the enemy cordon.

The 1st Southern Division of the I.R.A. was formed about this time and Liam Lynch (O/C. Cork II Brigade) became Divisional O/C. He was replaced as O/C. by Sean Moylan (O/C. Newmarket Battalion). The officers of Cork II Brigade now were:- O/C. Sean Moylan; Vice O/C. George Power; Adjutant Dan Shinnick; Q.M. Paddy O'Brien.

Within a short time - about mid-May 1921, I think, Sean Moylan was arrested, and this led to a further change in brigade officers who now were:- O/C. George Power; Vice O/C. Paddy O'Brien; Adjutant Dan Shinnick; Q.M. Ned Murphy.

During the first week in May 1921, Mick O'Sullivan and Paddy Clifford, who had been taken prisoners on the night fixed for the destruction of Ballygiblin Bridge at the end of April, were tried by courtmartial on a charge of being found in possession of arms. They were sentenced to death. They were defended at their trial by Mr. J.G. Skinner, solicitor, Mitchelstown, who decided to apply to the Courts for a conditional order of habeas corpus. This order was refused, but leave to appeal was granted and it was decided to appeal to the House of Lords. In this connection, Mr. Skinner briefed Michael Comyn, K.C., who engaged Sir John Simon - the leading light at the English Bar. The fee was £300 and a retainer of £300 a day. The estimated cost of the proceedings was £2000. Arrangements were made to collect this money in the battalion area and, in one week, I collected £950 in the parish and £1100 was subscribed throughout the area. The actual cost of the defence was £1970. The case was argued in the House of Lords prior to

the Truce. The death sentences were suspended. The decision in this case covered the cases of 17 other members of the I.R.A. who were under sentence of death at the time. The appeal was successful and the lives of 19 men were saved.

I was present at a Battalion Council meeting which was held in Droumadeer about mid-June 1921, when a captured British intelligence report was read. The report indicated that the area north of the river Blackwater was now 'quiet' and that the British forces should now concentrate on mopping up the area south of the river. Arrangements were made at this meeting to liven up conditions in our area. Orders were issued to harass the enemy in every possible way, especially by sniping posts and convoys when conditions were suitable for such operations. Sniping parties were regularly on active service all over the area, but, owing to the strength of the enemy convoys encountered, were unable to take any effective action.

The weather was exceptionally dry about this time and, as a result, the water supply to the military barracks, which was at the highest point in the town of Mitchelstown, failed on occasions. The military authorities, accordingly, arranged to draw a supply each day from the fountain on the Clonmel road. The supply was taken to the barracks in a water cart drawn by two mules. It was usually escorted by a party consisting of a sergeant, a corporal and about a dozen soldiers. This party always travelled in extended order and, while the water cart was being filled, covered off an area on either side of the fountain. Arrangements were made to snipe this party from a position about 100 yards north of the position on the Clonmel road on the morning of 27th June 1921. When the ambush party of eight riflemen were moving into position before daybreak, they were informed that a small column of British

forces had gone out the Caher Hill-Limerick road a short time previously and were somewhere in the rear of the position selected by our party. In the circumstances, it was decided not to attempt to snipe the 'water cart' party and the section withdrew towards Ballygiblin. Amongst those in the party were:- William Gallahue, Mossy Walsh, Patrick J. Luddy, Henry Feeney, Jack O'Neill, Jim Luther and Wm. Roche (witness).

When the party reached Ballygibbin, they took up ambush positions behind the roadside fence on the Mitchelstown-Clonmel road. Here we were joined a short time later by Paddy Luddy (Battalion Vice O/C.) After some time it was decided to move to a more suitable position, but just as we were about to move, a large enemy convoy made its appearance. This convoy consisted of an open touring car, four lorries and a double-turreted armoured car. As the strength of this convoy would not give our party a fighting chance, it was decided to let it pass through without a shot. Although we remained in position throughout the day there was no further enemy activity.

We took up positions in this area on three or four occasions in the following ten days but there was no appearance by the enemy. Eventually, it was decided to attack the "water cart" party at the Fountain and to mobilise for this job all available men in the Mitchelstown and Ballygiblin companies. The date was fixed for 10th July 1921, and it was arranged to obtain six rifles from the central dump in Kildorrery Company area. We also arranged to collect six revolvers. We then arranged for the mobilisation of about 20 men at daybreak on 10th July 1921. These men were allocated as follows:-

- (a) Three riflemen to cover R.I.C. and Black and Tan Barracks - 'Pa' Quinlan, Jack O'Brien, Maurice O'Donoghue. These men were behind a sod fence about 200 yards from the barracks.

- (b) Three riflemen to cover the military barracks - Patk. J. Luddy, Tom Roche, Jerome Hurley. These men were on high ground approximately 450 yards from the enemy post. They were accompanied by a scout or runner (Brian Roche).
- (c) The main attacking party of six riflemen - Wm. Gallahue, Jim Luther, Tim Fay, Sean O'Neill, Mark Ahearne and Leo Skinner, and five shotgun men - Mick Dunne, Matt Slattery, Jack Farrell, Bill O'Donoghue, ... McCarthy. This party were in position in the creamery yard opposite the Fountain. I was in charge of this section and was armed with a revolver.
- (d) Two revolver men - Dick Perrott and Dan Coleman.- at the junction of Lower Cork St. and Clonmel road. These men were to deal with a sentry who was usually left in position at this corner.

There was no activity until close on 9 a.m. when the approach of the enemy party was signalled by our scouts. They arrived at the Fountain about 9 a.m. and took up the usual positions. They were extended over a distance of about 80 yards between the junction of Lr. Cork St. with the Clonmel road and some yards east of the Fountain. Just as the enemy party took up their positions, the main attacking party at (c) above dashed through the gate of the creamery yard, where they had been under cover, shouting 'Hands up' and, simultaneously, opened fire, and disarmed two or three of the enemy. Some of the enemy party dashed away - taking their arms with them - but, meanwhile, the enemy sentry at the junction of Lower Cork St. and Clonmel road opened fire and wounded two of our men (Wm. Gallahue and Leo Skinner). The two men at (d) above, who had been allocated to deal with this sentry, had obviously mistimed their action, so leaving this man at liberty to fire on our men (I.R.A.) from a sheltered position. The sergeant in charge of the enemy party tried to rally his men, but failed. Three of them were wounded and the others dashed away, taking their arms with them.

As the time of attendance of the 'water party' at the

Fountain was not fixed for any particular hour, no definite plans to cut enemy lines of communication could be embarked upon. As a result, the enemy forces at the military barracks and R.I.C. post were able to communicate with Kilworth military camp - about three miles distant - during the course of the engagement. The danger of the early arrival of enemy reinforcements compelled our party to withdraw without delay to Ballygiblin area, taking our wounded comrades with us. The wounded men received medical attention at 'Pa' Quinlan's home in Ballygiblin where they remained on the night of 10th July 1921. Next day, after the declaration of the Truce, William Gallahue, who was the more seriously wounded, was removed to Mercy Hospital, Cork.

The covering parties at the R.I.C. and military barracks continued to snipe these enemy posts for approximately half an hour after the cessation of the main engagement of The Fountain. They then withdrew to Ballygiblin area where they joined the members of the main body.

This was the last engagement in the area prior to the Truce on 11th July 1921, at 12 o'clock (noon), but I would like to point out that most of the members of the Mitchelstown Company were on active service with the battalion flying column under the Brigade Vice O/C. (William O'Regan) at one time or another during the period October 1920 to July 1921.

Just prior to the Truce, Cork II Brigade was reorganised. The five battalions (Mallow, Kanturk, Newmarket, Charleville, Millstreet) at the western end of the brigade area were formed into a new brigade - Cork IV. The battalions at the eastern end (Fermoy, Castletownroche) together with Lismore Battalion of West Waterford Brigade formed the new Cork II Brigade.

I should state, at this stage, that Castletownroche Battalion was divided into two sections - Glanworth and Castletownroche. The officers of the new brigade were:-

Cork II Brigade - O/C. George Power
 V/O.C. William O'Regan
 Adjt. Dan Shinnick
 Q.M. (Cannot recollect)
 O/C. Police. William Roche (witness).

Cork IV Brigade. - O/C. Paddy O'Brien
 V.O.C. Ned Murphy
 Adjt. Eugene McCarthy
 Q.M. Mick O'Connell

I think that this reorganisation, although agreed upon prior to the Truce, did not actually come into operation until some days after the Truce.

My rank at the Truce - O/C. Mitchelstown Coy.,
 Castletownroche Battalion,
 Cork II Brigade.

I was also O/C. Mitchelstown-Ballygiblin sub-Battalion,
 (see page 3).

Strength of the company was about one hundred.

Signed: William Roche
 (William Roche)

Date: 6th March 1956
 6th March, 1956.

Witness:

P. O'Donnell
 (P. O'Donnell)

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