

ORIGINAL

BUREAU OF MILITARY HISTORY 1913-21

BURO STAIRE MILEATA 1913-21

No. W.S. 1551

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BUREAU OF MILITARY HISTORY, 1913-21.

STATEMENT BY WITNESS.

DOCUMENT NO. W.S. 1551.

Witness

Patrick McCabe,
Dublin Road,
Castlepollard,
Co. Westmeath.

Identity.

Captain, Castlepollard Company.

O/C, Castlepollard Battalion, I.R.A.

O/C, Mullingar Brigade, I.R.A.

Subject.

Activities of Castlepollard Company, Irish
Volunteers, Co. Westmeath, 1914 - 1921.

Conditions, if any, Stipulated by Witness.

Nil.

File No S.2871.

Form B.S.M. 2

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STATEMENT BY PATRICK McCABE,

Dublin Road, Castlepollard, Co. Westmeath.

I was born locally and received my education at the local schools. At the school, one of our masters, who was named Farrell, was very keen on subjects of Irish interest and he gave us a thorough grinding in Irish history and our Irish heritage. My grandfather had been an active member of the Fenian movement.

I joined the Irish Volunteers in Castlepollard in June, 1914. Seán McDermott was holding a meeting there that day and it was he who enrolled me. There were about twenty Volunteers in the company then. Tom Clinton was, I think, in command then, and the secretary was a man named Madden. There were no arms available to the company. Ex members of the British army acted as drill masters and instructors. When the 1st Great War started, John Redmond, who led the Irish Party in the British House of Commons, offered the Volunteers to the British government for the defence of Ireland. Colonel Pollard joined the Volunteers then and there was a big rush to join up. Colonel Pollard, of course, came from the aristocracy and was very imperialistic in his outlook. He constructed a rifle range in his demesne for the use of the Volunteers. He organised a concert to raise funds for the Volunteers, and at the end of the concert he invited the audience to sing the British anthem. They would not do so. Colonel Pollard then said they were only a pack of bloody rebels and he would have nothing more to do with them. He even dismissed Sergt. Duggan, who had been acting as instructor.

When the split took place in the Volunteers as a result of Redmond's speech at Woodenbridge, only about eight remained loyal to the Irish Volunteers, the remainder becoming the Irish National Volunteers. Michael Murtagh was in charge of the element that remained loyal and Joe Kennedy of Castlepollard had organised a branch of the Fianna in the town. There were still no arms available to Murtagh's loyal section, and when the Rebellion broke out in 1916 this was still the position. In fact, they had never been in touch with the Irish Volunteer Headquarters or any other Irish Volunteer unit.

Nothing happened around Castlepollard during the time of the Rebellion, and afterwards the Volunteer movement was dead for some time.

In 1917, Joe Kennedy and I set about reorganising the Volunteers in Castlepollard and we got about sixteen to twenty young men to join. There was then no oath or declaration to make on joining. Each man paid a small subscription weekly towards the arms fund and other expenses. There were still no arms of any sort available, except a few shotguns and a few revolvers of sorts. Joe Kennedy usually conducted what training we got then. There was also a company organised in Glenidon, and Coole and Whitehall had good sections which later became companies. There was also a section in Stonestown. The nucleus of a battalion organisation was in existence and Joe Kennedy was appointed Battalion Commandant. I became captain of Castlepollard Company.

This was the situation up to early 1918 when a big change took place. The young men of the country

were now faced with being conscripted into the British army by act of the British government, and the country, almost to a person, opposed this act and resolved to fight it to the last. There was a great influx of men into the Volunteers now and our strength rapidly reached around one hundred. Parades were held regularly now in the open and the services of ex British army men were availed of to lick this new force into a disciplined unit. Anti-conscription meetings were held at which the Volunteers paraded. The Catholic clergy were the leading lights in the opposition to the conscription act, and when they gave the lead the crowd followed. The Volunteers collected for the anti-conscription fund, the monies so collected being held by the clergy. This money was later returned to the subscriber. The Volunteers also had everyone sign the anti-conscription pledge. Other than this sort of activity, tempered with plenty of fiery speeches, there was nothing positive done to meet the threat of conscription.

When the crisis died away, so also did all our anti-conscription Volunteers fade out and, with a few exceptions, we were back in the same position as we were before the crisis. I often thought it was a great pity conscription was not enforced - it would have put a lot of backbone into our men of that time.

When the war ended, Lloyd George, the British Prime Minister, who was then at the peak of his popularity, decided to hold a general election. This election was always referred to as the "khaki" election. Sinn Féin, which had been trying to organise the country to its support since the Rebellion, now decided to contest all seats

against the Irish Party and Unionists. The policy of Sinn Féin was - not to take their seats in the British House of Commons but to stay at home and set up their own government in Dublin. This policy appealed to the great majority of the Irish people, as they had lost confidence in the British government over their handling of the Home Rule Bill and in the failure of the Irish Party to force the issue. The Irish Party did not want to embarrass the British government during the war. The executions after the Rebellion had also turned the people against the British, and they realised that if freedom of any sort was to be won it could only be achieved by a new and bolder policy. The Volunteers entered wholeheartedly into the election fight on behalf of Sinn Féin and linked up with Sinn Féin in furtherance of their cause. I might say that most, if not all, of the Volunteers were also members of Sinn Féin, and the demarcation line between the two was very indistinct. The Volunteers canvassed and collected on behalf of Sinn Féin. On polling day, which was early in December of that year, they did duty on the polling stations to ensure that their supporters were not interfered with in casting their votes. They organised transport to bring the people to the polling stations and also indulged in a spate of personation voting for the Sinn Féin candidate, Laurence Ginnell. Ginnell was returned at the head of the poll, and Sinn Féin won nearly all the seats throughout the country. With the exception of a few brushes with the nationalist supporters - mostly the wives of British army men - the election went off quietly. The R.I.C. were openly hostile to Sinn Féin.

Early in 1919 - in January - all the newly elected M.P.s who were not in jail met in Dublin and the first Dáil came into existence. Instead of an oath to the English King, they took an oath to the Irish Republic. They constituted themselves into an Irish government and appointed a Cabinet of Ministers to administer the various departments of state. The Dáil floated a loan and here again the Volunteers did great work in canvassing and collecting for this loan and a good sum was obtained, even some of those who opposed us in the election now subscribing. Joe Kennedy acted as trustee for the money collected around Castlepollard. Every subscriber was given a temporary receipt and later received an official one from the Department of Finance, which was run by Michael Collins as Minister. All monies subscribed were accounted for, which was a notable feat in itself, and in later years when the Irish Free State was established this money, with its accrued interest, was returned to the subscribers.

Joe Kennedy had been arrested for reading the 1916 proclamation during a meeting. When arrested he had appointed Seamus Maguire of Glenidon as Battalion Commandant. Kennedy was released before the loan was floated. The Dáil now took over the Irish Volunteers as the army of the Republic and each member of the force was required to take an oath of allegiance to the Irish Republic. All our members subscribed to this oath.

The peace conference was sitting in Paris and the Dáil tried to have Ireland's case for independence put on the agenda. A national plebiscite was held towards this end. Here again the Volunteers did the major amount of this work in having all the people sign

the plebiscite. That was as far as the attempt got, as Lloyd George, through Freemasonry influences, succeeded in having Ireland's case refused a hearing.

Sinn Féin was pretty well organised in the country now and proceeded to set up its own courts of justice and arbitration courts. These courts were welcomed by the people, who supported them loyally and took their troubles to them, and the British courts were almost idle. The solicitors and barristers practised at the Sinn Féin courts. Local men of standing were appointed judges of the courts. In Castlepollard, Mr. Clinton, who was also a Volunteer, was judge, and James Thornton was registrar. The Volunteers did duty in connection with the courts, acting as summons servers and enforcing the courts' decrees where necessary. They did duty at the sittings of the courts, which were held at first in a hall in the town. The R.I.C. at first did not interfere with the courts, but later on they did and the courts had to be held in secret. The police and military often raided to try and locate the court, but never succeeded. The Volunteers were now doing general police work throughout the area and were very successful in this work, getting a measure of co-operation from the people that the R.I.C. could never get. In addition, the Volunteers had to make an occasional arrest and detention. Men arrested were kept in a place - a disused house near Ballymanus, under Volunteer guard. Such places were commonly called "unknown destinations".

Plans were made about September, 1919, to attack Ballynacargy R.I.C. barracks. The barracks was in charge of Sergeant Noble of the R.I.C. and contained only a small

garrison. Sergeant Noble had formerly been in Castlepollard and was only in his new station on a temporary basis. His family still lived in Castlepollard and he usually spent the week-ends there with them. It was planned to kidnap the Sergeant when he came to Castlepollard and thus reduce the effective resistance of Ballynacargy. For some reason the Sergeant did not come to Castlepollard on that particular week-end, and for some reason which I do not know the attack did not take place. I understand that a number of men mobilised for the affair and some blocking of roads was done, but there the matter ended.

Seamus Maguire was still O/C of the battalion and I was Captain of Castlepollard. The main work being carried out by the Volunteers at this time was that of police work. At the same time military training went on as usual. One man who refused to attend the Sinn Féin court had to be forcibly brought to the court. This man, who was a Catholic, was the defendant in the case, while the plaintiff was a Protestant. A couple of men had also to be arrested over land disputes. Such cases were generally dealt with by substantial fines. The British courts were now almost idle and were only supported by the Unionist element in the population.

In the early part of 1920 the R.I.C. began to close down a number of their outlying posts and to transfer the garrisons to larger ones. Attacks had been made throughout the country on some such posts and the authorities apparently realised they could not maintain them. This evacuation was a blessing to the Volunteers, as it gave them greater freedom of movement and at the same time removed or curtailed the intelligence service of

the British authorities. The R.I.C. had always been the eyes and ears of their masters in Dublin Castle. It also meant that the Volunteers had to step up their police work, as the withdrawal of the R.I.C. was taken by the less law-abiding elements amongst the population as giving them a free hand to act. The Volunteers quickly put a stop to any such ideas.

In this area the R.I.C. evacuated their stations at Fore, Collinstown, Coole and Finea. A lot of the men from these posts were transferred to Castlepollard, which was considerably strengthened. On Easter Saturday night, 1920, the evacuated barracks were destroyed by us by burning them down. This was a countrywide operation and was carried out by the order of G.H.Q., Dublin. We met with no mishaps during this operation.

The Battalion O/C, Seamus Maguire, went to work in Liverpool and Laurence Murray, who was Captain of the Mullingar Company, now became Battalion O/C. The County Westmeath at this time was one brigade area and it was now divided into two brigades - the Athlone Brigade and the Mullingar Brigade. David Burke of Mullingar was now appointed our Brigade O/C. Thomas Lennon, now dead, was Brigade Adjutant. I don't remember now who the other members of the staff were. The brigade area was now reorganised and Castlepollard became a battalion area. I was appointed Battalion O/C, with Owen Briody as Battalion Adjutant and, I think, James Cunningham as Battalion Quartermaster. The companies making up the battalion were: Glenidon - Captain, James Nugent; Coole - Captain, Luke Rock; Streete - Captain, Patrick Smith. That was all the companies organised at that time.

The only armament that the battalion possessed were a few shotguns and about four revolvers of different types. Around August or September, 1920, G.H.Q., Dublin, ordered a general raid for arms and all houses in the area known or suspected of having arms of any sort were visited by our men. There was no serious trouble encountered in collecting the weapons, as in most cases it was only a matter of explaining to the people that we were acting under orders from Dublin. A lot of the people were glad to get rid of them, as they were becoming a menace. We collected an assortment of shotguns of all types, quite a lot of which were unserviceable, and a small supply of shotgun cartridges. We also got a couple of miniature rifles, but no service weapons of any type.

Elections for the different Local Government bodies were now held, and here again Sinn Féin set out to get control everywhere and contested all seats. Around this area the opposition was still particularly strong and, despite all our efforts, Mr. Keegan, who was a Nationalist, was elected. This man had stood on recruiting platforms for the British, which made his election the more extraordinary. I was a candidate for Labour and Sinn Féin. I headed the poll, but Keegan was elected as second member. This was for the County Council. Sinn Féin had a good majority on the Council, of which Thomas Maguire, a brother of Seamus, was appointed Chairman. The first action of the Council was to repudiate the authority of the British Local Government Board and to pledge its allegiance to An Dáil. We immediately came up against financial troubles, as the banks were loth to grant overdrafts to boards which were founded on such unstable foundations. I had only attended two meetings of the Council when I was arrested.

Meantime we had raided the local Excise offices in Castlepollard and burned all the books relating to taxation. Any papers which were the private property of the Excise Officer were returned carefully to him. An aeriocht had been planned to take place in Castlepollard and Mrs. Skeffington and Jack O'Sheehan were billed to speak at this. They arrived in Castlepollard the day previously and were met by a large crowd, whom they proceeded to address outside the hotel. The R.I.C. charged the crowd with drawn batons and the crowd retaliated by throwing stones at them. The R.I.C. then used their rifles, but I think they only used blank ammunition as no one was hit. This melee went on for some considerable time. The following morning a strong party of military arrived in the town to assist the police in enforcing the ban which they had placed on the aeriocht. However, on the previous night we had decided to go ahead with our function, but we changed the venue and now held it in the hills near Fore. The people of the town and surrounds became aware of the new venue and made their way there unnoticed by the police and military, who were scouring the neighbourhood looking for us. We could see the military on the roads from where we were in the hills. Mrs. O'Sheehan resembled Mrs. Skeffington and we got her to dress like her and to knock around the town. We estimated that they would be watching Mrs. Skeffington's movements and in this way we mislead them. We had Volunteers around the town directing the people to the new venue.

The Brigade O/C, David Burke, now resigned. He was in poor health and unable for the job. A meeting

of brigade officers was called for Mullingar and I was elected Brigade O/C. Michael Price of the G.H.Q. staff represented that body at this meeting. My Adjutant was Thomas Lennon. I can't remember who the other staff officers were. Patrick Kiernan (deceased) now took over command of our battalion.

The battalions which made up the brigade were as follows:

1st Battn., Mullingar area - Comdt. Seán Grogan.
 2nd Battn., Loughnavalley area - Comdt. Wm. Fox.
 3rd Battn., Kinnegad area - Comdt. James Reilly.
 4th Battn., Castlepollard area - Comdt. Pat. Kiernan.

There were about a dozen rifles in the Mullingar Battalion area. These had been bought and in some cases taken off soldiers from the military barracks. The ammunition for them was very limited. I don't think there were any rifles whatsoever in any of the other battalions. Just before I was appointed Brigade O/C we had plans made to capture Castlepollard Barracks. The barracks occupied by the R.I.C. at this time was a house of a terrace of houses, and our plan was to burn them out by getting on to the roofs of the adjoining houses. From the roofs of the adjoining houses we planned to smash holes in the roof of the barracks and then to throw material which would be saturated with paraffin and petrol into the holes. There was a post office on one side of the barracks and a publichouse on the other. There was a wall about thirty yards in front of the barracks and running parallel to it, and we proposed to place armed men behind this to prevent the police coming out by the front, similar action to be taken at the rear. We had ladders earmarked for getting on to the roofs, also a pump to keep a supply of paraffin pumped

into the holes in the roof. This plan had operated successfully against a number of barracks in the south of Ireland.

The Resident Magistrate for the County Westmeath was Maxwell Moore. He was an ex officer of the British army. He still persisted in holding his courts throughout the country, although he had been warned several times to desist from doing so. One day while he was travelling from Mullingar to Castlepollard his car was held up by our men and he and a Justice of the Peace named Hyde were kidnapped. They were kept prisoners for about a week and then released, having been told that if they held any more courts they would do so at their own peril. After their release the British forces made a vast round-up of the area - based on the information supplied by Moore and his companion. Moore had made marks on the walls of the premises where he was detained so that the place would be recognised by the raiding forces when he was released. I had come out of Castlepollard chapel after attending Rosary service - this was October, 1920 - and was one of a number of men standing at the corner near the chapel. Suddenly we were surrounded by a party of R.I.C. and Tans, who were in force in the country now, and we were all arrested. Some of our party were released almost immediately, but about eight of us were detained and searched.

Unfortunately for me, I had a sketch plan of the R.I.C. barracks on me. I had this sketch in connection with the planned attack on the barracks and had completely forgotten that I had it in my pocket. A woman who worked in the barracks had given me details

from which I had compiled the sketch, which gave details also of the adjoining roofs and outoffices. It was thought desirable that the outoffices be included in the plan in case the garrison took refuge in them. Needless to say, they found this sketch on me.

I was first taken to the local barracks and then to Mullingar military barracks. From there I was taken to Mountjoy. After some time in Mountjoy I was taken to Kilmainham for courtmartial. I was charged with conspiracy and several other things, and they connected me with the kidnapping of Maxwell Moore and Hyde and the plan for the attack on the barracks. The District Inspector of the R.I.C. gave evidence that the sketch of the barracks was accurate in all details. There were twelve of us charged. Four got a two years sentence and the rest were found not guilty. ^X I was one of the men sentenced to four years. I was returned to ^X Mountjoy Jail and from there I was transferred to Perth Prison in England, where I was detained until January, 1922. Prison conditions in Perth were not too bad on the whole.

A few days after my arrest, two military officers inspected the R.I.C. barracks in Castlepollard. The officers, I understand, were from the Curragh and they condemned the place as a veritable death trap. The police now commandeered the residence of Mr. Price, a prominent Unionist in the town, and that of his next door neighbour, Mr. Kenny, a business man in the town. The two houses in question were on the Dublin road. They put out the occupants immediately and went into occupation. Curiously enough, they put Kenny, who was a Catholic, into the old barracks as his residence, but Mr. Price, who was a Unionist and Protestant, was left to

fend for himself. Price had to store his furniture and eventually found a place for himself five miles out of town.

The police now fortified this new barracks, breaking the two houses into one and thus making them into a compact block with no houses adjoining. The houses were now fortified with steel shutters, sand bags and elaborate barbed wire protection. The garrison of R.I.C. at the time of my arrest was about thirty, made up of R.I.C. and Tans.

On the death of Lord Mayor MacSwiney, orders had been received that one or two policemen were to be shot in each area. Sergt. Roche and Constable Lynch were selected in our area for shooting, but for some reason they or any other police were not shot. MacSwiney died the day I was being brought to Mountjoy Jail. Seamus Maguire, who had returned from England, was appointed Brigade O/C after my arrest.

The Tans in Castlepollard, with a couple of exceptions, were not too bad a lot and behaved themselves reasonably well, and they were more inclined to drink and get drunk than to be keen on duty. It should not be lost sight of that without the assistance of the R.I.C. these men would be pretty useless.

There were a good few arrested from the brigade area, particularly around the time of the Maxwell Moore affair, and for some time this threw the Volunteer organisation into a bad state and rendered them incapable of action for some time.

We made a large amount of buckshot in the area and loaded it into the shotgun cartridges, but it was almost impossible to keep such material in good order as the cartridges were very susceptible to damp and swelling and could not then be loaded into the guns, or would not extract when fired. We also made a number of concrete land mines and some home-made bombs, but this was after my arrest.

Intelligence officers existed in the brigade and battalions but were not of much value except for local intelligence purposes. Constable Guinan, who was stationed in the local R.I.C. barracks in Castlepollard, assisted us a good deal by supplying us with information about pending raids and round ups and the names of men who were on the wanted police list and about affairs inside the barracks. The post office in Castlepollard was run by pro British elements who were hostile to us. I understand that the post office in Mullingar did very good work, but this was a G.H.Q. affair and outside our control.

There were no spies shot in the area up to the time of my arrest. There were some people under suspicion of working for the enemy, but there was not sufficient evidence or proof to warrant their being dealt with.

Communications in the battalion and brigade area were maintained by Volunteer dispatch riders travelling on bicycles or on foot.

I joined the I.R.B. early in 1920. Joe Kennedy took me into the local circle and administered the I.R.B. oath to me. There were about ten members of the circle all told, who were ^{all}Volunteers, but not all of whom were officers. We paid a small subscription - I think monthly.

Kennedy was centre of our circle. Meetings at first were held regularly, but later on, as things became hot, they were irregular. At these meetings we talked a lot and planned, but this never got us anywhere. I still do not see what useful purpose the organisation served. Perhaps it acted as a kind of backbone in the Volunteer force. G.H.Q. seemed keen on it and they must have had some good ideas of the purpose it could serve. There was also a circle in the Glenidon area.

Signed: Patrick M. Calk

Date:

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Witness:

Michael James O'Connell

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