

ORIGINAL

BUREAU OF MILITARY HISTORY 1913-21

BURO STAIRE MILEATA 1913-21

No. W.S. 1426

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BUREAU OF MILITARY HISTORY, 1913-21

STATEMENT BY WITNESS.

DOCUMENT NO. W.S. 1426.

Witness

Denis Keohane,
New Street,
Bantry,
Co. Cork.

Identity.

Vice O/C, Bantry Battalion, Cork Ill Brigade,
I.R.A.

Subject.

Activities of Caheragh Company, Bantry Battalion,
Irish Volunteers, 1914-1921.

Conditions, if any, Stipulated by Witness.

Nil.

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No. W.S. 1426

STATEMENT BY DENIS KEOHANE,

New St.. Bantry. County Cork.

I was born at Caheragh, Drimoleague, in March, 1891. I was educated at the local national school until I reached the age of fifteen when I went to work in the local creamery.

I joined the Caheragh Company of the Irish Volunteers in the summer of 1914. The strength of the company was in the neighbourhood of forty. The officers of the unit were:

O/C - Jerh. McCarthy
1st Lt. - Nicholas Keohane
2nd Lt. - Seán Cotter.

There was no special training in the early stages. Our activities were mainly confined to occasional parades and route marches. The company continued to operate up to Easter, 1916, but, as far as I know, did not receive any instructions in connection with the Rising which took place in Dublin on Easter Monday, 1916. There were no activities in the area during Easter Week.

When the Irish Volunteers were reorganised after the Rising in the summer of 1917 the Caheragh Company resumed activities. The strength was about 35. The officers who had been in charge up to 1916 were re-elected. The armament of the company about this time consisted of six or eight shotguns with a small supply of suitable ammunition. In addition, there were a number of Croppy pikes which had been fashioned in the local forge. At this time, as far as I can recollect, there was no battalion organisation and the company (Caheragh) was an independent unit of Cork Brigade.

There was no great activity during 1917, but organising went on throughout the district. New recruits were usually vetted by the officers before being accepted as members. The strength of the Caheragh Company increased slightly to about forty.

The only training carried out at this period was close order foot-drill under the officers of the company. Usually at week-ends the company went on route marches to neighbouring areas.

When the conscription was threatened by the British in the spring and summer of 1918 there was a big influx of new recruits. Nearly every man of military age in the district joined up. There was no change in the officers of the unit. The strength increased to nearly one hundred. At this time all Volunteers assisted in taking up the national collection for the anti-conscription fund, as well as in obtaining signatures for anti-conscription pledge. All arms - mainly shotguns - not already held by members of the Volunteers were collected, and the Caheragh Company now had about forty shotguns. When the conscription scare had passed all new recruits faded out and the strength of the unit fell to about thirty-five.

During the spring of 1918 my brother, who was 1st Lieutenant of Caheragh Company, was arrested by the local R.I.C. on a charge of illegal drilling. He was sentenced to a term of imprisonment in Mountjoy Prison, Dublin. He was released under the Cat and Mouse Act with a number of other prisoners after being on hunger-strike for some days. On his release he did not return to the area but transferred to Cork City area.

It was about this time that Cork Brigade was organised into battalion units. Our company (Caheragh) became a unit of Bantry Battalion. Other companies in this battalion at the time were: Bantry, Kealkil, Pearson's Bridge, Glengariff, Durris, Comhola, Droum Sullivan. The officers of the Bantry Battalion were:

Q/C - Ted O'Sullivan
 Vice O/C - Mossie Donegan
 Adjt. - Seán Cotter
 Q/M - Sonny Sullivan.

Training now became more advanced. Units were drilled in extended order and trained in the use of cover. On occasions during the summer months battalion manoeuvres were held. Selected men in all units were trained in scouting and signalling.

I should have mentioned that during the years 1917 and 1918 all Volunteers were engaged in organising Sinn Féin - the political wing of the Republican movement. This organisation was mainly composed of the Volunteers and the members of their families. Sinn Féin clubs were organised in every parish. The delegates from the clubs in the district met and formed a District Committee or Comhairle Ceanntair. Delegates from the various Comhairl1 Ceanntair then met and formed a Dáil Ceanntair, which was the governing body for the organisation in an electoral constituency. I cannot now recollect the names of the prominent members of Sinn Féin in the area.

There was no activity in the area in connection with the general election in December, 1918, as the Sinn Féin candidate was returned unopposed.

Cork Brigade, which embraced the whole county, was divided into three brigades in January, 1919.

Our battalion (Bantry) now became a unit of Cork 111 Brigade. Other battalions in the brigade were: Bandon, Clonakilty, Dunmanway, Skibbereen. The first Brigade O/C was Tom Hales, Bandon.

Early in 1919 the Battalion O/C (Ted O'Sullivan) reorganised the area. He made a number of changes in the officer personnel in various companies. As a result the following appointments were made in Caheragh Company:

- O/C - Tim Hayes
- 1st Lt. - Denis Keohane (witness)
- 2nd Lt. - Denis Daly.

This was the position up to October, 1919, when the O/C (Tim Hayes) resigned. The officers of Caheragh Company now became -

- O/C - Denis Keohane (witness)
- 1st Lt. - Denis Daly
- 2nd Lt. - Seán Cotter.

Throughout 1919 the activities of the company were mainly concentrated on training and organising. Training at this time became more advanced. Companies and battalions often assembled at week-ends when manoeuvres of a general nature were carried out. This training helped to make the Volunteers more conversant with the use of cover, scouting, signalling and suchlike activities. In addition it built up a spirit of comradeship between neighbouring units.

All members of Caheragh Company were sworn in as members of the I.R.A. about August or September, 1919. This change was due to the fact that Dáil Éireann (Parliament of the Irish Republic) established following the general election in December, 1918, had accepted

responsibility for the activities of the Volunteers. All members now - on taking the oath to the Irish Republic - became members of the Irish Republican Army.

During the summer and autumn of 1919 all units of the army were engaged on the work of organising and collecting the first Dáil Éireann loan.

About the end of 1919 I was sworn in as a member of the I.R.B. (Irish Republican Brotherhood) by the Battalion O/C (Ted O'Sullivan). The 1st Lieutenant of Caheragh Company (Denis Daly) was sworn in at the same time. I was then appointed a Centre and was instructed to get two additional members from amongst the members of the company (Caheragh). I selected Daniel Sullivan and Wm. Norris (Company Q/M). These were sworn in by me. As far as I know, these were the only members recruited to the I.R.B. from Caheragh Company area.

The first activity of a military nature in which members of the Caheragh Company were engaged was the attack on Durrus R.I.C. barracks on March 28th, 1920. This was a battalion engagement and, as far as I can recollect, a number of companies from the area were represented in the operation. The representatives from Caheragh Company were: Denis Keohane (O/C), Denis Daly (1st Lt.), Seán Cotter (2nd Lt.), Seán Holland, Wm. Norris, Daniel Sullivan. There were also two or three others whose names I cannot remember.

The barrack was a two-storey building situated in the street of the town. The roofs of the houses on either side were lower than the roof of the R.I.C. post. Sections were placed in position at the rear of the building, also behind the wall of the yard of Sam Ross's

publichouse directly opposite the front of the barrack. There were also sections on outpost duty on the roads leading to Durrus, as well as a section covering an attacking party on the eastern gable of the enemy post. I was in charge of the latter party, which consisted of Denis Daly (1st Lt. Caheragh Company) and two members of another company whose names I cannot recollect. I was armed with a revolver, while the others carried shotguns. We were behind a wall - about 30 yards from the barracks - on the same side of the street. The main attack, which opened about 1 a.m., was concentrated on the front of the building by the party in Sam Ross's yard who were armed with rifles. A party at the eastern side endeavoured to get on to the roof from the adjoining lower house. They managed to damage the roof but failed to set it on fire. The attack continued for about 2½ hours, but was then called off as there was no prospect of capturing the post. I then returned with the other members of the Caheragh Company to my home area. I should have mentioned that before moving off after this attack I was handed a rifle by the Battalion O/C (Ted O'Sullivan). This rifle was to be used for training purposes in Caheragh Company, and within a short time all members were efficient in the use of this weapon. The rifle had been taken off a British patrol boat in Bantry Bay in November, 1919.

Sometime towards the end of October, 1920, a number of men from outside companies in Bantry Battalion were assembled at Wilkinson's stables at Dromore - about 1 mile from Bantry - by the Battalion O/C (Mossie Donegan). He had replaced Ted O'Sullivan, who had been appointed Brigade Vice O/C, Cork 111 Brigade about July, 1920. The strength of the party was about a dozen. It was

proposed to hold up and disarm a patrol of R.I.C. in Bantry town. It was for this reason that men from the Bantry Company were not included in the party. If and when captured, the R.I.C. party were to be marched to Newtown where the Battalion O/C (Mossie Donegan) was to deal with them. I was placed in charge of the attacking party. All were armed with revolvers. I divided the party into four sections and allocated them to different positions in the town. The enemy patrol made its appearance on the street, but none of our sections was able to get into a reasonable position to attempt to rush it with any hope of success. As there was no hope of a successful attack, all sections were ordered to withdraw and, after a discussion with the Battalion O/C (Mossie Donegan), I withdrew with the other members of Caheragh Company present to our home area. Some members of the party who assembled for this job were: Charlie O'Brien, Dan O'Driscoll and Con Connolly (Drimoleague Company), Eugene O'Neill, Jim O'Connell (Kealkin), Jerry Holland, Lucey (Comhola), Tim Carty and another (Durrus), Denis Daly, Denis Keohane - witness - (Caheragh). I think that the date of this attempt was October 23rd (Saturday).

On the following Friday (October 29th, 1920) the same party were again assembled and moved into Bantry with the intention of attacking the R.I.C. patrol. When we entered the town we found that all shops were closed. This was the day of Terry MacSwiney's funeral in Cork (I think). There was no trace of the patrol on this occasion, but while in the town I was approached by Robt. Kelly - a Sinn Féin judge, and Patk. Connell ~~Connell~~. I was asked not to take any action. I informed Messrs.

Kelly and Connell of the whereabouts of the Battalion O/C (Mossie Donegan), telling them at the same time that I would have to carry out my orders. They apparently contacted the Battalion O/C because within a short time I received orders to withdraw my party. All sections then withdrew to the outskirts of Bantry where we met the Battn. O/C. The party was then disbanded and all returned to their own company areas.

Early in November, 1920, a training camp for officers of the Skibbereen and Bantry Battalions was established at Kealkil. The camp, which was carried on for a week, was controlled by Tom Barry (O/C Brigade Column). All companies in both battalions were represented at the camp. Caheragh Company was represented by Denis Daly, Wm. Norris and Denis Keohane - witness. While at the camp we were instructed in the use and care of arms, arms drill, use of cover, selection of ambush positions, use of grenades, close and extended order drill, night training. The camp terminated with a short musketry course - each man firing two or three rounds. Some of the rifles used at this camp were captured at Schull R.I.C. barracks early in October, 1920.

The levy for the arms fund was collected in Caheragh Company area as well as throughout the Bantry Battalion about this time. The amount of the levy in the case of farmers was based on the number of stock carried on the farm. In the case of shopkeepers it was based on the Poor Law Valuation of the premises. With few exceptions, in which we had to threaten to seize stock or goods, all contributions to the fund were given on request.

On our return from the camp at Kealkil the training of our local company (Caheragh) was stepped up. All members were now put through a course on similar lines to that employed at the camp except for the musketry course. Scarcity of ammunition prevented the use of .303 for this purpose, but target practice with .22 ammunition was carried out.

The Brigade Column was being strengthened about this time and Wm. Norris. (Q/M Caheragh Coy.) joined up. He continued to serve with the column as required up to the truce on July 11th, 1921.

About this time I received instructions from Battalion H.Q. to make six dumps in Caheragh Company area. The timber for the dumps was purchased in Skibbereen and the boxes were made by the local carpenter. The boxes were 6' X 3' X 2' and were made from tongued and grooved timber. They were then buried in the ground on the side of a hill. The clay from the excavation was distributed over newly ploughed fields and the top sods were replaced so that there was no indication that the ground had been interfered with in any way.

The Battalion O/C (Mossie Donegan) and Adjutant (Seán Cotter) were arrested on November 28th, 1920. This led to a change in officer personnel on the Battalion Staff. Tom Ward, who had been Vice O/C, became Battalion O/C. I left Caheragh Company to become Battalion Vice O/C. I did not, however, assume duty as Vice O/C until January, 1921. My duties in my new post entailed regular visits to the various companies, inspection of parades, swearing in new members. This work occupied my full time for a considerable period in the early stages. The

Battalion Staff of Bantry Battalion at this stage were:

O/C - Tom Ward
 Vice O/C - Denis Keohane (witness)
 Adjt.- Michael Harrington
 Q/M - John J. O'Sullivan.

The Battalion O/C (Tom Ward) fell sick early in February, 1921, and his duties then devolved on me. A Battalion Council meeting was called for Colomane Wood on February 10th, 1921. While the meeting was in progress the Brigade Adjutant (Liam Deasy) and Brigade Column O/C (Tom Barry) arrived. The column, which had taken part in the attack on Skibbereen on the previous night were billeted in the neighbourhood. The Column O/C (Tom Barry) asked for a report on the lay-out, defences etc. of Drimoleague R.I.C. barracks. This information was furnished by O/C Drimoleague Company (Dan O'Driscoll) who was present at the meeting. It was decided to carry out an attack on this post next night. In the meantime the Column O/C expressed a desire to see the building for himself. He asked if there was any member of Cumann na mBan in the area who would be prepared to drive him in a horse and trap through Drimoleague so that he could examine the position. I arranged for Miss Bridie Manning, Colomane, to drive Tom Barry on the trip, which was carried through next day without incident. While this trip was being made Peter Monahan - a member of the Brigade Column - assembled a mine at Durravahalla where he was billeted.

Towards midnight on February 11th, 1921, the column, with a number of local scouts, was assembled about 1 mile from Drimoleague. Parties were selected to take up outpost duty, act as scouts, block roads etc. and were allocated to their positions. The main attacking party,

to the number of about 30, moved into Drimoleague about midnight. They took up positions across the road from the R.I.C. post, a small section taking up a similar position to the rear. Another section took a mine into the village and laid it on the barbed wire entanglements, which extended from the front wall of the building to the boundary wall at the roadway. The mine exploded, the party in front of the barrack opened fire, to which the enemy garrison replied, but as the explosion of the mine had not damaged the building the main attacking party was ordered to withdraw.

While the attack on the enemy post was proceeding I was in charge of a section of a party of about twenty men who were in ambush position on the Bantry-Drimoleague road at Inchingearig - about $2\frac{1}{2}$ miles from Drimoleague. Ted O'Sullivan (Bde. Vice O/C) was in charge of this party, which was intended to intercept any enemy reinforcements which might come from Bantry. As the attack was not a success our party received orders to withdraw to Castledonovan, where we went into billets with the other members of the column. While the column was resting at Castledonovan next morning two or three lorries of Auxiliaries from Dunmanway approached the billets. They halted on the roadway within a short distance. The column was alerted and took up positions in anticipation of their advancing further, but the enemy turned about and returned to Dunmanway. The column then moved across country to Goulanes. Having rested here for a short time they moved on to Coomleigh, where they billeted on Sunday, February 13th, 1921. They moved next night into Dunmanway Battalion area.

During March, 1921, I was in charge of a party of six riflemen covering the Military Barracks, Bantry, while the Brigade Vice O/C (Ted O'Sullivan) and another party were laying a mine at the railway bridge at Sheskin just outside Bantry. The bridge was approximately 200 yards from the Military Barracks. The explosion of the mine did not demolish the bridge as had been expected, but it did sufficient damage to prevent road traffic from crossing. Although the barracks was sniped by our party before withdrawing from the area there was no reply from the enemy.

On the night of March 16th, 1921, men from three companies (Caheragh, Durrus, Bantry) were engaged on trenching the main Bantry-Cork road, while on the same occasion Meenies Bridge in Drimoleague Company area was demolished. The Battalion Engineer (Dan Sweeney) was in charge.

The Brigade Column passed through the battalion area on a couple of occasions during the month of April and May, 1921, but there was no engagement with the enemy.

All units were engaged at this period on blocking roads, demolishing lines of communication and generally impeding enemy administration. This work involved more or less continuous duty by the members of the various companies, as roadblocks or obstacles set up one night were usually removed next day by the enemy forces or by civilians commandeered by them for the purpose and who were forced to perform the work at the point of the gun.

While a meeting of Bantry Battalion Council was being held in the vicinity of Bantry about the second week in May, 1921, word was received that the Auxiliary force stationed at Glengariff was to evacuate the Eccles Hotel, which they had taken over, next day. They were expected

to travel by train from Bantry. It was decided to ambush this train in Inchingearig Company area next morning. All present at the meeting moved to Inchingearig that evening. With Tom Ward, (O/C) I arranged with Con Keane, O/C Inchingearig Company, to remove a section of the railway line on a bend. All available arms in the area were collected. Early next morning the main body - to the number of about twenty - moved into position on high ground on the railway embankment north of the line. They were extended over a distance of about 150 yards and were all armed with rifles. When we had been in position for about 3 hours word was received that the Auxiliaries were not travelling. The whole party then withdrew to billets in Kilamine.

Later on the same day - about 4 p.m. - the assembled party received word that a patrol of six R.I.C. men were in the area. Arrangements were immediately made to endeavour to intercept this party on the way back to Drimoleague. While making our way to what had been selected as a suitable ambush position, our party discovered that the enemy patrol had already passed through the selected position. In the circumstances, we decided to fire a few shots at the withdrawing patrol. They returned our fire. The exchange continued for about thirty minutes before we decided to withdraw as there was no possibility of concluding the engagement satisfactorily.

About the end of May, 1921, in co-operation with the members of Caheragh Company I arranged for the hold-up of a goods train between Cork and Bantry at Aughavilla. Amongst the military stores taken from the train were flooring for tents, engineers' tools, two tons of potatoes.

All were consigned to the military post at Bere Island. The "weigh-bill", when found amongst the guard's papers, showed that these goods were consigned as "1 bag fodder - Bere Island". The engineers' tools and potatoes were removed to safe dumps. The flooring for the tents was destroyed by fire on the spot. On this occasion the train had only been allowed to proceed on its way when a strong party of military arrived at the hold-up point by road from Bantry, but we had already withdrawn from the area. A similar hold-up was carried out at Madore on the Skibbereen-Cork line about three or four days later. This raid was mainly concerned with the capture of mails and some small stores for the coastguard station at Castletownsend. The examination of the mails did not reveal anything of military importance, and all letters, after endorsement - "Censored by I.R.A." - were reposted at various post offices in the district.

Early in June, 1921, the Lewis gun, which had been captured at Crossbarry, was held in Bantry Battalion area by Droumsullivan Company where it was in charge of the gunner - Billy O'Sullivan. A message was received from Tom Barry (Column O/C) requesting the urgent transfer of the Lewis gun to the vicinity of Ballinascorthy. Scouting arrangements had already been made for the trip, so in company with the gunner (Billy O'Sullivan), Wm. Dillon and Dan O'Mahoney I proceeded across country to Ballinascorthy. On the way we discovered on a couple of occasions that the scouts, although at the agreed points, did not put in an appearance immediately we reached the rendezvous. These tactics were due to the activities of Auxiliary forces from Dunmanway who, in the previous week, had

visited the area and posed as I.R.A. men. For this reason our scouts had to be sure of our bona fides before making their appearance, so they lay behind fences watching us and listening to our conversation before they made their appearance. However, our party reached Ballinascarthy area on time and reported to the Column O/C (Tom Barry). He then informed us that the proposed job was "off" as the R.I.C. force which it had been proposed to ambush at Ballinascarthy railway station had changed plans and travelled by road.

Next night our party (Billy O'Sullivan, Dan O'Mahoney, Wm. Dillon, Denis Keohane - witness) moved into Bandon with the Brigade Column to set fire to Bandon Workhouse. Our party took up a position with the Lewis gun on the Eagle Bridge - spanning the main Bandon-Cork road. We remained in position with Tom Barry (Column O/C) until we saw that the Workhouse was on fire, when we withdrew towards Ahiohill area. The column was then disbanded and our party - the Lewis gun section composed of Billy O'Sullivan, Dan O'Mahoney, William Dillon and Denis Keohane (witness) - were instructed to billet in two houses in Ahiohill area.

We remained here for two or three days until we again received instructions to assemble at Lyre National School in Clonakilty Battalion area where the column, to the number of about seventy, had again been mobilised. The whole party then moved into billets. Next day we moved into an ambush position on the Dunmanway-Rosscarbery road. However, information was received that the Auxiliary forces which had been expected to travel through the ambush position had already billeted in Rosscarbery. It was then decided to advance on Rosscarbery, the column being

divided into three or four sections to approach the town from different directions. The Lewis gun section (Billy O'Sullivan, Wm. Dillon, Dan O'Mahoney and Denis Keohane - witness) took up a position on high ground overlooking the enemy posts from the east, but we had the minimum of cover. After firing a few "bursts" at the enemy posts the return fire forced us to withdraw towards Corrin, where we made contact with the other members of the column who had also retired. The column was now disbanded - the various members being instructed to return to their own battalion areas. I then returned to Brigade H.Q., which was in Caheragh Company area. The other members of the Lewis gun section (Billy O'Sullivan, Dan O'Mahoney and Wm. Dillon) returned to Bantry area. This was, I think, June 26th, 1921.

Brigade H.Q. moved into Kealkil Company area towards the end of June, 1921. This necessitated the provision of scouts, guards, dispatch riders, etc., who were to be available round the clock, from the Bantry Battalion. I was engaged on work in connection with the protection of Brigade H.Q. on practically a whole-time basis at this period. Just before the Truce, Brigade H.Q. moved from Kealkil to Cappabur area, where it was situated on July 11th, 1921.

My rank at the Truce - Vice O/C, Bantry Battalion, Cork 111 Brigade, I.R.A. The strength of the battalion was about one thousand two hundred.

As far as I can recollect, the officers of the Bantry Battalion were:

1918-20 (O/C - Ted O'Sullivan - to Bde.V/C July, 1920
 (V.O/C - Mossie Donegan
 (Adjt.- Seán Cotter
 (Q/M - Sonny Sullivan.

(O/C - Mossie Donegan (arrested Nov., 1920)
 July '20-(V.O/C - Tom Ward
 Nov. '20 (Adj. - Seán Cotter (arrested Nov., 1920)
 (Q/M - Jno. J. O'Sullivan.

(O/C - Tom Ward
 Dec. '20-(V.O/C - Denis Keohane
 July '21 (Adj. - Michael Harrington
 (Q/M - John J. O'Sullivan.

Signed: *Denis Keohane*

Date: *26th May 1956*

Witness: *P. L. Donnell*
 (Investigator).

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