

ORIGINAL

BUREAU OF MILITARY HISTORY 1913-21
BURO STAIRE MILEATA 1913-21
No. W.S. 1487

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BUREAU OF MILITARY HISTORY, 1913-21.

STATEMENT BY WITNESS.

DOCUMENT NO. W.S. 1487.

Witness

Colonel Jerry Ryan,
Ballynonty,
Thurles,
Co. Tipperary.

Identity.

Commandant, 1st Battalion, 2nd (Mid) Tipperary
Brigade.

Subject.

Activities of 1st Battalion, 2nd Mid Tipperary
Brigade, Irish Volunteers, 1918-1921.

Conditions, if any, Stipulated by Witness.

Nil.

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STATEMENT BY COLONEL JERRY ~~DELL~~

Ballynonty, Thurles, Co. Tipperary

Commandant, 1st Battalion, 2nd (Mid) Tipperary
Brigade.

In the year 1912 I was sworn into the Irish Republican Brotherhood by a man named Harding at his home in Christchurch Place, Dublin. I was then 19 years of age and at the time I was temporarily residing in the city. A year or so later I returned to my home at Moycarkey and took up a position in Thurles.

During the year 1914 a company of Irish Volunteers, which I joined, was formed in the Moycarkey-Two Mile Borris area and I remained a member until the split in the Volunteer movement took place later on in that year. As the majority of the members then favoured the policy of the late John E. Redmond, the company affiliated to the National Volunteers and this led to my severing my connection with it.

Irish Volunteer activities of anything of a worthwhile nature did not commence in Thurles and the surrounding parishes until the reorganisation of the Volunteer movement in 1917. Prior to 1916, Mr. James Kennedy of Parnell St., Thurles, then the Assistant Town Clerk, had sworn a number of men in the various parishes into the I.R.B., but when the Rising took place, we had no properly organised Irish Volunteer unit in the district.

Towards the end of the year 1916 and early in 1917, I organised Sinn Fein Clubs in Moycarkey and Two-Mile-Borris and I was then elected a member of

the Mid-Tipperary Executive of Sinn Fein. Later on in the year 1917, I organised Volunteer companies in those two parishes and I assisted in organising another company in Holycross. Shortly afterwards, companies were formed at The Commons, Gortnahoe and Killenaule. I was then O/C. of the Moycarkey Company.

Activities at that time were confined to drilling and training. There were occasional parades held openly in defiance of the R.I.C. and these led to a number of arrests followed by prison sentences. What I might call the headquarters for a large area of Co. Tipperary came into being at Michael (Mixie) O'Connell's shop, Liberty Square, Thurles, and from there the work and the activities were directed by James Leahy (later the brigade O/C.) and Michael O'Connell, the proprietor of the establishment. Thurles then became a dispatch centre for the major portion of the south of Ireland. Dispatches from G.H.Q., Dublin, came by post to Miss Bridget Fitzpatrick (now my wife) and she handed them over to 'Mixie' O'Connell who, in turn, arranged to have them forwarded to their destinations. Dispatch carrying then had to be done by night as the Volunteers who did this work could not be taken from their employment in the daytime. Later, a thorough system, operated mainly by the Cumann na mBan, was organised for handling dispatches.

In April 1918 the R.I.C. removed all arms, ammunition and explosives from Leahy's and Fitzpatrick's hardware shops to Molloy's, which was the oldest firm in that particular trade in Thurles. Two Volunteers - J.K. Dwyer and Patrick O'Connell - were then employed in Molloy's and one night shortly afterwards they opened the door for a party of Volunteers who seized the complete stock of guns, ammunition

and explosives. Some of this stuff was taken to Callanan's of Ardbawn and the balance was brought to Maher's of Annfield.

The work of organising Volunteer Companies in the various parishes was fairly well completed by the Springtime of 1918. It was, I think, in May of that year that the officers of eight companies met at Casey's cottage, Littleton, to form their companies into a battalion and to elect a battalion staff. The companies represented at the meeting were Thurles (2), Holycross, Moycarkey, Two-Mile-Borris, Gortnahoe, Glangoole and The Commons. Battalion officers elected at that meeting were:-

| | |
|----------------------|---------------------|
| Battalion commandant | Jerry Ryan (myself) |
| " Vice do. | Michael Eustace |
| " Adjutant | Leo Ryan |
| " Quartermaster | J.K. Dwyer |

Michael Eustace was succeeded in 1920 by the late Michael Small as battalion vice-commandant and, on my arrest early in 1921, Michael Small was appointed battalion commandant. The post of battalion vice-commandant was then taken over by Patrick Leahy, then of Boherlahan, and now of Holycross. Leo Ryan, the battalion adjutant, went to the U.S.A. in late 1919 or early 1920 and was succeeded by Michael Leamy. J.K. Dwyer was arrested by British forces sometime about December 1920, and Philip Shanahan was then appointed to the post of battalion quartermaster.

When the organisation of the battalion was finally completed, it consisted of the following nine companies:-

| | | | | |
|--------|-----------------|---|--------------------|----------------------------------|
| A/Coy. | Thurles | - | Company Commander, | Patrick Ryan |
| B/Coy. | Thurles | - | do. | Michael Hogan |
| C/Coy. | Holycross | - | do. | John Ryan (later Patrick Doyle). |
| D/Coy. | Moycarkey | | do. | Patrick Lambe |
| E/Coy. | Boherlahan | | do. | Joseph Nagle |
| F/Coy. | Two-Mile-Borris | | do. | Patrick Hayes |
| G/Coy. | Gortnahoe | | do. | Michael Bartley |
| H/Coy. | Glangoole | | do. | John Norton |
| I/Coy. | The Commons | | do. | Hugh McCormack |

Due to arrests and to service with the flying column there were some changes in the company commanders during the years 1920 and 1921, but I have mentioned the names as I now recollect them.

Two further battalions based on the Templemore and Upper-church areas had been similarly organised and, about mid-summer of 1918, a meeting of the battalion officers of the three battalions was held at Brady's Mills near Thurles. This meeting was convened to organise the three battalions into a brigade which became known as the 2nd or Mid-Tipperary Brigade. James Leahy, then of Thurles, and now of Nenagh, was elected brigade commandant; Edmond McGrath of Lockmore, vice-commandant; Michael Kennedy of Thurles, adjutant; and John McCormack of Thurles, quartermaster.

That summer of 1918, and particularly during the months when the conscription crisis was at its peak, proved a very busy period for the Volunteers. At Maher's of Annfield thousands of ball cartridges were filled and distributed to other centres. In all parishes firearms were collected and, with very few exceptions, these were handed up willingly. Those that were not voluntarily given up, and those in the hands of Unionists, were raided for and seized. In the whole of my battalion area there were, at the time, only three or four serviceable rifles. About thirty Martini Henri rifles were obtained from the National (or Redmondite) Volunteers, but these proved afterwards to be almost valueless and sometimes a danger. There was, too, a certain amount of confusion brought about by the big influx of new recruits into the existing companies, and by the springing up like mushrooms of new companies. This righted itself immediately it became clear that the British Government did not propose to enforce the Conscription Act in

Ireland, as we saw no more of most of the new recruits. For instance, I drilled a company of 106 men in one particular area during the conscription crisis period and when I subsequently visited that same company I found only six men on parade. However, that company retrieved itself later on as a result of the work of a few devoted and loyal adherents.

During the later portion of the year 1918 and the early months of 1919, activities were directed mainly on recruiting in weak areas, defining battalion and company areas, and occasional raids for arms. In this latter phase of activity I would like to mention, in particular, the work of four men - Thomas Ryan, who was later appointed battalion I.O.; Thomas Keogh, James Peters and Sean McCarthy. With my knowledge and concurrence, but without brigade authority, they raided for arms in many places in Co. Leix and portion of Co. Kilkenny and assembled for the battalion a large collection of guns of various types and vintages, but including some useful revolvers.

By the early Summer of 1919 the R.I.C. became very active and did a great deal of raiding on the homes of people known or suspected of being supporters of the Sinn Fein or Volunteer movements. Many Volunteers were then on the run and I had been on the run myself since about the time of my election as battalion commandant. District Inspector Hunt of the R.I.C. in Thurles, through those raids, many of which he personally conducted, made himself most obnoxious to the people because of the brutal manner in which he carried them out. The brigade officers decided that he should be executed and, on June 23rd 1919, he was shot dead in Thurles as he returned to the town with a party of R.I.C. men from the racecourse where he had been on duty at the races that day. Hunt's execution was carried out by James Stapleton of Upperchurch, James Larkin of Upperchurch and John Dunne, Rossoulty, Upperchurch.

During these years of 1919 and 1920 it became necessary for me to pay frequent, almost weekly, visits to G.H.Q. and to the offices of the Dáil Éireann Ministers in Dublin, as, in addition to being commandant of the battalion and a member of the Mid-Tipperary Executive of Sinn Fein, I had taken on the work of organising and establishing Sinn Fein Courts, collecting subscriptions for the Dáil Éireann Loan, and I was secretary of the Dáil Éireann Land Resettlement Area Committee. This Land Resettlement Department functioned under Art O'Connor and was doing work analagous to that performed by the old British Congested Districts Board and now done by the Irish Land Commission.

It would now be impossible for me to recall the day-to-day events of the year 1920, and I do not propose to deal in this statement with minor incidents such as raiding mails and the sniping of police posts which was done to harass and worry the garrisons, but to confine myself to some incidents with which I was associated and which may be worthy of recording for a military history of the times.

Early in January 1920, I decided to attack Holycross R.I.C barracks and the attack took place on the night of 18th January 1920. By arrangement, Paddy Kinnane, Commandant of the 3rd Battalion, staged an attack on Drombane R.I.C. Barracks on the same night. The R.I.C. Barracks at Holycross was a lone building situated on the Holycross-Cashel road, about one mile from Holycross, five miles from Thurles and seven or eight miles from Cashel. Our plans to take the barracks depended mainly on our ability to blow down one of the gable walls with mines made from the boxes of cart wheels and packed with gelignite. The mines were made in advance in a store at the back of 'Mixie' O'Connell's shop in Thurles. While we had ample material for their construction, we were handicapped by

the lack of men with sufficient technical knowledge for their successful use.

Four companies were mobilised for the operation and most of those were given the task of blocking the roads from Cashel to Holycross and from Thurles to Holycross. **P**arties armed with shotguns were placed in positions on the road blocks. For the actual attack itself we could only provide either two or three service rifles, four Martini Henri rifles and a few shotguns. We got the mines into position and laid the fuses without attracting the attention of the garrison, but when exploded the mines caused only slight damage to the powerful wall which was built of cut stone. Immediately the mines exploded, our rifle and shotgun men opened a light fire on the barrack door and windows to which the police replied with rifle fire and grenades. When the mines failed us I sent some men to try and get ladders with the idea of attacking from the roof. Two ladders were got but they proved to be too short to be of any service. Even when the eaves of the roof, which jutted out for some distance from the walls, were smashed away, it was still impossible to gain access to the roof from the tops of the ladders. We then decided to try and lob some hand grenades through the narrow portion at the top of the ground floor windows, i.e., through the portion about four inches in depth which was not protected by the steel shutters. This, too, proved impossible and, whilst engaged on this task, I had a very lucky escape, for a grenade thrown from the barracks made smithereens of a barrel containing water behind which I had taken cover.

It was decided to call off the operation when it became apparent that the garrison had no intention of surrendering. It had lasted for over three hours and, during that time, the R.I.C. sent up Verey lights for assistance, but neither the

military nor R.I.C. in Cashel or Thurles sent out reinforcements to their aid. That was the first of a number of attacks on Holycross R.I.C. Barracks, but as far as I am aware, the subsequent attacks were in the nature of harassing operations and not intended as serious efforts to capture and destroy the post.

For some months after the attack on Holycross R.I.C. Barracks, the activities were more or less of a minor nature. I am not sure about dates, but I recall one occasion when I was a member of a party of about seven or eight who occupied an ambush position on the road between The Commons and Ballingarry to await the arrival of a patrol of eight R.I.C. men. The patrol came along as expected, but when fire was opened on them they scattered and fled, and the net result of the ambush was that we captured one R.I.C. man and took his rifle. The .303 ammunition which we were using that day had been received a short time before from G.H.Q. and, to our surprise, most of the cartridges were dud, only about one in ten being effective. This, and this alone, saved the patrol from serious casualties and, had the police shown fight, it could have had serious consequences for us. I understand that quite a lot of this ammunition was distributed to the brigades all over the country and had to be recalled by G.H.Q.

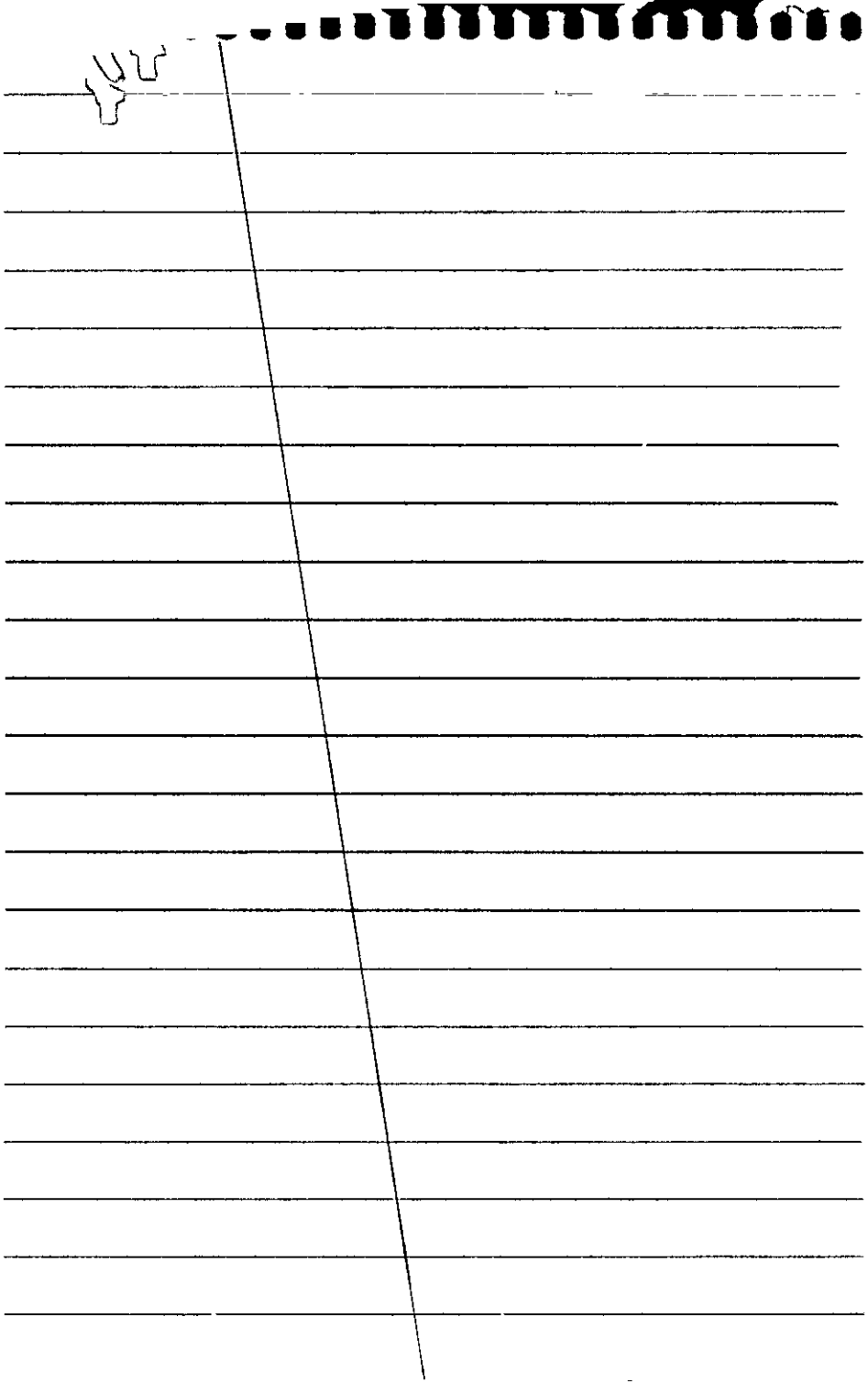
Some time in October 1920, a battalion flying column or active service unit, of which I took charge, was organised. The personnel of this unit was recruited from members of the battalion who were then on the run, and, occasionally, it was reinforced for a week or so at a time by men from the Holycross Moycarkey and Gortnahoe companies. During my absence to attend to my other various duties and on the occasions of my visits to G.H.Q. Michael Small, the battalion vice commandant, took

charge of the column.

On several occasions during the Springtime and Summer of 1920, I prepared plans and considered ways and means of capturing and destroying Littleton R.I.C. Barracks, but something always seemed to crop up to prevent my plans from being put into operation. Then, on Saturday night, October 30th 1920, an opportunity presented itself when I met in Littleton a Black and Tan who was stationed in the barracks there. He was one of the type who did not care a damn what happened provided he could get enough of drink or money to buy drink. I gave him a few drinks, a bottle of whiskey and a £1 note and promised to get him £40 if he co-operated with me in capturing the barracks, provided, of course, that the raid on the barracks was successful. He agreed, and I arranged with him that on the following evening at about 2 p.m. he would come outside the barrack door, leaving the door unlocked behind him.

I spent Saturday night and the early hours of Sunday morning mobilising twelve picked men and arranging to have them in Littleton in good time next day. This party occupied a house opposite to and about 22 yards from the barrack door while I loitered about in the vicinity of the barracks to await the appearance of the Black and Tan who, by the way, was barrack orderly that day. Two o'clock came and went and I was beginning to get worried and uneasy when, at about 2.30 p.m., he opened the door and stood outside. While I was disarming him the others rushed across the road and entered the barracks. Things worked out much easier for us than we expected. The sergeant and two constables were gone out on patrol. There were six constables in the day room, two others were in bed and another was busily engaged cooking the dinner. The arms were thrown loosely about and only one constable made any

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effort to resist, but before he could use his rifle he was covered by Mick Small. In fact, all the police seemed bewildered and stared at us with a surprised look. We lined them up under guard on the street and, in less than 20 minutes, we had removed all arms, ammunition and grenades and had set the barracks on fire. As the patrol party was expected back at any moment, I sent four men to intercept them, which they did, but the patrol made their escape through a shrubbery close to the village.

As I expected that Thurles would be a target for enemy reprisals that night we locked our R.I.C. prisoners in a barn at Littleton and we then proceeded to Thurles. Police and military, however, arrived in Littleton that evening and after firing indiscriminately through the village and along the roads, they burned the local creamery and then went to Moycarkey where they burned down my father's home.

Arriving in Thurles we had something to eat and we then decided to defend the town. We took up a position at the bridge over the River Suir and sent out scouts to watch the movements of the military and police. Without our scouts detecting them, 10 or 12 police made their appearance in Liberty Square and they threw a bomb into 'Mixie' O'Connell's shop. We then opened fire on them and they ran helter-skelter back to the barracks. We were joined in Thurles that night by Jimmy Leahy, the brigade O/C.

Next day we billeted and made our headquarters in the farmhouse of St. Patrick's College where we were reinforced by men from the adjoining companies. About 2 a.m. on the Tuesday morning we came into contact with a large force of police on that portion of the Mall which runs parallel to Liberty Square. It was very dark at the time and a medley of shooting took place. After the first shots the police ran.

Some of them jumped into the river, more of them took refuge in the gardens at the back of the houses and the largest party of them took to the college fields at the western side of the river. At that time our forces were divided into two parties - Jimmy Leahy being in charge of our main party at the river bridge and I had taken charge of a party on The Mall. As my party was nearest to the police who were retreating through the college fields, we proceeded after them firing at random as, in the dark, it was only by the noise they made and by an occasional shot fired by them that we could follow their line of retreat. This action proceeded in a semi-circle for about three quarters of a mile until the police reached the back entrance of their stronghold in Friar St. Following this, we abandoned our headquarters in St. Patrick's College farm and remained concealed in houses in the town for the remainder of that week, but nothing untoward happened.

The twelve men who were engaged with me at Littleton all took part in protecting the town of Thurles in the days that followed. They were:- Michael Small, John McCormack, Michael Dwan, Sean McCarthy (Goorty), James Fraher, James Mooney (Coffey), Michael Kennedy, William O'Grady, Edward Power, Michael Leamy, Thomas Ryan and John Harty. The arms and ammunition captured at Littleton consisted of 8 rifles, between 3,000 and 4,000 rounds of .303 ammunition, a few boxes of small egg bombs, some Mills hand grenades, either 7 or 8 short Webley revolvers, some .45 revolver ammunition and 3 Verrey light pistols.

As regards the payment of the £40 to the Black and Tan who opened the door, I certainly intended to keep my word to him, but I never saw or heard from him afterwards.

During the next couple of weeks there was continuous sniping of R.I.C. Barracks, especially of Gortnahoe Barracks in an effort to entice the military from Killenaule out to an ambush position, but without success. The column spent almost the entire week prior to Christmas 1920, in the Gortnahoe, New Birmingham area seeking an engagement which did not materialise.

About the end of December 1920 or very early in January 1921, I received a special summons to report to G.H.Q. in Dublin. Eamon de Valera had just returned from the United States and an appointment had been arranged for me to meet him at an address in Dublin. I mistook the address and went to the wrong house. It took me about an hour and a half to discover the correct meeting place and, when I got there, de Valera had left. I met Cathal Brugha, the Minister for Defence, and Austin Stack, Minister for Home Affairs. They told me that the policy we were pursuing of attacking police and military was getting us nowhere internationally, particularly in the United States; that I was being released from all service with the Volunteers, and that henceforth I was to devote all my time to organising the Sinn Fein Courts in Munster. At that time the Sinn Fein Courts were well established and functioning in the Mid-Tipperary area.

By the time I arrived back from Dublin, Jimmy Leahy, the brigade O/C., had received a dispatch from G.H.Q. informing him of this decision.

Now, at that time, I was particularly keen on having an engagement of some kind in the Gortnahoe area with the enemy forces. As I have said, the column was billeted for long periods there and I feared that our friends in that district who were catering for us might think that we were just having

a good time at their expense. I decided therefore that before leaving to take up my full-time position as organiser of the Sinn Fein Courts I would have another try, and on the morning of 24th January 1921, with 13 members of the column, I occupied an ambush position at Poydstown. We expected a lorry load of military and Black and Tans to pass that way from Killenaule to Gortnahoe.

About noon, our scouts reported that there were three lorries of military, accompanied by police in a private car, in Gortnahoe and they appeared to be travelling towards Killenaule. This was in the opposite direction to what we had been expecting and, from our point of view, it worsened our position considerably. Again the scouts reported that the strength of the enemy forces was approximately 70, whilst, as I have said, our strength was 14 - nine armed with service rifles and 5 armed with Martini Henry rifles. The latter proved to be ineffective after one shot. Mick Small, who succeeded me as battalion commandant, and I decided, after consultation, to attack, but we explained the position fully to the other 12 and we gave them the option of leaving if they were not prepared to die, but none left.

One lorry and the private car drove into the ambush position and crashed into a trench which we had dug across the road. The other two lorries went on to another road which ran parallel to the one we were on and only about half a mile distant from it. This, and the fact that our supply of .303 ammunition was not sufficient to maintain a lengthy action, decided us to terminate the engagement as quickly as possible. It lasted about 20 minutes and, while we had no casualties, the enemy suffered 5 killed and either 7 or 8 wounded. A peculiar feature of this engagement was that two of the best

marksmen in the brigade were placed in a position dead straight in front of the lorry with instructions to shoot the driver. At 55 yards range they only wounded him in the foot, but shot dead the soldier sitting beside him and the one directly behind him. This indeed proved to be a stroke of luck, for subsequently we learned that the driver was a civilian driving a lorry which the military had commandeered that day. Some days later, military in great strength invaded and terrorised the countryside and demolished all houses in the immediate vicinity of the ambush position. Those who took part in the actual ambush with me were:- Michael Small, Michael Leamy, Michael Ryan (my brother), William O'Grady, Edward Poer, John McCarthy (Goorty), James Mooney (Coffey), Thomas Maher, Patrick Doyle, John Norton, George Hayes, Michael Bartley and Patrick Lennon. Denis Heeney and two others acted as scouts and incurred as much risk as any of those who were in the ambushing party.

On the second day after the ambush at Foyntown, I was captured by a party of R.I.C. men in Thurles. I had just written and dispatched a report of the operation to G.H.Q. I was taken to the R.I.C. Barracks in Thurles and there I was severely interrogated and badly beaten up by members of the R.I.C. I was unarmed at the time of my arrest, and the only item of an incriminating character which was found on me was a half-inch map on which I had indicated by circles two points which I considered to be suitable for ambushes. During the night I was again interrogated and questioned about the meaning of the two circles on the map. They (the R.I.C.) became highly infuriated when I suggested that they, themselves, had put the circles on the map and that they were not on it when it was taken from me. There were two other I.R.A. prisoners in the barracks that night.

As I was then in the hands of the R.I.C. murder gang some friends of mine, including a local priest and a Miss Bridget Fitzpatrick (the lady who is now my wife) approached Captain Warren, who was then in charge of the British forces in Thurles, and informed him that there were three prisoners in the R.I.C. Barracks whose lives were in peril from the R.I.C. At first, the R.I.C. denied to Captain Warren that they were holding any prisoners, but, urged on by my friends, Warren persisted in his inquiries, and eventually I was handed over to the military.

I was taken to Limerick military barracks where, a few weeks later, I was tried by Field General Courtmartial on a charge of levying war against His Majesty the King - the specific incident mentioned on the charge sheet being the capture and destruction of Littleton Barracks. One R.I.C. man named Ryan, who was a member of the garrison at Littleton swore that I ill-treated and permitted them to be ill-treated while they were my prisoners on that Sunday afternoon. This was a glaring untruth and I must say that Ryan's evidence in this ~~respect~~^{respect} was flatly contradicted by another R.I.C. witness, a constable Timoney. I was found guilty by the courtmartial and sentenced to 15 years penal servitude.

I spent about a month of my prison sentence in Limerick Prison and a further two weeks in Cork Prison before being sent, in May 1921, to Spike Island. There were quite a number of I.R.A. prisoners in Spike Island at the time and we soon made the place uninhabitable. During the Truce period we received a visit from the late Michael Staines, then Chief Liaison Officer, and, as a result of his visit, we were transferred in October 1921 to Kilkenny Prison. My sojourn in the latter prison was a brief one for, soon after my

arrival there, I was informed by either Martin Kealy or Jim O'Hanrahan (now Adjutant General of the army) that a tunnel out of the prison was being constructed by the prisoners and was then nearing completion. The tunnel was completed before that month of October came to a close and then, one evening after tea, I was one of 47 prisoners who made their exit to freedom through it.

Signed: Jerry Ryan

Date: 11th September 1956

Witness: J. Grace

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