

ORIGINAL

BUREAU OF MILITARY HISTORY
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BUREAU OF MILITARY HISTORY, 1913-21

STATEMENT BY WITNESS.

DOCUMENT NO. W.S. 1406

Witness

Dan Coakley,
Boolamore,
Rathcoole,
Banteer,
Co. Cork.

Identity.

Column Member, Millstreet Battalion Column.

Subject.

Activities of Rathcoole Company,
Millstreet Battalion, Cork II Brigade,
1917-1921.

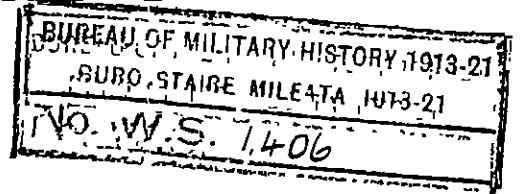
Conditions, if any, Stipulated by Witness.

Nil.

File No ... S. 2611..

Form B S M. 2

ORIGINAL



STATEMENT BY DAN COAKLEY,
Boolamore, Rathcoole, Banteer, Co. Cork.

I was born at Boolamore, Rathcoole, on March 12, 1895. My parents were small farmers. I was educated at Rathcoole National School until I was twelve years of age when I left to go to work with other farmers in the area.

I joined the Irish Volunteers in Rathcoole early in 1917. The strength of the unit was about twenty-four. The officers were:-

O/C - Jerh. Long.
1st Lieutenant - John Lehane.

Other members of the company were: Jack Coleman, Jerh. Coleman, Mick Sheehan, Denis Bride, Ned Forde, Roger O'Erien, Neilus Hearne. The company was a unit in Millstreet Battalion, Cork Brigade. Other companies were Lyre, Drishane, Millstreet, Rathduane, Kilcorney and Cullen. The officers of the Millstreet Battalion were:-

O/C - Con J. Meaney (Sonny)
Vice O/C - Con Meaney (Big)
Adjutant - Jerh. Crowley.
Quartermaster - John Lehane.

John Lehane was replaced in the company by Jerh. Philpott.

Training was carried out under our own officers. It mainly consisted of close order foot-drill. It was carried out in the fields around Rathcoole -

usually at night and on Sunday evenings. The only arms held were a few shotguns - the property of members - but there was also a Mauser rifle and five round of ammunition. I cannot recollect where or how the rifle was procured.

The strength of the company was doubled when the conscription scare started in the spring of 1918. The membership now increased to about fifty. There was no change in officers. All arms in the area were collected at this time, and we now had about twenty-five or thirty shotguns, with a supply of cartridges.

Cork Brigade was divided into three brigades in January, 1919, and Millstreet battalion formed part of Cork II Brigade. The other battalions in this brigade which covered North Cork area were: Mallow, Kanturk, Newmarket, Charleville, Fermoy, Castletownroche. There was no change in the officers of the battalion or company at this time.

Training went on as usual throughout 1919 and there was nothing of importance to report. However, on November 17th, 1919, two bankers from Millstreet branch of the Munster & Leinster Bank were going to the branch office at Knocknagree for the Fair Day there. They were carrying a large sum of money and were being driven by - Carmody from Millstreet. When they reached Ballydaly Cross, on the Millstreet-Killarney road, they were held up by a number of masked men and the money being taken to the fair was seized. I think the amount was about £18,000. The R.I.C. in the area investigated the robbery. and

questioned a number of I.R.A. men in the course of their investigation. As a result, a rumour began to get about that the raid had been carried out by the I.R.A. Liam Lynch (Brigade O/C) immediately ordered an investigation, and it was then discovered that the raiders were not I.R.A. men. They were, however, natives of the district and were arrested by members of the Millstreet and Mallow battalions. Their names were: Hugh O'Brien, Jerh. Buckley, Dan Buckley, - Carmody (driver of the car), - O'Connor, Mick Murphy. They were tried by members of the Brigade Staff and were deported from the country. With several other members of the Rathcoole Company, together with representatives of other companies in the battalion, I took part in the arrest of Jeremiah Buckley, Dan Buckley and Hugh O'Brien. These men, after arrest, were removed to Mourne Abbey area by men from Mallow Battalion. They were tried in Mourne Abbey area and deported. I think that the activities in connection with the arrest of these bank robbers took place in March and April, 1920.

When the order for the destruction of evacuated R.I.C. posts was received at Easter, 1920, our company was responsible for the destruction of Rathcoole R.I.C. barracks. This was a Rathcoole Company job. An attempt was first made to blow up the building with charges of gelignite, but it was not a success, due, I suppose, to our lack of experience in the use of explosives. However, the building was later destroyed by fire, a quantity of hay being obtained from a neighbouring haggard and sprinkled with paraffin oil, in order to help on the fire. Amongst

those who took part in this job were: Mick Sheehan, John Lehane, Jack O'Keefe, Dan Coakley (witness), Denis Murphy, Ned Forde, Jack Coleman, Jerh. Long. There were a number of others, whose names I can't remember, engaged on scouting and outpost duty.

During the summer of 1920 several raids were carried out on the mails in the area, but no information of any importance was obtained. These raids, however, tended to make the general public, as well as the I.R.A., more careful of what they wrote or said.

Normal training, which was becoming more advanced - the use of cover, scouting and target practice with .22 rifle being the main aspects - continued throughout 1920. There was no great increase in I.R.A. activities in the area. The members were, however, engaged in impeding enemy movements by blocking roads, cutting telegraph wires and generally upsetting enemy plans.

Early in 1921, the cutting of enemy lines of communication by blocking roads, demolishing bridges, kept a number of men fully occupied. Seven bridges in the area were destroyed about this time, while nearly all roads were being continually blocked by fallen trees and other obstacles.

During the first week in February 1921, I was called to a meeting at which the Battalion O/C (Con.J. Meaney) and Brigade Vice O/C (Paddy O'Brien) were present. I was accompanied by Jack O'Keefe. There were also a number of others present. I think that it was a meeting of the Battalion Council. The

Battalion O/C explained to the meeting that it was proposed to ambush a party of British military which occasionally travelled on the train between Mallow and Killarney. The site selected for an ambush was on a high railway embankment, about three miles from Rathcoole railway station and one mile from Millstreet. The main ambush party was to be composed of the members of the Battalion Flying Column, all armed with shotguns. At the meeting, it was decided that the maximum strength of the enemy party should not be more than seven. It was arranged that one man would board the train at Banteer station (this station was on the Mallow side of Rathcoole) each evening, while another waited at Rathcoole to hear his companion's report as to whether there were any enemy troops on the train and, if so, in what strength. The man at Rathcoole was to carry two revolvers - one to be given to the man travelling from Banteer, if it was proposed to carry out the job. The train usually reached Rathcoole about 7.15 p.m. The Battalion Column would, of course, be in position at the site selected for the ambush, beyond Glebe bridge.

With Jack O'Keeffe, I was selected for the scouting job between Banteer and Rathcoole - the journeys from and to Rathcoole to alternate between us. Each of us, in our turn, walked from Rathcoole to Banteer every second evening for about a week, and travelled back on the train to Rathcoole where the other was waiting with the guns. Jack O'Keeffe travelled on the first evening, but there were no enemy troops on the train. Next day, I did the journey, but there were only five soldiers on the

train, so we decided to allow them to go their way. This activity went on for about a week, and on February 11th Jack O'Keefe went to Banteer. When the train reached Rathcoole where I was waiting, Jack O'Keefe came along and reported that there were fourteen soldiers on the train - all in one carriage. This was the opportunity we had been waiting for, so, as the train began to move out from Rathcoole station, Jack O'Keefe and I boarded the engine and held up the driver and fireman. We told them to drive on as usual till we reached the Glebe bridge (about four hundred and forty yards at the Rathcoole side of the ambush position where the Column were). At this point, we ordered the driver to blow two blasts on the whistle of the engine. This was to indicate to the ambush party that the enemy troops were on the train, and also to give the man with the ambush party who had been detailed to place a red lamp on the line, - to show where the engine was to be halted, - due notice. As well as ordering the driver to blow the whistle, we also ordered him to slow down gradually and to stop the engine at the red light when it came into view. When the train drew near the selected spot, the red light was clearly to be seen, and we again told the driver what to do. He said that it was a hard thing to do, but he would try his best. Anyhow, the train was halted in the right spot, and fire was immediately opened on the carriage in which the enemy forces were. After shooting had gone on for about twenty-five or thirty minutes, the enemy were shouting that they would surrender, and firing ceased. All this time, Jack O'Keefe and I were on the engine with the driver and fireman. On the surrender of the enemy, we left the engine and helped to collect all

enemy arms (fourteen rifles) and equipment, as well as about six hundred rounds of .303 ammunition. When the engagement was over, I went with Jack O'Keeffe to find billets for the members of the Column at Jerry Hallahan's, Cuarrague, about five miles from the site of the ambush. The enemy lost one dead and several wounded. The I.R.A. had no casualties.

Following the engagement, I joined the column which was billeted in Lackadota and Kilcorney areas. Jack O'Keeffe also joined at the same time. Between the date of the train ambush and the first week in March, 1921, the Column took up ambush positions on a number of occasions, but failed to make contact with the enemy.

On the night of March ~~4~~⁵th, 1921, when we were billeted in Musherá area, orders were received to go to Clonbanin next morning. The column left billets about midnight and travelled by horse and trap to Keale bridge, from which point we walked to Clonbanin, a distance of about three miles across the country. We reached Clonbanin cross about 6 a.m., and here we met the members of Charleville and Newmarket battalion columns as well as a column from Kerry II Brigade. The combined columns were in charge of Seán Moylan, Paddy O'Brien and Tom McEllistrum.

Our column - Neilus Healy, John Reid, Jimmie Hickey, Jack O'Keeffe, Dan Coakley (witness), Jerh. Philpott, Con. J. Meaney, Jerh. Crowley, Wm. O'Riordan, Mick O'Riordan, Miah Galvin, Matt Kelliher, John Lehane, Sean Healy and two or three others - were first placed in position in Shaughnessy's haggard, south of the

Killarney-Mallow road. Con "Sonny" Meaney was in charge. All were armed with the rifles captured in the train ambush. The Kerry column were also south of the road and to the west of our position. We were behind a sod fence, about two hundred yards from the road. There was also a machine gun and crew posted in position to the east of our party in the haggard. The Newmarket and Charleville columns were north of the road. The parties at both sides were extended on high ground over a distance of about one thousand yards, with flanking and outpost parties in addition. Two mines - one at each end of the position - were laid on the road. When all preparations had been completed, all sections moved to their selected positions to await the arrival of the enemy.

About 10 a.m. three lorries of military moved into the position from the east (Mallow), but they were allowed to pass through as the signal to open fire was not given. This was, I think, due to the failure of the mines to explode. There was no further activity until about 2 p.m. when the scouts to the west signalled the approach of an enemy convoy. The convoy consisted of a lorry, a private car and an armoured car, followed by two lorries. I should have mentioned that, while awaiting the arrival of the enemy, about half of our party moved to a new position to the east where we took up positions behind the road-side fence. Included in this party were Neilus Healy, Sean Reid, Jack O'Keefe, Dan Coakley (witness). We were more or less a covering party whose duty it was to ensure that any enemy forces could not take the forces on the southern side of the road from the rear.

We had only taken up our new position when firing broke out, and our party, with all other sections, opened fire on the enemy. The mines did not explode - I'm not sure that they were tried a second time. The leading lorry got through under heavy fire, but the private touring car was disabled at the first burst of fire. The armoured car ran into the ditch, but the crew continued to use their machine guns. The enemy forces in the other lorries, who had not been wounded by the opening volley, took cover behind the roadside fences. From our position, we were able to cover the lorry which got through, and we opened fire on the party in it. They replied to our fire, and all sections were heavily engaged for about two hours.

As the I.R.A. forces were unable to silence the guns in the armoured car, the signal to break off the engagement was given, and all sections withdrew to a pre-arranged meeting place. The Millstreet column withdrew to Kilcorney area. They were accompanied part of the way by Kerry II brigade column. The Charleville and Newmarket columns moved towards the north-east and their home areas. General Cummings of the British party was killed, and several of the enemy were wounded. The I.R.A. had no casualties and no captures.

During the next couple of months, every effort was availed of to harass the enemy forces in the area. Posts were being continually sniped as were strong convoys. Roads were blocked and bridges demolished regularly by members of the local companies, while, in many cases, the members of the column acted as guards

while these operations were in progress. At this time, owing to the extent of these activities - being spread over the whole area perhaps on the one night - the column was broken up into small parties of two or three. They were billeted in the various company areas and undertook the more advanced training of the members of the local companies where they billeted. This was more or less the general position until mid June 1921.

On the evening of June 15th, 1921, the column was again mobilised for Rathcoole ambush. The column assembled at Rathcoole, about two and a half miles east of Millstreet, on the Banteer road, after midnight on June 15th, 1921. The members of the column were: Jimmie Hickey, Jack O'Keefe, Dan Coakley (witness), Wm. O'Riordan, Mick O'Riordan, Neilus Healy, Jerh. Crowley, Miah Galvin, John Reid, Jerome Buckley, Tom Crowley, Con J. Meaney, O/C. There were one or two others. During the course of the night, we were joined by the members of Mallow, Newmarket, Charleville and Kanturk battalion columns. The combined columns, to the number of about one hundred and twenty, were in charge of Paddy O'Brien (Brigade Vice O/C). About eighty members of the column were armed with rifles. The remainder carried shotguns.

The combined force was divided into, I think, six sections - one to cover each of six mines which had been laid in the road, early in the morning of June 16th 1921. The whole party extended over a distance of about one thousand, two hundred yards, and there were, in addition, flanking parties and scouts both to east

and west. All these sections were in position on rising ground to the south of the road, and within about two hundred yards of same. I was one member of a party of six or seven who were detailed to take up a position at the opposite side of the road (north) and about the centre of the ambush position. We were all armed with rifles and were behind a sod fence, about three hundred yards from the road. Our party were to attack any of the enemy who might take cover behind the north side of the roadside fence when the fight began. We were extended over a distance of about four hundred yards. Some members of this party were: Jack O'Keeffe, Jack Carey, Eugene Sullivan, Dan Coakley (witness), Jack Kelleher and one other whose name I cannot recollect.

About 10 a.m. a convoy of four lorries of auxiliaries passed through the ambush position. They were travelling from Millstreet to Banteer. As it was known that they passed the way twice each day, they were not attacked on the outward or inward journey in the forenoon. I should have mentioned that all I.R.A. forces were, at this time, under cover in Rathcoole wood and not in the selected ambush positions. When the convoy had again passed through on its way to Banteer, about 2.30 p.m., all sections moved into the pre-arranged positions.

We all awaited the return of the convoy, and about 4 p.m. we - in our position at the northern side of the road - heard the lorries approach. Within a few seconds, there was an explosion and, at the same time, an outburst of rifle and shotgun fire. From our position, we could not see what was

happening, and we concentrated on our job of ensuring the enemy could not take cover behind the roadside fence, at our side of the road. None of the enemy forces did succeed in getting cover at our side. Fighting went on for about an hour when the signal to withdraw was given. Our party then moved east and crossed to the south side of the road where we joined the remainder of the ambush party at the rear of Rathcoole wood. We were then instructed to withdraw to our billets.

During the remainder of the period to the Truce on July 11th, 1921, the column were mainly engaged on sniping enemy posts in the area.

Rank at Truce - Column Member, Millstreet
Battalion Column.

Strength of Company (Rathcoole) - about 50.

SIGNED

John C. Oakesley

DATE:

24th April 1956

WITNESS

P. O'Donnell

