

ORIGINAL

BUREAU OF MILITARY HISTORY 1913-21

BUREAU STAFF MILITARY HISTORY

No. W.S. 1507

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BUREAU OF MILITARY HISTORY, 1913-21.

STATEMENT BY WITNESS.

DOCUMENT NO. W.S. 1507.

Witness

Joseph McCarthy,  
29 South Street,  
New Ross,  
Co. Wexford.

Identity.

1st Lieutenant, New Ross Company.

Vice Commandant, New Ross Battalion.

Subject.

Explosion at Saltmills, Co. Wexford, October, 1920.

Conditions, if any, Stipulated by Witness.

Nil.

File No S.2836.

Form B.S.M. 2

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No. V.J.S. 1507

SECOND STATEMENT OF JOSEPH McCARTHY,  
29 South Street, New Ross, Co. Wexford.

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It was October, 1920. Autumn had, in her gay colours of red and russet, tinted the old oaks and elms surrounding Tintern Abbey. The barley and wheat were stacked in the neighbouring haggards, leaving, naked and quiet, the close-cut stubble fields.

A short distance from Tintern Abbey, in a lonely, sloping stretch of country reaching down to St. Kearns sea-shore, stood a small unoccupied house in the midst of fields, some gone wild, with furze bushes and whitethorn sceachs. A few were cultivated, and others, in a not well-cared for condition, were grazed by cattle and sheep.

On a junction of the road from Ballycullane to Saltmills, close to Tintern churchyard, runs a road, along by St. Kearns shore, which is seldom used except by people who live along that stretch. A little distance along this road is the old quay of St. Kearns where sailing schooners, belonging to Captain Roche, brought coal cargoes. Opposite the quay was a gateway that gave access to the fields that led to this old house.

The local I.R.A. had selected this old house, and had been using it for some time now, for making bombs, filling cartridge cases and storing all kinds of ammunition. Raids on the Hook lighthouse and

supplies from other places brought large quantities of explosives. They were kept in boxes, and brought each night from hidden dumps near the neighbouring farms. The manufactured bombs were buried in ground close to the unoccupied house, before despatch to their various destinations.

There was never anyone outside the local company to assist them. They had no previous knowledge of such work, but adapted themselves and improvised in many ways with the material at their disposal. Consignments of bombs were sent in butter boxes to Dublin and Cork, and, in addition to the urgent requests from those places for further supplies, they were preparing for an attack on Foulksmills R.I.C. barracks which kept them busy every night. The same men were not present every night, and, on the night previous to the explosion, two or three men were there who were not present on the night of the disaster.

On the night of the explosion - 12th October, 1920 - the following members of the company were busy at work:-

Martin Roche	- Saltmills.
James Gleeson	- St. Kearns.
Robert Walsh	- do.
James Byrne	- Bridgetown.
Michael Fitzgerald	- St. Leonards.
Patrick Kelly	- Ballycullane.
Thomas Gleeson	- St. Kearns.
John Timmons	- Tintern.
Thomas Kinsella	- Kinnagh.
Michael Conway	- Curraghmore.

Stephen Barron - St. Kearns.  
Patrick Reville - St. Kearns.  
Patrick Grady - Tintern.  
Edward Kelly - Saltmills.

Buckets of explosive material, emptied out of the sacks and boxes, were all over the room. Candles and cart-lamps gave them light, and sacking was placed against the windows, so as to have no light visible from outside.

Tom Gleeson and Michael Conway were cutting detonator wires. Michael Conway was using a pliers. Tom Gleeson struck the detonator with a penknife he was using, causing a spark.

In a second or two, a blue flame filled the room. John Timmons and Edward Kelly shouted, "Run, run, lads! The Lord have mercy on us!", and, as they finished those words, a quick, short, loud explosion had blown the old house to pieces. The explosion was so powerful that it had blown the roof to the far end of a four-acre field.

Three men - Martin Roche, Robert Walsh and Michael Fitzgerald-- were killed instantly. James Gleeson lived about half an hour, and James Byrne died in Kelly's, Saltmills, the following morning. Of the remaining men, some were found shortly afterwards, grievously injured, naked and bleeding, trying to creep along the ground. The others were stunned, going aimlessly around and suffering from shock.

Michael Conway recalls that, a moment after he saw the spark, a blue glow filled the house with a

choking gas, and, in another moment, the explosion had left him bereft of any memory till he found himself outside, numbed from shock and bleeding.

Michael Conway, John Timmons and Patrick Grady, holding each other, exhausted, quite naked and covered with blood, were found by Michael Gleeson - a brother of Thomas - and he guided them to Gleeson's of The Bridge (Saltmills Bridge).

John Whelan of Kinnagh recalls that, at about ten o'clock that night, he was on his way to the house, to work at the bomb-making, when he heard the explosion. He was not unduly alarmed, as there had been some conversation the previous night that they were going to test one of the bombs on the sea-shore, but, at the same time, the noise of the unusual bang re-echoing over the bay and the wild calling of the sea-birds, crying out in wild clamour, gave him, as the moments passed, a chill of foreboding tragedy. As silence again filled the countryside, he hastened in the direction of the old house. As he was about to leave the road, he met Edward Kelly, streaming with blood and almost naked, standing, dazed, by a fence. As he approached him, Kelly fell towards him, and shouted to him that he thought the others must be all killed and to go to them.

After helping Kelly on his way to Gleeson's of the Bridge, Whelan found the rubble of the house scattered all over the field. He found Thomas Gleeson in a terrible condition - his clothes in rags - creeping, with the aid of a piece of stick in one hand and a stone in the other. Some short distance from him, he came to Jimmy Gleeson who was badly injured,

in a dying condition. He was trying to creep, but he was not able to make any progress as the only way he could manage was with his shoulder.

In the meantime, the neighbours around came on the scene. Patrick Reville went with Stephen Moran who lived in a shop at St. Kearns Quay. They made their way with a storm lamp to the ruined house.

Mrs. Gleeson, with her daughter, ran up towards the house and, on their way, found her son, Jimmy, on the ground. She was unable to recognise him at first, except by his shirt sleeves. They had a candle which they placed, lighting, in a cart track and, in some mysterious way, it kept alight while an Act of Contrition was breathed into his ear. He died in a few minutes.

John Whelan whispered an Act of Contrition to Thomas Gleeson. His brother, James, came with other neighbours, and carried him home.

Michael Fitzgerald was found dead on the remains of a wall of the house, and Martin Roche, dead, beside him.

Bob Walsh was still alive, and stones, blown from the house, were on top of him, but he died in a few minutes.

Tom Kinsella, naked of clothes except for his boots, was found outside the ruins and brought home by Martin Walsh and Mick Kennedy.

After Stephen Barron was brought home, though his clothes were in rags and he was suffering from burns and shock, he put on fresh clothes and went back to the scene of the explosion to help his comrades.

Hearing moans some distance from the house, John Whelan found Paddy Kelly in a kneeling position and, close beside him, Jimmy Byrne, lying on the ground, both bleeding, badly burned and suffering great pain.

Pat O'Grady, naked and dazed, standing by a ditch, was found by John Whelan. Michael Conway and John Timmons, naked and covered with blood, holding on to each other, were met by Michael Gleeson at the Tintern churchyard gate, and guided, with Pat O'Grady, to the house by the Saltmills bridge.

By this time, neighbours had increased in numbers. They brought the dead and wounded away. Some went for the Rev. Fr. O'Rourke, C.C., Poulfur, and John Whelan went for Fr. Scallan, St. Leonards. Others went for Dr. Walton, Fethard-on-Sea, and Dr. Anglin of Taghmon.

The priests administered the last rites of the Church to the dead and wounded. Fr. Scallan then went to the ruins, fearing there might be other victims there, and gave general absolution.

Jimmy Byrne died in Kelly's, Saltmills, early next morning. The bodies of Jimmy Gleeson, Bob Walsh and Martin Roche were brought to their own homes.

At daybreak, John Whelan went to the ruins, to remove anything left there, and he found some detonators and piping which he took away.

Information of the explosion reached the military at New Ross next morning. It is believed that messages were sent from the post offices at Saltmills and Arthurstown. The military arrived about 9 a.m. and,

assisted by the R.I.C., raided the houses where the dead and wounded lay.

During the morning, attempts were made by the R.I.C. to hold an inquest. These attempts proved a failure, as word had been passed to the people not to attend. Throughout most of the day, the R.I.C. called all over the townland, and were unable to get anyone to serve on the jury. Thomas J. Kelly, solicitor, later Irish Government State Solicitor for County Wexford, came to assist the men if the military did succeed in holding an inquest.

Jimmy Gleeson was buried in Poulfur. Bob Walsh and Michael Fitzgerald were buried together in Ballycullane. James Byrne was buried in Rathangan, and Martin Roche was buried in Tintern churchyard. The military were present at the funeral to Ballycullane, and followed the remains in Crossley tenders. A party of them also marched after the funeral procession. The weather was fine, and I remember the lorries were covered with dust, and the soldiers had printed, with their fingers, on the sides of the lorries, "Who killed Cock Robin!".

All work in the countryside came to a standstill until the day after the victims were buried. A guard of honour marched beside the hearses, the Last Post was sounded and farewell volleys were fired at the other end of the graveyard.

Pat Reville, Pat Grady and Pat Kelly, all suffering from burns and shock, were able to be moved, and went on the run before the military came from Ross on the morning of the explosion. They were a long



time recovering from their injuries, and the military were continually on the hunt for them. Having very often evaded the round-ups, they were on several occasions close to capture, but they were never arrested.

There were fourteen men making bombs on the night of the explosion. Five men were killed, six men were imprisoned, and three went on the run.

Dr. Jim Ryan and Tom O'Hanlon brought John Timmons and Michael Conway, who were not quite so badly injured as the others, to Dr. Furlong's nursing home in Wexford.

During the week, the military came with ambulances, arrested the injured men in their homes, and removed them on stretchers, although they were not in a fit condition to be taken from their beds. The local doctors had been attending to them up to this time. In addition to other injuries, there were burns all over their bodies which were completely wrapped in cotton wool. Thomas Gleeson, up to this time, lay naked in bed, as he could ~~not~~ bear anything covering him, and he was unable to take any food. Thomas Kinsella, Thomas Gleeson, Stephan Barron and Edward Kelly were brought to the infirmary in New Ross. After about three weeks, all the injured were brought to the military hospital, Waterford, in an ambulance.

Dr. Garrett Hickey, who was a doctor in Ross hospital, gave the prisoners special attention. A fairly strong military guard was placed over the patients, both in the hospital ward and at the entrance gate. Army doctors visited the patients every day, and, on each occasion, wished to remove them, but Dr. Hickey would not consent to their removal, as he said

they were not well enough. He was anxious to cooperate in an attempt to rescue the prisoners from custody, but, before any attempt at rescue could be properly planned, the military took them away and brought them to Waterford, with <sup>our</sup> Dr. Hickey's approval. gvc.

From Waterford, Michael Conway, Edward Kelly and Stephen Barron were brought under military escort to Dunmore Quay where they were handcuffed and put on board a mine-sweeper on which was an unusually large party of armed navy men. The boat arrived in Cork next day, and the prisoners were imprisoned in Cork military barracks where there was a big number of the Republican Army already imprisoned.

During the period in Cork military barracks, they were brought as hostages when the Black and Tans travelled over wide areas of Cork and Tipperary. One of their longest journeys was to Carrick-on-Suir. The Black and Tan officer in charge, before proceeding on their journeys, always warned his party that, in case of meeting any hostility, they were to shoot the prisoners immediately.

In December, 1920, the prisoners, Edward Kelly, Michael Conway and Stephen Barron, were brought from the military barracks, Cork, to Fermoy military barracks where they were detained for four days. From there, they were taken to Waterford prison, travelling via Clogheen, Fethard (Co. Tipperary), Clonmel and Carrick-on-Suir. The other three prisoners, John Timmons, Thomas Gleeson, and Thomas Kinsella, who had been in Waterford military hospital, were also brought to Waterford prison at this time.

During that week, they were court martialled in Waterford prison by a party of British officers. Dr. Walton, Dr. Furlong of Wexford and Dr. Hickey were brought to the court martial to give evidence. Fr. Scallan, C.C., St. Leonards, was also summoned to the court martial, but he refused to attend. When the various charges were read out to them, the prisoners were asked had they anything to say in defence of the charges. The prisoners refused to speak. The doctors were questioned as to the nature of their injuries. Dr. Furlong's evidence was to the effect that they were caused by an explosion. Dr. Hickey, in his efforts to minimise the consequences of such evidence, suggested that, in his view, most of the injuries were burns. One of the officers urged the prisoners to plead guilty to the making of bombs for the waging of a war against His Majesty's forces. He told them that, if they did so, their sentences might be lighter and, possibly, reduced to about three years' imprisonment. The prisoners still remained dumb but, after a pause, each one, individually, said he did not recognise the court. Lieutenant Alexander of the military barracks, New Ross, and Sergeant Linders, R.I.C., Duncannon, gave evidence against the prisoners. The court martial sentence was three years' imprisonment.

The prisoners were then brought, under military escort, to Mountjoy prison, Dublin, which was already full of I.R.A. prisoners from all over Ireland, who had been court martialled and sentenced.

One night in March, 1921, about three hundred prisoners were brought out to the jail yard. Their names were checked, for deportation to Portland prison,

England. During this counting and checking of the prisoners, a party of Black and Tans came on the scene. They were in a drunken and rowdy condition, swinging their revolvers, shouting, cursing and pushing around the military escort, which was in charge of the prisoners. They demanded the whereabouts of Joe Murphy, one of the prisoners. Murphy had been sentenced to death. The sentence was later commuted to imprisonment for life. The Black and Tans wanted to shoot him at sight. The prison governor endeavoured to remove them, but he was powerless to control them. However, realising their intentions, he did not call out Joe Murphy's name. The Black and Tans had some idea of Murphy's description. He was standing alongside Edward Kelly who was somewhat like Murphy in build. He exchanged his cap for Murphy's hat, in an effort to confuse them. The Tans, thinking they had Murphy, seized Kelly from amongst the prisoners and put him against the adjoining wall. As they drew their revolvers to shoot him, Timmons shouted that they had the wrong man, that he was a Wexford prisoner. The governor and military guard intervened to convince them that they had the wrong man - and Kelly recalls that he felt there was nothing between him and death, but a miracle. They were all night out in the yard, and, early next morning, there was a stronger guard of military formed around them. The Black and Tans were again there, mad with drink and determined to get Murphy.

The military lorries arrived, to take the prisoners and escort to the North Wall, to board the boat for England. As there had to be a final check, the list was called again when the prisoners were in

the lorries. The military were beginning to get very hostile towards the Black and Tans at this time. The soldiers stated that they were never ambushed in Dublin except when Tans accompanied them, and that, if they shot Murphy, they (the soldiers) would shoot some Tans. The military shielded Murphy when his name was called. The Tans, in frustration, got up on a wall at the exit of the prison and, putting their revolvers at the cock, pointed them at the lorry that Murphy was in, as it approached them. A couple of soldiers took up their rifles and, as the lorry was at the wall, they swung the butts of them down on the heads of the Tans, knocking them, senseless, off the wall, and thus saving some of their own lives as well as the lives of their prisoners.

The voyage to England was in a cargo boat, and, on arrival at the English port, the three hundred prisoners were taken to Portland prison where they were held for some months.

Conditions in Portland prisons were similar to those in the prisons in Ireland - the usual prison fare and exercise in the prison circle. Speaking to one another was not permitted, but they usually overcame this by acquiring the habit of speaking in an almost silent voice.

In July, 1921, all the Irish prisoners were removed to Dartmoor prison. When being placed in their cells in Dartmoor, Edward Kelly was separated from his Wexford comrades and was put into another wing of the prison with some Munster men. Dartmoor had more rigorous conditions, and the warders were very

hostile, which created a non-co-operative spirit amongst the Irish prisoners. In a short time, they demanded political treatment. This was not granted, and the men in Kelly's wing took drastic action. As Edward Kelly puts it: "It was like getting a telegram when the signals to begin proceedings were given".

The prisoners proceeded to wreck their cells and tear out the walls and fittings. The warders would eventually overpower the prisoners and handcuff them, with hands behind their backs. They kicked the prisoners down the stairway to the underground cells, using all kinds of abusive language, and shouting, "Kick the swine!" They were placed in underground cells and put in solitary confinement, with a diet of bread and water. After putting in a period of three or four days in the punishment cells, they were brought up again and given bags to make. The prisoners refused to do the work, and the same routine of beating, solitary confinement and bread and water took place again. After that, some of them were given fatigue duty in the kitchen and bakehouse (Kelly was brought to the bakehouse). In all cases, they refused to work. Again they were handcuffed, kicked and beaten, and put on bread and water. This wing of the prison was in open rebellion all the time except when the prisoners were taken to the prison hospital, suffering from injuries or in ill-health.

The prisoners were still in Dartmoor after the Truce, and were not released until the 3rd February, 1922.

And, so, the quiet countryside which enclosed the waters of Bannow Bay, had added another page to

its fabulous history. Looking out over the remote and lonely scene of land and water, one could say that time and history had passed it by. Across the Bay are the ruins of Bannow church where are gathered together generations of Dane and Norman and Irish dead. In the scene of tranquility and peace, there is no discordant sound to disturb the symphony of nature's harmony. To the percussion roll of the trembling waves at the Bay of Bannow, the rhythmic beat of the riddling wash of moving gravel, coursing around the shore, and the piccolo cries of redshanks, skimming the waves in wild surge, in answer to the urge of the unseen baton of the Almighty Conductor, opens the concerto of the lark whose solo is in the background cloth of blue sky and sea. And, again, in an interlude of low undertone of sound, are the cries of wild duck and philibin, mingled with the joyous voices of children, playing.

Nevertheless, Bannow has recorded many pages of history. In times beyond recall, it contained the mighty city of Bannow which, for centuries past, has been swept away by sea erosion. Every trace of its quays and jetties, warehouses and public buildings are lost, and nothing remained up to recently but a portion of a paved street. Rushing tides, changing channels and storm raised sand banks now mark its site.

St. Brendan, the navigator, in his many sea voyages, sailed into Bannow Bay in the course of his travels, and, to this day, a stretch of coast is called "Brendaun".

Strongbow and his invading marauders landed in Bannow, and the names of some of his warriors are inscribed on tombstones in Bannow churchyard.

Earl Marshall came and built Tintern Abbey, as a votive offering for safety from ship-wreck from the treacherous sea outside the bay.

Then came Cromwell who despised the monks, and put <sup>THE</sup> Colclough's in possession. Time took a hand in Tintern and in the Colclough's, for, down the years, they adopted the Irish ways and, in '98, one of them fought with the Irish, was captured and beheaded.

The Huguenots came to Bannow, to build their new Geneva, but their stay was brief and they moved to Passage East. The memory of their visit is recalled in the name of another stretch of coast, called Geneva.

In Clonm<sup>N</sup>ies, the seven castles mark the spot where the Dominicans, Franciscans, Jesuits and Augustinians had their houses of study and prayer, until their suppression. The Augustinians clung to their territory without intermission, and still have their church and monastery at the Bannow side, in Grantstown.

Down the years, the sturdy families of Dane, Norman and Irish lived and intermarried, and worked, with supreme skill, in cultivating the land, and became noted for their loyalty and service to Ireland. They gave their services to the Irish armies in many battles against the English. Detachments fought in '98 in the battles of Ross and Horetown. Later, the Fenians and the Land League had active fighters from amongst them, and from those forbears descended the



spirit of freedom in the years of the Black and Tan war, for the descendants of these families were the soldiers of the Irish Republican Army. They offered their services generously and freely, and they accepted the important tasks without any question of the danger involved. They knew that it was a vital necessity in the war against England, and they responded cheerfully to their allotted tasks, which ended in the disaster of the explosion.

A monument has been erected in Ballycullane churchyard, in the form of a limestone Cross, to the memory of those who died from the explosion. On the pedestal is written -

ERECTED BY

NO. 2 BATTALION, SOUTH WEXFORD BRIGADE, I.R.A.,

IN COMMEMORATION OF THEIR COMRADES,

SECTION COMMANDER MARTIN ROCHE,

SECTION COMMANDER MICHAEL FITZGERALD,,

VOLUNTEER JAMES GLEESON,

VOLUNTEER JAMES BYRNE,

VOLUNTEER ROBERT WALSH,

WHO WERE KILLED IN THE EXPLOSION AT ST. KEARNS

ON THE NIGHT OF OCTOBER 12th, 1920.

R. I. P.

BUREAU OF MILITARY	13-21
BURO STAFF	
NO. W.E. 1,507	

SIGNED:

*Joseph McCallery*

DATE:

*10-10-56*

WITNESS

*Sean Brennan Lieut. Col.*