

N. S. 1,368

ORIGINAL

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

DOCUMENT NO. W.S. 1,368

Witness

William Hanly,
Reiska,
Kilcommon,
Co. Tipperary.

Identity.

Adjutant, Fifth Battalion,
No. 1 (North) Tipperary Bgde.

Subject.

Fifth Battalion, No. 1 (North) Tipperary
Brigade, 1917-1921.

Conditions, if any, Stipulated by Witness.

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STATEMENT BY WILLIAM HANLY,

Reiska, Kilcommon, County Tipperary,

formerly Adjutant 5th Battalion, No. 1 (North) Tipperary Bde.

I was born on 23rd January, 1891, on the holding where I now reside and which has been in the possession of the Hanly family for generations. A great, great grandfather of mine was Hugh McDonnell, leader of the United Irishmen in our part of Tipperary and, according to local tradition, was the "First Scout of the Mountain" in that movement. I have heard that description given to him in my youthful days by the old people, but I was never able to ascertain what rank or post it signified.

My connection with the Irish Volunteer movement commenced about August, 1917, when Joseph McDonagh, whose brother, Thomas, was executed as one of the leaders of the Rising in 1916, addressed a Sinn Féin meeting on a Sunday evening at Reiska creamery and after this meeting started the Kilcommon Sinn Féin Club. About twenty men joined the club that evening, and a chairman, William Ryan, and secretary, Pat Doherty, were elected. Because of the seditious nature of the speech delivered by Mr. McDonagh at that meeting, he was later arrested and sentenced to a term of three months' imprisonment.

A fortnight after the formation of the Sinn Féin Club, Jim Ryan, Nenagh, enrolled myself and about twenty others in the Irish Volunteers and then conducted an election of officers. The captain selected was Pat Doherty, 1st Lt., myself, and 2nd Lt., James Caples. The unit became known as the Kilcommon Company. At the beginning we were drilled by

Paddy Walsh, an Irish teacher, who had been in the Volunteers in Dublin. Though in other parts of the country men were being arrested for such drilling, which took place publicly, none of the Kilcommon Company was arrested for these activities. For a number of months after the start of the company we met for drill each Sunday evening at two o'clock at different places.

The policeman responsible for the arrest of Joseph McDonagh was an R.I.C. sergeant in Kilcommon named Micky Murphy, and there is no doubt about the fact that he perjured himself when giving evidence at the trial. He swore that McDonagh in his speech exhorted the people to "use rifles if police use batons", whereas what McDonagh actually said was: "If the police use batons, use batons against them, and if the police use rifles, use rifles against them". Sergeant Murphy's evidence in this case made him very unpopular in the district. In fact, an attempt was made to shoot him on the occasion of a big dance at Kilcommon Cross in October or November, 1917. I was one of a group of Volunteers who discussed this matter. It was agreed that three men from the Upperchurch Company, Paddy Kinnane, Paddy Larkin and Mick Ryan, would carry out the shooting. Fortunately for the sergeant, he did not leave the barracks that night to come for his customary few drinks to a local publichouse, and he was transferred from the area immediately afterwards.

When the country was threatened with conscription in the winter of 1917 and the spring of 1918 the membership of the Reiska Company increased to about 200. Every man who had not a shotgun at his disposal was requested to equip himself with a pike. The pikeheads were made in the forges by John Hughes, Reiska, and Burkes of Kilcommon, from any

suitable piece of steel which could be procured. For shafts, plantations of young ash trees, owned by big landowners in the locality, were raided, and the trees were shaped into shafts by the Volunteers themselves. No use was ever made of these pikes afterwards, and as soon as the conscription threat faded out so did the majority of the men who had joined our company because of this threat. By May, 1918, the company strength fell to about thirty men, who all remained in the ranks until the truce in July, 1921.

To the best of my recollection, it was in May, 1918, that Liam Hoolan, Nenagh, presided at a meeting of Volunteer officers in the old schoolhouse in Templederry when the 5th Battalion, No. 1 Tipperary Brigade, was formed. The following officers were elected:

- Commandant - Michael Hogan
- Vice: " - Pat Doherty
- Adjutant - Myself
- Quartermaster- Paddy Kennedy.

The battalion consisted of the following companies:

<u>Company</u>	<u>Captain</u>
"A" - Templederry	- Paddy Cash
"B" - Kilcommon	- Myself
"C" - Foilnamon	- John Kennedy
"D" - Curreeny	- Jim Murphy
"E" - Killeeny	- Ned Ryan.

I remained adjutant of the battalion until the truce, and I continued in the post of captain of the Kilcommon Company until early in 1919 when James Caples took over the captaincy and later, in 1920, he was replaced by his brother, John. On the latter being appointed battalion commandant in April, 1921, Ned Conlon became captain of the Kilcommon Company. In the other companies, too, the post of captain was filled by different men as the struggle went on, but I can't remember the dates on which these changes took place.

In Templederry, Paddy Cash was replaced by Jack Hogan on the former's translation to the position of Vice Commandant of the battalion. In Foilnamon, William and Michael Ryan in turn succeeded John Kennedy, and in Curreeny, Paddy Hill and then Paddy O'Brien came after Jim Murphy. Only in the Killeeny Company was there no change.

The first revolver that came into my possession as an Irish Volunteer was a short .45 Webley revolver which I got in 1918 from my brother, Tom, who was then working as a chemist in Clonmel. I got 25 rounds of ammunition with it, and it was this gun which was later used by Jim Murphy, Curreeny, in the shooting of District Inspector Hunt in Thurles. Later on we got other revolvers from brigade headquarters in Nenagh, three or four altogether. One of these was a .45 Colt automatic, for which 25 rounds were supplied. I carried that particular weapon in the troubled times of 1920 and 1921.

In Reiska and Kilcommon there were a good number of farmers who held shotguns and, as it became known that the police had received instructions to collect these shotguns from the owners, the local Volunteers moved in advance of them and took possession of the shotguns. Nearly all the gun holders were in sympathy with the Volunteers and it was only a matter of asking for the guns, although, to bluff the authorities, raids for arms were feigned. Altogether the Kilcommon Company got control of about twenty-five shotguns in these raids. The guns were entrusted to the care of reliable Volunteers, often the sons of the owners. A number of dumps were constructed in different parts of the company area for the storing of arms and ammunition. They were made of lengths of steel pipes, 6 feet long by one foot in diameter, which were taken out of the creamery in Reiska.

By inserting them in fences, each end being filled by stones and bushes, they proved to be excellent storing places for arms, and in no case did the enemy ever discover one.

Following the shooting of members of the R.I.C. in Soloheadbeg, Seán Treacy, Dan Breen, Seán Hogan and Seumas Robinson, who participated in that engagement and were eagerly sought after by the British authorities, were brought into the 4th Battalion area by myself and the Vice Commandant, Pat Doherty. We met these men in Upperchurch and drove them in a horse and car to Murphy's in Curreeny. Each of the four of them had two revolvers and they also carried a number of hand grenades. As the party were leaving Upperchurch we were joined by Maurice Crowe, Adjutant of the 3rd or South Tipperary Brigade, who had a bike, on which he cycled part of the way with us to Curreeny. He told Treacy that he had come to notify him that G.H.Q. in Dublin had sent down orders that Treacy and his three companions were to leave the country at once, and that in order to put these orders into effect arrangements had been made whereby they would be picked up by a boat in the Shannon.

This news was received with ill-grace by our passengers, and though they disagreed with headquarters' decision they nevertheless made up their minds to obey it. Next morning they left Curreeny for Newport on their way to Limerick, again travelling under a Volunteer escort. I did not accompany them. That night Maurice Crowe called at my home and told me he wanted to contact Treacy most urgently as further word had now come from G.H.Q. countermanding the previous order and requesting Treacy and the three others to remain in Ireland. I took Crowe as far as Glencrow, Newport, and there put him in touch

with Volunteers who put him on the track of the men he wanted to overtake. I heard afterwards that he barely reached them in time to prevent their departure by boat.

Throughout 1919 the Irish Volunteers in our battalion continued to drill and train and they were not involved in any clashes with the enemy forces. Towards the end of that year each man took the oath of allegiance to Dáil Éireann and from thence onwards became known as an I.R.A. man. In the beginning of 1920 two or three rifles were given to the battalion by brigade headquarters for the purpose of instructing the rank and file in the use of the rifle. These lectures were given by Paddy Walsh and some of the battalion officers, who, during the conscription crisis, had been given an idea of the rifle by Jim Gorman, Hollyford, an ex-Australian soldier.

In February, 1920, a section of the Kilcommon Company were being lectured on the rifle in the fields near Cunneen's house in Upper Milestone when a patrol of three R.I.C. came along the road. The battalion quartermaster, Tom Carey, who was present, could not resist the opportunity to have a shot at the "peelers" and from the cover of a fence fired three shots at them. The police quickly took cover but fired only one shot in reply. These were the first shots exchanged between the I.R.A. and enemy forces in the Kilcommon district.

The parish of Kilcommon was adjoined by three other brigade areas - No. 2 (Mid) Tipperary; No. 3 (South) Tipperary and East Limerick. There was a great deal of association between the I.R.A. men in these units which was not in accordance with G.H.Q. orders at the time. For instance, in the attack on Hollyford R.I.C. barracks

on 16th May, 1920; Hollyford was in the No. 2 Tipperary Brigade area and, at the invitation of the officers in the Hollyford Company, Pat Doherty, Vice Commandant, Tom Carey, Battalion Quartermaster, and myself left our battalion without the approval of our own Brigade Commandant to take part in the attack. Doherty had a rifle and Carey and I had revolvers. We met the rest of the attacking party at Shanahan's, half a mile from Hollyford, at about ten o'clock at night. Ernie O'Malley, G.H.Q. staff, Seán Treacy and Seumas Robinson from the South Tipperary Brigade were in charge, and there were also men present from the Mid Tipperary Brigade.

Carey and I were put into a section of about twelve men whose job it was to place two ladders at the gable corner of the barracks nearest to the Foilmacduff or Shanahan's road. Great stress was placed in the instructions which were given to us regarding the importance of putting these ladders into position as silently as possible. The least move might alert the police, who had loopholes cut in the gable from which grenades could be dropped that would blow us all to pieces.

Between 11 and 12 o'clock that night our section moved off from Shanahan's with the two ladders, the smaller men being in front and the taller men behind to facilitate the raising of the ladders against the barrack walls. In front of the barracks a number of roads met, I think five, all told, including the laneway up to Shanahan's house. There was no wall between the barracks and the crossroads and this facilitated our approach to the building. Under O'Malley's direction the ladders were quickly put into position, one in front, about two feet from the gable corner,

and the other against the gable, also about two feet from the same corner. I should have said that all the men in this section had left their boots at Shanahan's and were now in their stockinged feet. Most, if not all, of them carried revolvers.

Like monkeys, O'Malley and Robinson scaled the ladders, each man having on his back a knapsack spraying machine full of petrol. On getting to the roof, these two men broke a hole in the slates with hammers and then pumped the petrol through the hole. In a short period the flames were to be seen rising from the barracks, but this did not seem to have any great effect on the police garrison.

After having placed the ladders in position and seeing O'Malley and Robinson safely on the roof, myself and the men who carried the ladders went back to the Foilmacduff road to await developments. There were also two sections armed with rifles, one behind a low wall near the creamery on the far side of the road opposite the front of the barracks, and the section in the fields at the rere of the barracks behind a fence roughly a hundred yards from that building. From memory I would estimate the strength of each section at seven or eight men. As soon as O'Malley and Robinson had got on the roof these riflemen opened fire on the front and rere of the barracks, and kept up this fire until the order to retreat was given about six o'clock next morning. The police spared no ammunition either and from the outset to the finish replied vigorously with rifle fire. For the want of having nothing else to do, I went to join the riflemen at the rere of the barracks and remained with them until we retired. Seán Treacy,

who appeared to have charge of both sections of the riflemen, kept moving from one to the other. Of course, all hopes of taking the building were based on burning it and thus force the garrison to come out and surrender.

By five o'clock in the morning it looked as if the attack were going to succeed. Practically all the barracks was on flames and by then there was no firing coming from the police at the rear, and at the front only from a stout stone porch. It was this porch which saved the situation for the enemy. It did not take fire, and although after taking refuge in it the police had a most uncomfortable time from the heat and smoke coming from the main building, they refused to yield. At six o'clock, with the supply of rifle ammunition on our side running low and the possibility of reinforcements coming at any time, despite the fact that the roads leading to Hollyford were all well barricaded by the Volunteers in the surrounding districts, the order to retire was given. Doherty, Carey and myself came back to our own area. The R.I.C. were withdrawn from Hollyford soon afterwards.

In Kilcommon Cross where the R.I.C. were stationed, the barracks was adjoined by a publichouse and grocery owned by a staunch supporter of the Sinn Féin movement named Roger Ryan. With the withdrawal of the R.I.C. from such places as Hollyford and the advent of the Black and Tans, the authorities decided to reinforce their stronghold in Kilcommon and, for this purpose, commandeered Ryan's business premises in the summer or autumn of 1920. The strength of the garrison was then brought up to thirty-three, comprising three sergeants and thirty constables. Having regard to the meagre equipment of the local I.R.A. units and the

isolated position of the enemy stronghold, the prospect of capturing it was out of the question. Our tactics then were to harass the enemy in every way we could and, if a favourable opportunity arose, to ambush them on patrol.

The police in Kilcommon had no motor transport of their own and whenever they ventured out on patrol it was either on bikes or on foot. Though the roads in the area were all barricaded or trenched by us in the latter part of 1920, this type of activity did not interfere very much with the movements of men who did not use motor transport. The village of Kilcommon is just one mile from Kilcommon Cross and it was in the village that the post office was located.

In order to counteract the raiding of the mails between the post office and the police barracks, the R.I.C. began to collect their mail at the post office in the month of November, 1920, and for this purpose sent a patrol each day to the post office. It was noticed that the patrol varied its route very frequently. In accordance with instructions, a report of the movements of this patrol was sent by our battalion intelligence officer to brigade headquarters. On the morning of 16th December, 1920, the brigade active service unit, consisting of about thirteen riflemen and four or five shotgun men under Ned O'Leary, Nenagh, and assisted by five or six of the Kilcommon Company, equipped with revolvers and shotguns, took up a position near Pat Ryan's house, The Grove, a quarter mile from Kilcommon village and waited for the police patrol coming for their mails. The I.R.A. force was split in two, the main party, comprised 16 men under O'Leary himself, was placed inside the fence at a bend on the road between Ryan's house and the village. A section of six men under Paddy Ryan

(Lacken) occupied a position in the fields approximately halfway between Ryan's house and the Kilcommon Cross, from which they had a good view of the road right into the barracks.

At about 11 o'clock in the morning the patrol came along, seven constables and the sergeant, a man named White. They were marching in extended formation in pairs. As soon as they came as far as the main party, fire was opened on Ned O'Leary's command. There was not much of a fight as half the police were killed in the opening volleys fired by the main party. The sergeant and three constables tried to retreat back to the barracks, but the former, though the most sought after man by the I.R.A., made his way into Pat Ryan's house without being noticed and concealed himself there for a few hours until the attacking party had left the locality.

One of the three retreating constables was shot dead by Paddy Ryan's (Lacken) group almost in front of the barracks, a range of about 300 yards, and the other two got into the building. Four rifles and a quantity of .303 ammunition were captured by the I.R.A. The rifle of the fifth policeman shot near the barracks could not be collected as it was covered by the police inside the building.

Swift reprisals followed this ambush. As soon as the police reinforcements came from Newport my own home and also those of Pat Doherty and of the Caples brothers went up in flames. Our fodder was also burned, and four head of cattle belonging to my father which were out in the fields near the house were shot dead.

Just a fortnight before the Kilcommon ambush the police had raided my home in search of my brother, Michael, and myself. On that occasion they told my people that they

intended to burn out the place. Because of this threat we expected them to come some night soon to put it into execution, but I decided to give them a fright. Mustering all the available arms in the battalion, three rifles and sixteen shotguns, a party of about twenty men occupied positions around the house for about a week waiting for the police to come. Eventually they arrived in a couple of tenders. Their approach took us unawares and the presence of the tenders showed that they included "peelers" from some outside station as they had no tenders in the local barracks. My house, which is about 200 yards from the road, had an avenue leading up to it and some of the I.R.A. party guarding the place were posted at the entrance to the avenue. My people were not staying at home at night at the time, and five or six others and myself were sitting in the kitchen when one of our men outside came running in to warn us that the police were coming up the avenue. It was about eleven o'clock at the time. I was taken aback when I heard this news as the men posted at the gate had instructions to fire when the enemy came as far as the avenue gate. The silent approach of the tenders must have taken these men by surprise and they did nothing to prevent the intruders from almost capturing us in the kitchen. The timely warning, however, gave us a chance to get outside with our guns. While making our way towards the avenue gate we noticed that some of the police had remained with the tenders on the road and the lighted ends of cigarettes which they were smoking gave us our target. We fired on them and the shooting lasted for up to twenty minutes. The police who had almost surprised us in the kitchen had only begun their work of smashing furniture when the firing commenced and, on hearing it, they left in a hurry to join their comrades at the

tenders. They made no further attempt to return to the house, but instead remounted the tenders and drove off.

I learned later that these vehicles had come from Newport and that they were led by the District Inspector from that barracks. He was the notorious Mr. Biggs, who was shot dead soon after at Coolboreen, Newport, by an I.R.A. party under the command of the Brigade O/C, Seán Gaynor.

To the best of my recollection it was in January, 1921, that an unofficial I.R.A. Flying Column, composed of men from the adjoining parishes of Kilcommon, Hollyford and Upperchurch and totalling about 18 men, all equipped with rifles, and under the control of Jim Stapleton, got together. I was one of them. We roamed about the country between Kilcommon and Borrisoleigh in mid Tipperary for a week or ten days seeking a chance to attack enemy convoys or patrols. Ambush positions were taken up in Knockfune, Ross and The Milestone. Nothing happened at Knockfune as the enemy did not put in an appearance. At Ross the column held a position on high ground about thirty yards from the road two miles from Borrisoleigh on the Nenagh road, when an armoured car came along at eleven o'clock in the morning. We fired at it but it got through, though one of the crew was wounded. In The Milestone, which is three miles from Kilcommon, a party of four of the column were sent to snipe the R.I.C. barracks at Kilcommon Cross in the hope that it might induce the police to come out, but the challenge was not accepted. We remained in ambush position at The Milestone for two days and then withdrew. After that the column dispersed, the men going back to their home areas.

About the first week in February, 1921, I went to Templederry to attack a police patrol from the Templederry

R.I.C. barracks at Castleotway. The brigade active service unit had organised the attack and had got some of the local Volunteers to help them. In all, I would estimate that there were twenty-five men assembled for the operation; most of them carried rifles and eight or nine had shotguns. The O/C of the active service unit was in charge. Positions were taken up about eight o'clock in the morning, and at midday we were still waiting. Then Sam O'Brien, an officer of the Templederry Company who had been detailed to do scout duty in the village of Templederry and to bring word to us that the police were on their way, arrived on his bike. He stated that the sergeant in charge of the station had seen him in the village and called him to warn us that the police were aware that we were waiting for them. On hearing this news, Collison dispersed the party and I came back to Kilcommon.

Throughout the area of the 5th Battalion, the only I.R.A. activity of note in the months of February and March, 1921, was the blocking of roads and cutting of trenches thereon. This was mostly done at night. In April, 1921, this type of activity was intensified and as well orders were received from brigade headquarters to post snipers in the vicinity of some of these barricades to shoot at the enemy should they attempt to interfere with them. No opportunity arose for these snipers to come into action except at Boornadeemery on the Newport road. Six men from the Kilcommon Company were watching a barricade in that townland. It was sometime in the month of May, 1921. Four or five lorries of military came along and the troops dismounted. As they were about to start clearing the barricade, the snipers began to fire, which the military promptly returned, and this they backed up by advancing on their attackers. The I.R.A. position was on the side of a hill which did

not provide much cover, and they soon found themselves in a dangerous situation. However, under the direction of Jim Gorman, himself an ex-Australian soldier, they extricated themselves by retiring in alternative groups until they got well into the Mohershave hills, into which the enemy did not care to venture very far and so broke off the engagement. There were no casualties on either side.

During May, June and July, 1921, the R.I.C. barracks in Kilcommon Cross was frequently sniped at night, just a few shots each time to keep the garrison alerted.

The last activity of the I.R.A. around Kilcommon before the truce in July, 1921, was on the 29th June, 1921. About a hundred men had fruitlessly spent that night in trying to knock down the Coolmore Bridge. At eight o'clock next morning eight of who were armed with rifles and revolvers crept up to within 80 yards of the Kilcommon Cross police barracks and kept firing at it for over an hour. The police vigorously replied but made no attempt to venture out.

Signed:

William Hanly

(William Hanly)

Date:

9.3.56

9.3.'56.

Witness:

D. Griffin

(D. Griffin)

(Investigator)

