

ORIGINAL

BUREAU OF MILITARY HISTORY 1913-21

BURO STAIRE MILEATA 1913-21

No. W.S. 1502

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BUREAU OF MILITARY HISTORY, 1913-21

STATEMENT BY WITNESS.

DOCUMENT NO. W.S. 1502.

. Witness

William Crowley,  
Kilsarlaught,  
Aughadown,  
Skibbereen,  
Co. Cork.

Identity.

O/C, Lisheen Company, Schull Battalion,  
Cork III Brigade, I.R.A.

Subject.

Activities of Lisheen Company, Irish Volunteers,  
Schull Battalion, Cork III Brigade, I.R.A.,  
1914-1923, and Brigade Flying Column, 1921.

Conditions, if any, Stipulated by Witness.

Nil.

File No .. S.2816.

Form B S M. 2

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STATEMENT BY WILLIAM CROWLEY,  
Kilsarlaught, Aughadown, Skibbereen, Co. Cork.

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I was born on 2nd February, 1894, at Kilsarlaught. My father was a farmer. I was educated at Lisheen national school. After leaving school, at the age of fourteen years, I went to work with local farmers as an agricultural labourer at ninepence per day.

I was interested in the national movement from my childhood. My home was the meeting place for all those interested in the freedom of Ireland in the district. My earliest recollections are of the stories of the Fenian movement being told by the local seanacaidhe at the fireside chats in my home. These stories naturally created in my mind an interest in the story of Ireland's fight for freedom, and as I grew up, I read every available story and book I could lay hands on, which related to Ireland's story.

When the Irish Volunteers were formed in Lisheen in July 1914, I was one of the founder members. Practically all the local young men joined the company at the invitation of the parish priest, Fr. O'Sullivan. The instructors who took charge were Henry Alcock, North Street, Skibbereen, and a retired R.I.C. man whose name I cannot recollect. The opening parade was the only one held by this unit as, within a few weeks, John Redmond, M.P., made his appeal for recruits to join the British army to fight for the alleged freedom of small nations. This speech led to the disbandment of the Lisheen company as none of the members were prepared to follow Redmond's advice, and the parish priest being a great supporter of John Redmond, the young people were

not prepared to oppose his (parish priest's) views.

There was no further activity in the area until September 1917, when I undertook the formation of a Sinn Féin club in Lisheen area. The officers of this club were: Chairman, Denis O'Driscoll; Secretary, Joseph O'Regan. The members of the Committee were William Crowley (witness), Jack O'Driscoll, William Keating, Michael Hegarty, Jack Horgan, Michael Crowley, John Hegarty, Bernard O'Regan, Dick Hurley, Tom O'Mahoney, John S. O'Driscoll, Dan O'Brien, Michael O'Brien, Dan O'Driscoll (2).

About the end of September 1917, a company of the Irish Volunteers was formed in the area. The pioneer members were: Dick Hurley, Bernard O'Regan, Jos O'Regan, Denis O'Driscoll, John S. O'Driscoll, William Crowley (witness), Jack Crowley, Michael Crowley, Jeremiah Crowley, Dan O'Brien, Jeremiah Horgan, Jack Horgan, Dan O'Driscoll, Michael Hegarty, Jack O'Driscoll, William Keating. The first O/C of the unit was Dick Hurley. The strength of the unit was in the neighbourhood of thirty.

The only type of training carried out at this time was close order foot-drill under two men from Skibbereen - Denis O'Shea and Denis O'Connell. Parades were usually held at night in the fields in the district.

The first public parade of the Lisheen company took place on the occasion of the Manchester Martyrs anniversary commemoration in Skibbereen in November 1917. The other companies in Skibbereen battalion also took part in this parade. Some of these companies

were: Lisheen, Skibbereen, Baltimore, Myross, Castlehaven, Glendore, Leap, Corran, Bridagh. The officers of the Skibbereen battalion at this time were, I think -

O/C - John B. O'Driscoll.  
Vice O/C - Denis O'Shea.  
Adjutant - Florence O'Donoghue.  
Quartermaster - Denis O'Connell.

The Skibbereen battalion also paraded at a demonstration which was addressed by Eamon de Valera in Skibbereen on December 10th, 1917.

Beyond normal training which was now being carried out under Dick Hurley (Company O/C), there was nothing of special interest until the British threatened to enforce conscription in the spring of 1918. There was a big influx of new recruits to Lisheen company at this stage. The strength grew to about eighty, but when the conscription scare passed, the majority of the new recruits passed out with it. However, the strength of the unit was now about sixty. There was no change in the officers.

During the spring and summer of 1918, all shotguns in the area were collected. All were surrendered voluntarily. In one or two cases, raids were carried out on the houses of British supporters, but the arms had already been handed up to the R.I.C. The total armament of the company at this time consisted of about twenty shotguns. At this period, selected members of the unit were engaged on the manufacture of bombs. The bombs were made by filling paint tins and cocoa tins with scrap metal and concrete,

leaving a hole in the centre in which a stick of gelignite, suitably detonated, was inserted. The cover of the tin was then securely fixed, and the fuse to explode the detonator was passed through a hole in the centre of the cover. The gelignite to make the bombs was obtained in a raid on Dreenamolane barytes mines. This raid was carried out by a section of Lisheen company under Dick Hurley, and all the gelignite seized was dumped in Lisheen company area. Volunteers were also engaged on the collection of anti-conscription funds at this time.

At a later stage, a supply of this explosive was being sent to Cork brigade headquarters in three butter boxes. The boxes were being taken to Skibbereen railway station by Joe O'Regan in a pony and trap. On his way to the town, he was met by two R.I.C. men, including Sergeant Mulherins who was later shot in Bandon as he was chief R.I.C. intelligence officer for West Cork. The R.I.C. men spoke to Joe O'Regan and accompanied him along the road to Skibbereen, but when he came to the entrance of the railway station, they continued on their way and O'Regan despatched his supply of gelignite to Cork.

On New Year's Day 1919, Lisheen company paraded in Ballydehob for the purpose of forming a Sinn Féin club in the area. The meeting was addressed by Peadar O'Hourihane and John B. O'Driscoll. A club, which functioned for a short time, was formed on this date. A further attempt to organise a club in the area was made at a later stage by Sean Lehane. He addressed a public meeting in Ballydehob, opening the proceedings in Irish. He was arrested some weeks later, and charged

with making a seditious speech. The Crown prosecutor at his trial was Jaspar Wolfe, solicitor, Skibbereen, who, in his opening address to the court, said, "This young man came to Ballydehob to revive the embers of a dying revolution and spoke in the Hottentot language". Seán Lehane was sentenced to three months' imprisonment.

Cork brigade, which embraced the whole of the county, was divided into three brigades in January 1919. Our battalion (Skibbereen) became a unit in the new West Cork brigade - Cork III. Other battalions in this brigade were: Bandon, Clonakilty, Dunmanway, Bantry and Castletownbere. The officers of the new brigade were:-

O/C	- Tom Hales.
Vice O/C	- (I cannot recollect)
Adjutant	- Liam Deasy.
Quartermaster	- Pat Harte.

Beyond normal training parades twice each week, there was no activity of any description in the area until the spring of 1919 when a number of protest meetings were held against the arrest of Ernest Blythe who, at the time, was editor of the local newspaper, "The Southern Star". He was also a Volunteer organiser. All Volunteer units took an active part in this campaign. One of the protest meetings was addressed by Michael Collins who was, at the time, Director of Organisation of the Irish Volunteers.

About this time, a strong force of British military moved into Lisheen area where they camped for two days. During their stay, they carried out extensive raids in the district, but they failed to find

any arms or make any arrests.

In the summer of 1919, Lisheen company was reorganised by the new battalion O/C, Sam Kingston, who had replaced John B. O'Driscoll. As far as I can recollect, O'Driscoll had been removed from office by the Brigade O/C., Tomás MacCurtain. On the reorganisation, the O/C (Dick Hurley) resigned, and the following officers were appointed:-

O/C	-	Jack Horgan
1st Lieutenant-		Jerome Harrington.
2nd	"	- Tom O'Mahoney.
Adjutant	-	William Crowley (witness).
Quartermaster	-	Dan O'Driscoll.

A brigade training camp was held at Glandore in August 1919, but there was no representative of Lisheen company at the camp.

The Irish Volunteer Executive had now agreed to submit to the control of Dáil Éireann which had been elected at the general election in December 1918, and now became the Irish Republican Army. All members of the army now took an oath of allegiance to the Irish Republic.

When Dáil Éireann floated the first Dáil loan in the summer of 1919, the work of organising and collecting same fell mainly on the shoulders of the I.R.A. in the area.

Normal training continued, and selected men were trained as scouts, engineers, first-aid men, signallers, about this time.

There was a change in the officers of Lisheen

company in March, 1920, when the company O/C (Jack Horgan) left for U.S.A. The officers now were:-

O/C	-	Jerome Harrington.
1st Lieutenant	-	Dan O'Brien.
2nd "	-	Tom O'Mahony.
Adjutant	-	William Crowley (witness).
Quartermaster	-	Dan O'Driscoll.

Prior to Easter 1920, the Brigade Adjutant (Liam Deasy), with Charlie Hurley and the battalion officers, Skibbereen battalion established their headquarters in Lisheen company area when making arrangements for an attack on Ballydehob R.I.C. barracks. Owing to unforeseen enemy activity in the area, the attack was called off. The barracks was evacuated within a day or two, and was burned by the members of Lisheen company within a few days.

When the local government elections under Dáil Éireann were held in the summer of 1920, several of the candidates were members of the I.R.A. and were elected to the Rural District Council (Skibbereen) and to Cork County Council. Tom Hickey (O/C, Kilcar company) was elected to the County Council, and Denis O'Driscoll (Lisheen company) to the Rural District Council.

About this time, Seán Lehane, who had been on the staff of Bantry battalion, was sent into Schull area to organise it. He established a number of companies throughout the area and, when the work of organisation was completed, he was appointed O/C of Schull battalion which was now an additional unit of Cork III brigade. In the reorganisation, part of Lisheen company (Kilcar) area was taken over by Schull battalion.



In the autumn of 1920, it was decided by brigade headquarters to establish an arms fund. The fund was to be raised by means of a levy on property owners. The amount to be collected was based on the number of stock carried on farms; or, in the case of shopkeepers and suchlike, on the poor law valuation of their property. The duty of collecting this levy fell on the shoulders of the local I.R.A. company in each district. In the majority of cases, the levy was paid on request but, in one or two cases, threats to seize stock had to be made before the cash was forthcoming.

A brigade training camp was established in Kealkel area in November 1920. The O/C and 1st Lieutenant of each company in Schull, Bantry, Castletownbere and Skibbereen battalions attended. Tom Barry was in charge of this camp. I was not present, as I was laid up at the time.

Following this camp, all arms known to be outstanding in the area were collected and dumped.

On the formation of the brigade column, Lisheen company was represented on it by Dan O'Brien (1st Lieutenant). He served with the column at Kilmichael and Gaggin, and returned to Lisheen area when the column was disbanded prior to Christmas 1920.

When the column was being reassembled, about mid January 1921, Dan O'Brien was on his way back to the assembly point when he was ordered by the battalion O/C (Sam Kingston) to return to his own company area (Lisheen). The battalion O/C then dismissed the company O/C (Jerome Harrington) and replaced him by

Dan O'Brien. I was then appointed 1st Lieutenant of Lisheen company, the officers now being:-

O/C	- Dan O'Brien.
1st Lieutenant	- William Crowley (witness).
2nd Lieutenant	- Denis O'Donovan.
Adjutant	- Tim Hegarty.
Quartermaster	- Dan O'Driscoll.
Intelligence Officer	- Joe O'Regan.

In February 1921, two farmers in Mohanna area - William Connell and William Sweetman - who had informed on members of the I.R.A. who had collected the arms levy from them, were executed by selected members of the Lisheen company. I do not recollect the names of the men who took part.

During the spring of 1921, all units were engaged in cutting enemy lines of communication - digging trenches, felling trees, removing rail and tramway lines. The work of keeping the roads closed involved continuous rounds of duty by the members of the company, as trenches cut at night were usually filled up by forced labour squads, under military guard, next day. This necessitated the opening of a fresh cutting at some other point that night.

I recollect that, on one occasion when the Lisheen company went to re-open a trench on the Skibbereen-Lisheen road at Newcourt, about three miles from Skibbereen, they were approached on their way by Mrs. Jeanne Daunt - a Protestant lady - of Newcourt. She informed them that she had seen the military taking up positions in Newcourt Wood and on a hill, a few hundred yards from the cutting. This section of military had a machine

gun in position on the hill. I have no doubt, but that for her information, the company would have been wiped out on this occasion.

All bicycles in the area were seized, for use by our own forces, as information was received that the British proposed to take them up.

The local mails were regularly raided at this time, but, as far as I can recollect, no information of any military value was obtained.

Towards the end of May 1921, a fresh column was assembled near Moultrehane. The strength was about sixty. Liam Deasy was in charge. Lisheen company was represented by Dan O'Brien and myself. The column moved into position at Gloundaw, on the Dunmanway-Drimoleague road, during the night of May 27th 1921. Positions were occupied on high ground overlooking the road, and extended over a distance of about four hundred yards. With about nine others, I was placed in position on the eastern flank - nearest Dunmanway. Peter Kearney was 1/c. of the section. We were all armed with rifles. It had been arranged that the members of Drimoleague company would ambush the police in that village, in order to draw the auxiliaries and military out from Dunmanway. Although we remained in position all day, the expected enemy force did not put in an appearance. The column then withdrew to Lissane area where we billeted that night.

Next evening, I was sent, with some other members of the column and some local men, to dump a mine which the column had been carrying. When this operation had been carried out, I returned with the other members of

the column to headquarters where a meeting of brigade officers was being held. I was then interviewed by Tom Barry (Column O/C) who instructed me to return to my own area (Lisheen) and to arrange for the scouting of all roads at key points in the area immediately, as he proposed to attack Skibbereen that night and then withdraw towards Baltimore, crossing the river Illen to Lisheen. Before he allowed me to leave, he insisted that I would empty my pockets, to ensure that, in the event of my being held up, there would be nothing to indicate that I had any connection with the I.R.A.

Before instructing me to return to Lisheen, Tom Barry was aware that Major Percival's column - four hundred strong - was in Leap, within two miles of his position. Despite this, he was prepared to undertake the attack on Skibbereen, and had prepared the escape route outlined above.

I returned to Lisheen and completed the scouting arrangements, to learn late that night, through the O/C of Baltimore company, that the attack on Skibbereen had been called off as fresh information, which had come to hand, indicated that a big round-up was taking place. The column, on this occasion, withdrew across the mountain to Gougane Barra in Cork I brigade area.

A short time prior to the Truce, arrangements were made to form a new brigade - Cork V. - from the battalions at the western end of Cork III brigade, viz., Bantry, Castletownbere, Schull, Skibbereen and a new battalion, Drimoleague, which embraced portions of Dunmanway, Bantry and Skibbereen battalions. The

officers of the new brigade were:-

O/C	- Gibbs Ross.
Vice O/C	- Ted O'Sullivan.
Adjutant	- Mick Crowley.
Quartermaster	- Michael O'Callaghan.
Intelligence Officer	- Tom Reidy.

When Cork V brigade was formed, my company (Lisheen) was transferred to Schull battalion from Skibbereen. There was no change in the officers of the company.

The O/C of Schull battalion (Sean Lehane) was now transferred to Dunmanway as battalion O/C there. This led to a change in Schull battalion staff which now became:-

O/C	- Seán O'Driscoll.
Vice O/C	- Thomas Hickey.
Adjutant	- Denis O'Mahoney.
Quartermaster	- James Hayes.

My rank at the Truce:-

1st Lieutenant, Lisheen Company,  
Schull Battalion, Cork III Brigade.

Strength of the company - 94.

When the Truce was signed, there was a general relaxation of tension for a few days. However, inside a week, the work of organisation was taken up again. A brigade training camp was set up at Bauravilla, a few miles from Skibbereen. Brigade headquarters was in the same area at the time. Owing to a protest by the

British military regarding the carrying of arms during the Truce, the brigade O/C (Gibbs Ross) moved the camp to Lissane where training was completed.

Battalion camps, which were attended by the officers of each company, were then established and routine similar to that at the brigade camp was followed. These camps were later followed by similar camps in each company area, so that, by the end of 1921, every man in the brigade had undergone an intensive course of training. I should have mentioned that special camps were held in each area for the special services, e.g., engineering, signalling, first-aid, where men were thoroughly schooled in these services.

Sometime following the Truce in July 1921, I joined the I.R.B. A centre was formed in Lisheen area. I was sworn in by Gibbs Ross (Brigade O/C). Other members of the centre were Dan O'Brien (Head), Jim Finn, Patrick Whooley, and Tim O'Mahoney.

When the Treaty was signed in December 1921, there was a general air of satisfaction at first. However, when the details were published in the newspapers and we saw that, despite all our fighting and the loss of some of our best men, we were only being offered a partitioned Ireland, there was grave dissatisfaction amongst the men in West Cork. However, we all hoped that Dáil Éireann would refuse to accept the Treaty, but we were disappointed when it was accepted on a vote of sixty-four to fifty-seven.

As it now appeared obvious that the fight for the Irish Republic was not finished, the intensive

training continued throughout Cork V. brigade.

When the British decided to withdraw their forces from the area, the posts evacuated by them were occupied by the I.R.A. This was the general position throughout our brigade area.

Within a short time, the representatives of the Provisional Government, which had been set up by those who accepted the Treaty, began to organise an army of their own, the Free State Army. The main strength of this force came from Dublin and the northern section of the country. There were, however, small units in a number of places in the south and west. The only Free State post in Cork V. brigade area was established in Skibbereen where it occupied the R.I.C. barracks. No action was taken against this isolated unit until the I.R.A. headquarters in the Four Courts, Dublin, was attacked on June 28th, 1922.

It was then decided to attack the Free State garrison in Skibbereen. This operation was carried out by units drawn from a number of battalions in Cork III and Cork V brigades in early July 1922. The I.R.A. force moved into Skibbereen on a Saturday night and took over a number of houses for billets. Our forces moved about the town on Sunday and, during the course of that evening, a conference was arranged by Fr. McCarthy, Adm., between the opposing forces. Agreement was not reached, and the I.R.A. forces took up positions in houses in the vicinity of the Free State post. While the I.R.A. forces were taking up positions in Market Street, fire was opened on them by the garrison in the R.I.C. barracks. Intermittent firing continued throughout the night and the next day until

the garrison eventually surrendered about 8 p.m. on Tuesday. The I.R.A. casualties were: one killed, Paddy McCarthy. The Free State party had no fatal casualties, but a number were wounded. Five members of Lisheen company took part in this operation.

There was little activity in the area during the month of July, 1922. We were, however, continually engaged on scouting and outpost duty, as rumours were current that Free State forces were to land on the West Cork coast. When they did land at Union Hall in the early days of August 1922, they were attacked on their way to Skibbereen by I.R.A. columns on which Lisheen company was represented by three men.

There was now a change in the Schull battalion staff, as Tom Hickey (Vice O/C) left the area to take up employment. He was replaced by Dan O'Brien (O/C, Lisheen). The battalion staff now was:-

O/C	- Sean O'Driscoll.
Vice O/C	- Dan O'Brien.
Adjutant	- Denis Mahoney.
Quartermaster	- Joe O'Regan.

This led to a change in the officers of Lisheen company. I was appointed O/C. The officers of the unit now were:-

O/C	- William Crowley.
1st Lieutenant	- Michael Cummins.
2nd Lieutenant	- Denis Donovan.
Adjutant	- James Caverly.
Quartermaster	- Dan O'Driscoll.



We continued to operate against the Free State forces in the area. They had now established posts in Ballydehob, Schull and Collatrim. It was now January 1923. Sniping operations on these posts were continued up to the Cease Fire Order from I.R.A. headquarters in April 1923.

I still continued to move around the area, on the run, until I was arrested in September 1923. I was interned in Cork until November 1923 when I was released. During my period of imprisonment, I spent two days and two nights without clothes in the open, in a compound in Cork prison.

SIGNED: William Crowley

DATE: 27 September 1956



Witness. P. L. Donnell