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ORIGINAL

BUREAU OF MILITARY HISTORY 1913-21

BURO STAIRE MILEATA 1913-21

No. **W.S.** 1536

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BUREAU OF MILITARY HISTORY, 1913-21.

STATEMENT BY WITNESS.

DOCUMENT NO. **W.S.** 1536.

Witness

William O'Neill,
Churchgate,
Castletownbere,
Co. Cork.

Identity.

O/C Castletownbere Coy.,
Castletownbere Battn.,
Cork 111 Bgde.

Subject.

Activities of Castletownbere
Coy., I.Vols., Co. Cork,
1917 - 1921.

Conditions, if any, Stipulated by Witness.

Nil.

File No S.2820.

Form B.S.M. 2

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STATEMENT BY WILLIAM O'NEILL

Church Gate, Castletownbere, Co. Cork.

I was born in Castletownbere on 26th June 1898 and was educated at the National School there until I reached the age of 15 years. After leaving school I went to serve my time as a carpenter.

I joined the Irish Volunteers in Castletownbere towards the end of 1917. The strength of the unit at the time was about 30. The officers, as far as I can recollect, were:- O/C. Michael Crowley; 1st Lieutenant, Mark Sullivan, 2nd Lieutenant, William O'Neill.

The only training carried on in the early stages was close order foot drill under our own officers. Parades were usually held in the fields in the vicinity of the town. Later on there were public parades and route marches to other areas.

When the British threatened to enforce conscription in the Spring of 1918 there was a big increase in the strength of the company. The membership was at least doubled. However, when the scare had passed, the majority of the new recruits passed out also.

I think that it was early in 1918 when, with Charlie Hurley and Jerh. McCarthy, I took part in the seizure of two rifles from three soldiers who were on their way back to Furious Pier from Castletownbere. We were not armed, but as the soldiers passed us on the road we jumped on them and took away their rifles. About the same time we also raided a British patrol boat - "The Flying Fox" - at Castletownbere Pier, and seized two more rifles. On this occasion two of us were armed with revolvers. In addition to these activities,

all shotguns and other arms in the company area were collected.

During the conscription period all Volunteers were engaged in organising the general public, collecting subscriptions for the anti-conscription fund and obtaining signatures for anti-conscription pledge.

When these activities ceased towards the end of the Summer in 1918, there was little beyond normal training. Parades were, however, now held in the open. New recruits to the Volunteers were being taken in after careful scrutiny and the strength of the unit was steadily growing.

It was about this time that Castletownbere area was organised on a battalion basis. There were now units at Bere Island, Castletownbere, Eyeries, Ardgroom, Urhan, Ballycrovane, Ardrigole and Inches. These companies formed Castletownbere Battalion. The first officers of the battalion were:- O/C. Charlie Hurley; Vice O/C. Sean Driscoll; Adjutant, Mick Crowley; Q.M. Dan Sullivan.

When Mick Crowley became battalion adjutant, I was appointed O/C. Castletownbere Company.

Throughout 1919 there was very little doing beyond normal training and parades. We were, however, engaged on the organisation and collection of the First Dáil Éireann Loan during the Summer and Autumn of that year.

The first serious operation in which I took part was the attack on Allihies R.I.C. Barracks on 12th February 1920. This operation was carried out by representatives of Castletownbere, Bere Island and Eyeries Companies. It was planned by Christy O'Connell, Con Sullivan (Eyeries) and Jim Sullivan (Bere Island). About 50 men drawn from the three companies

took part in this operation. The main attacking party consisted of about 20 men while the others were engaged on scouting and road blocking duties.

The main attacking party was armed with rifles and shotguns. There were, I think, eight riflemen. The rifles had been obtained - 4 in a raid on Eyeries R.I.C. barracks on St. Patrick's Day 1918, and 4 had been obtained by the men of Bere Island Company from soldiers stationed on the Island. This latter company also supplied the guncotton which was used in the attack. This guncotton had been seized in Bere Island and transported to the mainland earlier on - about mid 1918, I think.

The men engaged on this attack assembled at Inches - about 1 mile from Eyeries - about 8 p.m. on the night of the operation. We moved off across country to Allihies which was about 7 miles to the west. When we reached the vicinity of Allihies the scouting and road-blocking sections were sent to their positions and, after a short delay, the main attacking party moved in.

The R.I.C. barracks was an isolated building in Allihies village with a stone wall surrounding a small yard at the rear. Sections were allocated to cover off the front, rear and sides of the building while another section moved in to lay a charge of guncotton at the base of the rear wall. I was one of a party of three in position behind a fence at the side of the building. We were armed with shotguns and tin-can bombs. Within a short time of taking up our position there was a violent explosion and the greater portion of the rear wall was blown down. The garrison were called on to surrender, but their reply was a burst of rifle fire. All sections replied to this fire and intermittent firing continued till approaching daylight compelled us to break off the engagement. All sections now withdrew to their home areas.

Allihies R.I.C. Barracks was evacuated next day and was later destroyed - about Easter 1920.

Early in July 1920, plans were being made for an attack on Ballycrovane Coastguard Station by the men of Eyeries, Inches and Ardgroom companies. My company (Castletownbere) was asked to co-operate by carrying out, at the same time, an attack on Castletownbere Station. When all arrangements had been completed, Sunday 25th July 1920, at 12 noon, was fixed for the two operations.

About 12 noon on the date fixed, I assembled 12 members of my unit in the vicinity of the Workhouse - a short distance from the Coastguard Station. As the church bell began to toll for 12 o'clock Mass, the whole party moved off towards the objective. Wearing military uniforms and using two military bicycles, Ned Harrington and I cycled boldly up to the station. We got into the Watch Tower without opposition and held up the man on duty there. The remainder of the party in five sections of two each endeavoured at the same time to get into the other buildings (five) which comprised the station. I should have mentioned that station consisted of a terrace of five houses with separate entrances. The house of the officer in charge and the Watch Tower were at one end. When we held up the man in the Watch Tower the others were fired on as they tried to force their way into the buildings. After about half an hour we were forced to withdraw, having a number of casualties - Michael Sullivan, shot in thigh; John McCarthy, shot in stomach; Murt McCarthy, shot in ankle; Jim Mullins, broken leg received when he jumped from a second storey window. The enemy had no casualties.

When Jim Mullins broke his leg in jumping from the building he was carried to the boundary wall of the station yard by Murt McCarthy. At this stage they came under fire

from the garrison and Mullins had to be left inside the wall for some minutes while I sought the whereabouts of the sniper who was shooting at him. I eventually discovered his position and succeeded in forcing him to vacate it. I then took Jim Mullins over the wall and, with the assistance of Dan Sullivan and Willie Downey, moved him about two fields away from the scene of the attack. John McCarthy was then assisted to the local hospital where he was attended to by the Sisters of Mercy who were in charge. In the meantime, Jim Mullins had been picked up by a patrol which moved out in search of the attacking party. Murt McCarthy and Michael Sullivan were taken into Ardgroom area and later sent to a Cork hospital.

During the autumn of 1920 and early in 1921, several raids for arms were carried out by members of Castletownbere Company. Amongst the arms taken in these raids were four revolvers, two of which were taken from a man named McGee who was constantly in the company of enemy forces. He was staying in the Berehaven Hotel. In company with another man he came into the kitchen of the hotel one night where I was having a meal with Jim Sullivan, Mick Crowley, Sonny Sullivan (Mark). He produced a gun and held us up. He fired a shot and his gun jammed and in the ensuing commotion we got away. We immediately picked up our revolvers from their dumps and returned to the hotel later. We held up McGee and his friend in their bedroom and took their guns. This was early in 1921.

Beyond cutting enemy lines of communication, trenching roads and suchlike activities, there was little to report until mid-May 1921.

A general order was issued at the end of April or early in May 1921 to shoot up any enemy personnel as a reprisal for the execution of I.R.A. prisoners. The date fixed for this

general operation throughout Munster was May 14th. A party of about 12 men drawn from Eyeries, Inches and Castletownbere companies were mobilised in the vicinity of the town about noon on the date fixed. They were armed with rifles. As we were moving into position at Toormore, a patrol of R.I.C. and Tans were observed moving through the fields, while a lorry of military drove along the road from Castletownbere. There was an exchange of shots at long range but, as far as I know, there were no enemy casualties. The men from Eyeries now withdrew to the north, and the men from Castletownbere moved to the west towards Allihies.

Amongst those who took part were:- Liam O'Dwyer, Mick Crowley, Richd. Dwyer, John McCarthy, Jim Sullivan, Denis Joe Sullivan, William O'Neill (witness) and Patrick Sullivan.

Beyond sniping of enemy posts and interrupting enemy lines of communication there was no unusual activity during the period to the Truce.

Rank at Truce:- O/C. Castletownbere Company,
Castletownbere Battalion, Cork V Brigade.

Strength:- About 70.

Signed:

William O'Neill

Date:

December 1st 1956

Witness:

P. O'Neill

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