

ORIGINAL

BUREAU OF MILITARY HISTORY 1913-21  
BURO STAIRE MILEATA 1913-21  
No. W.S. 1,603

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COSANTA.

BUREAU OF MILITARY HISTORY, 1913-21

STATEMENT BY WITNESS.

DOCUMENT NO. W.S. 1603.

**Witness**

Michael J. Crowley,  
Lisieux,  
Enniscrone,  
Co. Sligo.

**Identity.**

Bgde. Staff Officer and member of Cork 111 Bgde.  
Active Service Unit.

**Subject.**

Activities of Cork 111 Bgde., I.R.A.,  
& Active Service Unit 1917-21.

**Conditions, if any, Stipulated by Witness.**

Nil.

File No S.2919.

Form B.S.M. 2

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STATEMENT BY MICHAEL CROWLEY

Lisieux, Enniscrone, Co. Sligo.

(Brigade Engineer, Cork III Brigade).

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I was born at Kilbriittain, Co. Cork, in the year 1897., being the youngest of a family of six children comprising four boys and two girls. In 1916 I was a student at Blackrock College, Dublin, and, prior to the Easter Rising, the sight of Irish soldiers in their green uniforms became familiar to us on the occasions of our walks, usually taken in Dun Laoire, or on 'Free' days when we went to the city. Such sights inspired a section of the students, (rather small) who were nationally minded to form a Volunteer company within the college walls, the activities of which were confined to close order drill. I was a member of this group, but as far as I am aware, we had no contact with the Volunteer organisation; but our action indicated our knowledge of and sympathy with the resurgent spirit of the time.

Our lack of contact with the Volunteers was evidenced by the fact that the Rising came as a complete surprise to our group. A few of us discussed the possibility of getting to Dublin on or about the second day of hostilities, but found the way barred by British military units at Booterstown. On my return home on summer holidays, I found a complete change in the outlook of the people, particularly those of the younger generation, both in Kilbriittain and the adjoining parishes. A company of Volunteers were in existence prior to the Rising in the neighbouring parish of Ballinadee, the officer in charge being Tom Hales. This company had marched, with other companies in West Cork, to rendezvous at Macroom at the start of the Rising, but, due to conflicting orders,

had taken no action. However, they formed the inspiration for the formation at a later date in adjoining areas, including Kilbrittain, of Volunteer companies.

Late in 1916, G.H.Q. sent Hugh Thornton, a young officer who had participated in the Rising, as Volunteer organiser for West Cork. He made Kilbrittain his base for training of existing units and forming new ones and I spent a considerable portion of my time assisting him in his work in adjoining areas. To his enthusiasm and tireless energy West Cork owes a debt of gratitude, as he laid the foundation of the later formed Cork III Brigade.

Early in 1917, Kilbrittain Company along with other units was instructed to take part in the reinstatement of an evicted tenant at Snugmore, near Kinsale. Despite the presence of a considerable force of R.I.C. we reinstated the tenant and ploughed lands, etc. This was the first public demonstration of Volunteers in the area and its successful issue excited favourable comment.

In February and March 1918, Kilbrittain Company raided all loyalist houses in the parish for arms, and collected a considerable amount of shotguns, ammunition and miniature rifles. No active opposition was met with in the raids. In one house, however, we were aware that a British army captain, on leave from the European Front, was resident there. We rushed the house, but the captain escaped through a window, leaving his loaded Webley revolver at his bedside. This heightened the morale of the young Volunteers as it tended to dispel the fallacy that British officers, back from the Front were invincible.

Some weeks later, I was one of a party of four invited to assist a company at Ahiohill, Clonakilty, in making similar raids. At the last house listed for raiding, on

bursting in the door, I was shot by the occupant, receiving a full charge of shot in left lung from a range of approx. five yards. The occupant was driven back to the rear of the house by revolver fire and I was removed. I was about three months recovering from my wound, as raiding continually by R.I.C. and military necessitated frequent changes of houses. Reports circulated of my death eventually eased off the pressure of raiding.

In July 1918, all men on the run from the 1st Battalion assembled in a camp in an unused house near Kilbritten where we made buckshot and bombs and continually trained in the use of arms. In September I went with a number of men to maintain order at elections in Waterford. One of my party was severely injured by a mob at the booth in Ballybricken. In October 1918, I went to University College Cork, where I was not known to be on the run, returning to Kilbritten at weekends or when any particular activity was envisaged.

In Cork, I was attached to the University College Company and also associated with the I.R.B. unit of Cork I Brigade. In January 1919, I was appointed brigade engineer to Cork III Brigade and attended a course of military engineering lectures in Cork city under the auspices of Cork I Brigade, later organising and lecturing to units of Cork III Brigade on same.

In April 1919, I, with the unit of the College Company, took part in the raid for military bicycles which were stored at Marsh's Auction Rooms, South Mall, Cork. Each individual secured at least one bicycle. During the raid, Marsh, the owner of the rooms, endeavoured to prevent any entrance and was shot. During this period, in conjunction with the I.R.B., units of Cork city stood-to for abortive attacks on R.I.C. patrols in the city.

About this period, a force of British military occupied Kilbrittain Castle, then vacant. Occupation of same was caused primarily by action taken by the Kilbrittain Company in dealing with agrarian trouble connected with this estate. The occupation force sent out day and night patrols into the neighbouring countryside. Observation revealed a set pattern for patrols and we shortly ambushed a patrol of eight men and officer at Rathclarin, Kilbrittain. The patrol, in close formation, were sprung on and summarily disarmed. A military sergeant, however, had time to draw his bayonet and inflicted a severe head wound on Lieutenant Michael O'Neill of Maryboro, Kilbrittain. All equipment, including 8 rifles and ammunition, was captured and the enemy released.

Intense raiding and searches followed, but we had Michael O'Neill removed in safety to Ballinhassig. The rifles were safely cached a short time later. The military party withdrew from Castle which was immediately destroyed by burning.

During this summer we learned details of caches of Fenian rifles alleged to have been buried at Knockbrown, Kilbrittain, and an area near Ballinadee. We spent fruitless nights digging trenches in the areas concerned. I, later, in September or October, brought Professor H.N. Walsh, M.E., Professor of Engineering at U.C.C. to Knockbrown to attempt to locate the cache with electro magnet, but the search again proved fruitless.

In November 1919, I, along with other members of Kilbrittain Company, lay in ambush for several consecutive nights for a particularly aggressive member of the local R.I.C. garrison. He was shot a couple of nights later while I was absent in Cork and was, I think, one of the first members of the R.I.C. shot. In February 1920, we attempted an attack on

Timoleague R.I.C. barracks which proved ineffective, as a premature shot alerted the garrison and, not having explosive charges, the element of surprise, which was anticipated, when we hoped to rush doors of building, was lost. After an exchange of shots our force was withdrawn.

In April and May 1920, we were continually endeavouring to locate R.I.C. patrols which usually patrolled the countryside for some miles around their barracks. We encountered a patrol of six to eight men near Upton railway station and, in the ensuing encounter, three R.I.C. men were killed and their rifles taken. We had a similar encounter later at Aughawadda Cross, near Timoleague, where also three members of the patrol were killed. During that period, all men on the run in the 1st battalion area moved around as a small column, usually in strength of 8-12 men, practically all the officers in the battalion being on the 'wanted' list.

After the withdrawal of the military from Kilbrittain Castle, the enemy forces in this company area consisted of the R.I.C. (barracks) and Howestrand coastguard station. The garrison in the latter were at first unarmed, but we later learned they had been supplied with rifles, so we decided on its capture. The Kilbrittain Company essayed the task with the help of, I think, two men from the neighbouring company of Ballinadee. We approached undetected to within about 50 yards of the building, one afternoon, and a quick rush took the coastguards by complete surprise. We benefitted to the extent of 10 rifles and approximately 5000 rounds of .303. The rifles were Ross Canadian pattern, rather cumbersome, but nonetheless welcome. About a week later, which passed with surprisingly little police or military activity, it was reported by Volunteers, resident adjoining station, that a naval sloop or corvette from Cobh had lain at anchor off the station. It soon transpired that sloop had taken the coastguards and replaced them with Marines.

It was decided to attack them before they had properly settled in their new quarters, so we did so within, I think, about ten days. As the Marines were naturally considered much more formidable than the original garrison of coast-guards, a daylight surprise attack was not considered feasible. The Brigade O/C., Tom Hales, was, to the best of my recollection, arrested shortly prior to this time, and his successor, Charlie Hurley, a native of Baurleigh, Kilbrittain, was called on for advice and assistance, which he gladly gave.

I must state that, whether due to their contempt for the Volunteers or, more likely, the short time they were in occupation, the Marines had failed to erect protection barriers of barbed wire, etc., at the approaches to the station. Our knowledge of this decided Charlie Hurley that the best method of attack was to rush building as previously done, with the difference, however, that same would be done at dawn when enemy would be least on the alert. Practically the same men were engaged as on the previous operation. We got into position during darkness and when dawn came, the attack started. Denis Manning of Kilbrittain Company burst in the door with a couple of tremendous blows of a sledge hammer and the Brigade O/C. led the storming party through the building. The Marines were taken completely by surprise, only one man attempting to put a bullet into breach of rifle. He promptly dropped same without firing and the complete force surrendered, without firing a shot, to the best of my recollection.

This success netted us fifteen rifles and approximately 10,000 rounds of .303. Before leaving, we dismantled and removed wireless transmitter. The disarmed Marines were soon evacuated and the building was subsequently burned by the local Volunteers. The wireless transmitter was set up with

technical assistance of post office linesmen from, I think, Bandon, to the best of my recollection.' Some messages between the R.I.C. barracks were intercepted, but the quickening tempo of operations in the area made it difficult effectively to operate without detection.

In July or August 1920, the first detachment of Black and Tans arrived to supplement R.I.C. at Kilbrittain barracks. They soon started daily patrols of the country-side, their frequent route being to the seaside resort of Harbour View situated about three miles from the barracks, which soon became a daily pattern.

We decided to ambush this patrol at Carranfeen and lay in ambush there for two days, but the patrol - contrary to custom - did not arrive. On the third day, we were instructed to attend the funeral of a Volunteer officer - Lieutenant Tim Fitzgerald - who had been killed in an attempted ambush at Brinny, east of Bandon. We travelled in two horses and traps and, at a point about two miles from where we had lain in ambush, on rounding a bend in the road, we drove right through the combined party of R.I.C. and Black and Tans whom we had spent two days seeking.

The enemy were proceeding in single file at both sides of the road, strung out at intervals of 10-15 yards. Fortunately, the road at this point was downhill and both drivers whipped up the horses and drove right through without even being halted, Our party had only side-arms, rifles being dumped, and we were evidently mistaken for local people travelling on legitimate business.

About this period, an event occurred which was to have a tremendous effect on the future of Cork III Brigade. The Brigade O/C., Charlie Hurley, had previously informed me that he had contacted an ex-British army man at Bandon who was keen on joining our organisation and that, despite doubts

expressed by some local Volunteers who had a slight knowledge of him, he (Charlie) proposed meeting him. He did so in due course and decided that he would prove a great asset to us. The man referred to was Tom Barry, whose name, in a few short months, was to become a symbol of terror and consternation to the British forces. - a name revered by every Volunteer soldier in West Cork, as well as every man, woman and child who believed our country was worth fighting for. He was appointed training officer for the brigade and at once started work as such. For this purpose, he decided to hold training camps, particularly for officers, at five different venues of the brigade area, venues approximating to the various battalion areas, each camp to continue for a week. The first 'camp' was held at Clonbouig, Kilbrittain, which I attended. Intensified training was carried out under simulated war conditions and a rigid discipline enforced. As the 'camp' was located only  $2\frac{1}{2}$  miles from Kilbrittain barracks which was occupied by a strong force of R.I.C. and Black and Tans, hostilities could indeed ensue at any moment, but the enemy, though doubtless aware of its existence, made no attempt to attack the camp.

At the conclusion of training, the personnel of camp became the first brigade column to take the field, as such, in East Cork, with Tom Barry as column commandant. Several ambush positions, where enemy were known to travel regularly, were occupied, without encountering them, however.

On disbanding, preparatory to starting another camp at a different venue, a few of us en route from the Dunmanway area contacted British forces after nightfall at Newcestown. Shots were exchanged and the enemy admitted to some casualties. Prior to this, in, I think, August 1920, a Feis was arranged to be held at Ballinadee. Detachments of military about this time

were in the habit of attending such functions for the purpose of attesting 'wanted' men, same to be identified by R.I.C. men. I understand this Feis was purposely arranged by the I.R.A. at this location, which was particularly suitable for an ambush. The Brigade O/C., with men from the 1st Battalion, took up pre-arranged positions, which we occupied all day, but the troops again perversely failed to appear.

Immediately after above, the Brigade O/C. with about 25 men from the 1st Battalion occupied positions for three consecutive days on the Bandon-Crossbarry and Bandon-Innishannon roads (the main links between Bandon and Cork), but made no contact with enemy forces. In July or August of this period I attended a H.Q. engineering camp conducted by Rory O'Connor in Dublin. After the second training camp, held at Ballymurphy, between Bandon and Cork, at which a number of us who had participated at Kilbrittain again attended, the column again took the field. An ambush was set at Tooreen, near Ballinhassig, which was partly successful, two lorries being engaged, of which we captured one with all its occupants, five of the enemy including their captain being killed and a number wounded. Full details of this action, as well as all the ensuing actions by the brigade column, are recorded in full in Commandant Tom Barry's book "Guerilla Days in Ireland".

About this time, some R.I.C. men from the local barracks fired shots into my parents' house where they resided along with my two sisters. A number of bullets lodged in the wall immediately over my parents' heads, as they slept, but, providentially, they escaped. For several nights we lay in ambush around the house and adjacent to the barracks, but no further sorties were made.

In December 1920, the local company decided to attempt the capture of this barracks, which, due to its location and

and defences, was a formidable stronghold. It was situated in the centre of the village and was completely detached, the nearest house on that side of the street being a lock-up shop owned by my parents, about 60 yards distant. A gravelled square in front of the building was completely enclosed with barbed wire entanglements extended 6-8 yards from the front of the building. The rear and sides were enclosed by high walls which, due to sloping ground, were overlooked from the 1st floor windows, which rendered an approach without being seen extremely difficult. It was eventually decided that the best prospect of achieving success was to try to place an explosive charge in position against the front wall of the building, by having the charge fixed at the end of long poles which could be extended over the entanglements, detonation to be effected electrically. The charge, approximately 20-25 lbs. gelignite, was prepared in an oblong box with two separate sets of leads from electric detonators, the box being securely tied on two poles about 12 feet long. Four tall men carried the charge and, despite the bright night, raised it over the wire and against the wall of the barracks without a shot being fired; but, after being placed in position, it slipped down along the wall. I connected the leads with the exploder but without result, and then switched to alternate leads which also failed to explode charge. Possibly the fall of the heavy charge caused a break in the leads which could have been entangled in the barbed wire. A rifle party opposite the front of the building opened fire and endeavoured to explode the charge by concussion, as we also did, by throwing a bomb in its direction but all efforts failed and the attack had to be abandoned, due to danger of encirclement by enemy forces from the military strongholds of Bandon and Kinsale.

A week later, we prepared a mobile charge, approximately in size to a large suitcase with strong hand grip attached, Detonation was to be effected by time fuse, which was placed in duplicate, and the charge was to be flung over the entanglements against the barrack wall by Lieutenant Denis Manning of Kilbrittain Company, who had achieved fame locally as a 'weight-thrower'. I lit both fuzes, about 60 yards from the barracks, having previously thoroughly timed sections of similar fuse. Lieut. Manning rushed with the charge, flanked by a couple of men and myself, and duly hurled it over the wire to wall. We withdrew to cover, awaiting an explosion which, however, again failed to materialise. We returned and bombed the spot several times without result. A member of the garrison later stated that both fuzes burned practically to the detonators.

On that occasion, I recollect I had the assistance of a Scotch soldier (of Irish descent) who had deserted from the British military to join us. He had been attached to an engineering unit in the British forces. He shortly joined the brigade flying column and, a few brief months later, was killed in action at Crossbarry. After this attack, I requested the Brigade O/C. to permit me to remain wholetime with the column, and permission was granted with the personal request from him, however, that I would, insofar as was possible, stay close to and assist in every way the column O/C.

This request showed the confidence and faith that Charlie Hurley entertained of the ability of the man he had selected to put in charge of training and of the brigade column which emerged from the training camps. This confidence was already supremely justified by two major engagements, i.e., Tooreen and Kilmichael, which the column, under Tom Barry's inspired leadership, had taken part in since its formation.

I was not present at Kilmichael, having been sent to Cork City on some business. The description of this fight and the destruction of the force of Auxiliaries engaged, is vividly described in "Guerilla Days in Ireland". While proceeding to a brigade meeting prior to same, by brother Con and John O'Mahoney of Kilbrittain were arrested by Auxiliaries, being, of course, under assumed names. They were detained at Macroom Castle and had the unenviable job of washing the dead bodies of Auxiliaries removed from the ambush scene.

My brother was later informed by an Auxiliary that his identity was suspected and that R.I.C. from different barracks were shortly to come and see him. The Auxiliary advised him to feign serious illness that night, when he himself was on duty. While doubtful of the motive and recognising that he had nothing to lose, if the informant was genuine, Con did so and was sent to Cork military barracks hospital for observation on the following morning, and so escaped being summarily executed.

He never learned the identity of his benefactor.

The brigade column was remobilised early in January and we took up ambush positions at Mawbeg in the Dunmanway area and, later, at Laragh, near Bandon. The ambush positions were 'baited' with the bodies of self-confessed spies of whose presence on the roadside information was deliberately sent to enemy forces in Bandon, but they were not to be drawn. The column commander decided that, as the enemy would not come to us, we should seek to engage them in their stronghold, Bandon. The immediate objective was the destruction of a military patrol, 40-50 strong, which invariably paraded the streets of the town every night for a couple of hours ostensibly to enforce curfew regulations.

Prior to the attack on the patrol, the military, Auxiliary

and R.I.C. barracks were to be covered, fire to be opened by covering parties when the attack commenced. Despite the secrecy of entrance to the town by different sections, the enemy must have been informed of our movements as, contrary to established practice, they remained in barracks. Positions were held by us for several hours without any developments when the column O/C., by pre-arranged signal, ordered retirement. Volleys were fired by covering parties at their objectives before leaving.

This attack, while not realising its immediate objective, nevertheless must have created consternation amongst the enemy rank and file, and a consequent loss of morale, to find that their strong-post in West Cork could be held powerless by what their leaders were describing as a handful of murderers and terrorists for a period of four hours.

The column's next objective was Innishannon R.I.C. barracks situated at the end of the village on the main Bandon-Cork road, about 3 miles from Bandon. I prepared the charge for this attack from gelignite taken from a dump at Crosspound in the 1st Battalion area, with the assistance of Peter Monahan, the Scotch-Irish soldier previously mentioned. Most of it was in poor condition, as the dumps in this area, due to ceaseless military activity, had to be often and hurriedly changed to avoid detection. We, however, got a few sticks in perfect condition and inserted detonators in them, which were placed in the centre of the charge. In due course, we crept up to the door of the barracks and placed the charge in position, then slipped back to where the exploder was placed, and pushed the plunger. A muffled explosion followed and, with the charging party, we dashed for the doorway, but found to our consternation that only a small hole was effected. It transpired that only the few good sticks exploded which accounted for so little damage to the door. The group threw themselves flat on the ground,

and we emptied our magazines through the door and towards the immediate windows, which action gave us time to withdraw before the garrison could open loopholes to throw out bombs. Another attack on an enemy behind strong walls had been made and failed.

The column commander later decided to seek an engagement with the enemy at Skibbereen, situated about 30 miles west of Bandon. The main body took up positions on the outskirts of the town and the column O/C., as was customary, led a party of 12 of us, including Liam Deasy, brigade adjutant, into the town, to engage any patrol which might be in evidence. None were to be seen, so, after occupying a strategic corner for about an hour, we rejoined the column and retired.

We next attacked a strong R.I.C. barracks at Drimoleague but again the charge proved ineffective in causing a breach, and, after an exchange of a few volleys, we moved off, without casualties.

The following couple of weeks were to prove poignant ones for me personally, as, first, I learned of the deaths of four members of my local company - Kilbrittain - who were surprised while trenching a road and ruthlessly killed. A few days later, my brother Paddy, who was resting prior to an operation in O'Neill's house at Maryboro', Timoleague, was notified by scouts of enemy approach. He hurriedly dressed and, while attempting to escape, was wounded and captured. On recognising him, Major Percival, in charge of the military (the famous Essex regiment) shot him dead. My eldest brother, Denis, was caught on the same round-up and, though not recognised, was arrested and suffered brutal treatment at the hands of the Essex.

This party of military then moved on to Kilbrittain

village and compelled prisoners taken throughout the countryside to demolish the shop owned by my parents therein, first having looted the contents. I was later to learn that an uncle-in-law of mine - an elderly man residing at Lislevane, near Timoleague - was shot dead by a raiding party on the same day. My remaining brother, Con, was at this time a prisoner under an assumed name, as previously described.

Some short time prior to the events described, a mixed force of military, Auxiliaries and Black and Tans had raided the house where my parents and sisters resided. They sprinkled the house with petrol, locked the occupants inside and then set it on fire. One of the raiding party, I think a Black and Tan, was humane enough, however, to permit their escape through a back door. Because of the increasing numbers of our people murdered in cold blood by the enemy - the principal offenders being the Essex Regiment - it was decided that in future, where they were concerned, we would meet ruthlessness in kind and henceforth take no prisoners.

Notice of this intention and the reasons for it were forwarded to Major Percival by the Column O/C., the medium of conveyance being a captured soldier. I must say that I agreed with this decision, feeling that it was necessary for our very existence. It was decided to enter Bandon immediately and put our notice into effect, thus proving to the enemy that their terrorist tactics had not the desired effect.

The column O/C. and I entered the town ahead of the column, which took up positions on the outskirts. We entered a house in the suburbs where a member of the family was in Cumann na mBan, and sought the latest information of enemy movements. We walked past the Devonshire Arms, a hotel occupied by Auxiliaries, and bade goodnight to the sentry stationed on steps of same, but were not halted, though dressed in

regulation trench coat, leggings, etc., as used by all column members. The O/C. proceeded to the south side of the town leaving me as a communicating link with the column at the end of the bridge spanning the Bandon river.

A few minutes after his leaving me, I heard voices and footsteps crossing the bridge and stepped towards the corner of house obstructing my view. I bumped into a number of Black and Tans at the corner and I consider that my salutation of 'Goodnight, gentlemen' helped to save me from being immediately shot. The Tans were nervously looking over their shoulders, due, as I later discovered, to the fact that they had sighted the column O/C. about 20 yards distant. My salutation appears to have momentarily allayed their suspicions insofar as I was concerned, and they turned towards the direction of the O/C. which gave me time to draw my revolver.

I consider Tom and I opened fire simultaneously and two Tans dropped a few yards from me. The party, consisting of, I think, 5 in number, had lost two dead at once and another wounded. The remaining two dashed towards the barracks. The O/C. pursued one and dispatched him in a house to which he had rushed, a short distance away. The surviving member escaped, uninjured I believe, despite volleys fired after him by the column which had entered the end of the street shortly after firing started.

A section at the north side of the town, covering the barracks, had picked up some unarmed soldiers of the Essex Regiment and shot two dead and wounded others in their rush for the barracks. We considered we had taught them a salutary lesson and, after awaiting emergence of reprisal force from the barracks without result, the column retired.

Some of us in the column - because of the fact that on one or two occasions Volunteers were caught by surprise while

in bed (the first intimation they got was a torch shining in their eyes) - decided that arms be kept alongside under the bedclothes to give us at least a chance of opening fire.

Early in March, the column being disbanded, I think for a few days, as was customary when changing personnel, I, accompanied by two comrades, Peter Kearney and Eugene Callinan - both former students with me in University College, Cork, and members of the College Company therein, went to Cork City. Due to executions of prisoners in Cork by military on that day, the Cork No. 1 Brigade O/C. had ordered reprisal action to be taken in the city that night. We learned that the College Company had been allocated Patrick Street, the city's main artery, as their scene of operations. The instructions issued were that the I.R.A. in small units were to patrol their respective areas and, at a fixed time - I think 7 p.m. when the public chimes struck - all enemy within range were to be attacked. At the appointed time, Peter, Eugene and I were near St. Patrick's Bridge at the extreme end of our patrol and, as the clock struck, we shot two soldiers. Various groups along the street acted similarly so that we encountered no more in our 600 yards dash back to the western end.

I had instructed another group to hold this corner until all members of the unit had arrived, so we were not alarmed to get an order to 'halt' as we approached it in the semi-dusk. I shouted 'All right' as we continued, but was answered by rapid revolver fire from, it transpired, some Black and Tans from the barracks nearby who had ventured out to investigate the shooting. A few rapid rounds from each of us, however, sufficed to make the attackers retire in haste, leaving our retirement line clear.

A few days later, Cork No. 3 column, now increased to 100 men, again took the field. On 17th March, we lay in ambush at Shippool, on the main Kinsale-Bandon road, at an ideal strategic position. I recollect saying to the brigade O/C., Charlie Hurley, that I hoped St. Patrick would be good to us and send the enemy. I little thought that they were practically the last words I would say to him as, at dawn, two days later, he was killed. The British, as was afterwards established, had got word of the column awaiting them and did not travel as anticipated. Instead, they began preparations for a round-up on a grand scale in which the destruction of the column was envisaged.

Early on the morning of 19th March, with Commandant Tom Kelleher, I was checking an arrangement of scouts, we heard the distant hum of lorries away to the west of the column billets. We immediately alerted all billets and instructed the section leaders with their men to report to column headquarters. When the complete column, consisting of approx. 100 men, had assembled, the sound of advancing lorries had increased and seemed to come from all directions. The O/C. moved men into positions at Crossbarry on the Bandon-Cork road, as described in detail in Barry's book "Guerilla Days in Ireland". My section occupied the centre position on the roadway with the command post on my right and sections protecting both flanks with a reserve party to the rear. Just after dawn, with the sound of moving lorries slowly approaching from the east and west, searching as they proceeded, we heard a sharp staccato of gunfire to our rear. We were later to learn that the outburst of firing was the last fight of our Brigade O/C., Charlie Hurley. The house where he slept was surrounded by the enemy and, indomitable to the last, Charlie, guns blazing, dashed into their midst to meet his inevitable death.

Unarmed scouts sent from the column to notify him of our presence in the vicinity had been captured by the raiding military before contacting him. But he died, as he himself had previously prophesied, alone and, I knew, as he would have desired, guns in hands fighting his country's foes. This brings to my mind a memory of 1919. Charlie's younger brother, Liam, while 'on the run' had contracted typhoid and, after a brief illness, died. Charlie and I were present and, a few minutes after closing Liam's eyes, he and I walked out from the death chamber. I was surprised at his lack of emotion on the death of Liam whom, I knew, he idolised but when we had got clear from the house and friends, the pent-up flood burst for a moment. He suddenly grasped me and moaned: "Oh, if he had only died fighting on an Irish hillside". I mention this in an attempt to describe this man whose love of country and preparedness to sacrifice everything for its sake transcended all mortal things. Hence, I know that he himself died as he would have wished.

Some hours later, the first of the enemy entered our position, consisting of a large motorised force from Bandon. Despite the rigid instructions of Column O/C., that every man remain concealed until they had fully entered, some unwitting movement stopped the leading lorry some 20 yards short of my section. The O/C. ordered the start of the attack and, in a few brief minutes, the occupants of eight lorries were practically wiped out. Liam Deasy, then brigade adjutant and later O/C. brigade, moved from section to section after the initial attack. Just prior to his arrival at my section, heavy fire had started on our left flank where sections under Peter Kearney and Denis Lordan contacted enemy forces from Kinsale and Cork. We moved on to road and enfiladed the enemy lorries on our right until

resistance on our front had ceased. Tom Kelleher's section on north end of left flank now got into action with the column who were advancing from Cork.

Liam took some men from my section, led by the indomitable Jim (Spud) Murphy of Clonakilty, to reinforce sections on our left front and flank, and, after a couple of vain charges, on Kelleher's position at the left flank, the <sup>enemy</sup> hurriedly withdrew. Enemy attacks on our left front were repulsed by sections under Peter Kennedy and Denis Lordan and made surprisingly poor use of their great numerical superiority. Indeed, the entire action convinced our men that resolute fighters, ably led, were more than a match for an infinitely greater number of mercenary soldiers.

After cessation of fire on our frontal positions, arms and ammunition were collected from the lorries and roadway, and I think about 8 lorries were set on fire. Other lorries extended west of the ambush positions had been abandoned by the enemy. The occupants of same attempted to advance after the initial attack, but were driven back by the section of Christy O'Connell, posted on the right flank, and disengaged themselves, quickly retiring in scattered groups to their Bandon headquarters.

From the opening shot of the engagement, our piper, Florrie Begley of Bandon, played warlike airs on the bagpipes until the last shot was fired. When the firing ceased, the O/C. gave the retirement order, which was made in a northerly direction, taking our wounded men, two of whom had to be borne in comrades' arms. Our three dead, including that gallant Scotch soldier - Peter Monaghan - of Irish descent, who had, as previously referred to, come over to us, had to be left where they fell.

On re-assembly of the combined column, about half a mile at the rear of the ambush site, a cart was procured to carry the two seriously wounded men, Dan Corcoran, Newcestown, and Jim Crowley, Kilbrittain. Just as the column moved off, I noticed some figures in a field about 200 yards east of the column. I called on Peter Kearney, Eugene Callanan and Jim Doyle to follow me and we dashed alongside a fence towards the men sighted, who turned out to be scattered Auxiliaries, as Glengarry caps were to be seen. When about 30 yards from them, the enemy fired a few shots at us, but firing as we advanced towards the fence behind which they had taken cover, we saw one drop, but apparently he was not fatally hit, as, when we topped the fence, they had decamped. The column O/C. then ordered a concerted volley from the entire column to be fired in the general direction of where they had retreated, and we made no further contact with the enemy during our retirement.

The following night, the column buried our Brigade O/C. at the family burial ground at Clogagh where my brother, Paddy, had been buried seven weeks previously, and then we moved west to the Rosscarbery area which, apart from the large towns, boasted one of the strongest R.I.C. barracks in West Cork. The battalion O/C., Jim Hurley, had previously contacted an ex-Royal Engineer officer, Captain McCarty, who had agreed to prepare a mine for the attack on this stronghold. This mine had, along with a number of smaller charges and 'canister' bombs, been prepared, and we moved on the barracks.

The column O/C., Battalion Commandant Jim Hurley, and I preceded the four bearers of the 'mine', which was a cumbersome affair. Detonation was by time fuse inserted in duplicate, and fuses were timed to allow for placing in position about 10-15 seconds before explosion. We duly opened the gate

leading to the barracks, placed mine in position without being observed and hurriedly withdrew to the shelter of houses about 30 yards distant. The explosion followed in a few seconds and the storming party dashed for the front of the barracks.

At this stage, we regretted the fact that we had to discard our boots before creeping up to the barracks with the charge, as the explosion broke every pane of glass between us and the barracks, and there was a trail of blood, mixed with the snow which had fallen, along that portion of the street. Personally, I lost my boots and had more than 12 miles to travel after the attack before I could locate them, and spent quite some time removing splinters of glass from my feet. Our dash to the barracks revealed that the mine had done much less damage than we had hoped for. However, a portion of the front porch had been blown down and at least a breach effected into which our crude, but most effective, canister bombs could be flung. The garrison responded with heavy fire and a continuous dropping of grenades on to the roadway. We continued bombing, interspersed with home-made fire missiles consisting of sacking soaked in paraffin tied on short sticks. These soon started a fire on the ground floor and the garrison were driven from same to the second storey. They continued resistance, however, for several hours until the survivors jumped to the rear yard which was protected by high walls, and thence escaped to the local convent. Our work was done, however, as the barracks was, by now, a burned out shell and no longer a menace to our activities between the Clonakilty and Skibbereen strongholds.

Shortly after this, G.H.Q. had mooted the procuring of arms and ammunition from, I think, Italian sources, and asked that the necessary arrangements for their landing and

subsequent distribution through the newly-formed 1st Southern Division be undertaken by Cork III Brigade. The point of landing was to Union Hall in the Skibbereen battalion area. Peter Kearney and I were detailed to make a detailed survey of roads leading from Union Hall, and other matters dealing with the proposal which, however, did not materialise.

In May 1921, it was decided at a 1st Southern Divisional meeting that if the threatened executions of arrested I.R.A. men confined in Cork were carried out by the British, a concerted daytime attack would be carried out simultaneously on all enemy posts in the divisional area. The executions were duly carried out, and, on the appointed day, every enemy post in Cork III Brigade area was attacked. I will confine myself to the attack on the forces in Bandon in which I participated. The column O/C. decided that the most effective way to effect contact was to drive through the town in a motor car past the military barracks and Devonshire Arms, the H.Q. post of the Auxiliaries, where we were bound to get targets. The party comprised the column O/C., Commandant Sean Lehane, driver of car (Model 'T' Ford), Peter Kearney, Billy O'Sullivan (machine gunner) and myself.

Our plans, however, had to be hurriedly changed because of the enemy's disposition. As we approached the square, of which the military barracks formed the south side, a sentry shoved himself, over the fence on the left side of the road. On the field on the right side, a large force of military had converged. Our presence seemed to puzzle the sentry as he did not attempt to halt us. The O/C. ordered our driver to halt and the party lined the fence and set up a Lewis gun trained on the military. I watched the sentry, not 20 yards distant, but was loth to fire until my companions had done so on the main body. Immediately they did, however, I opened

fire on him and he fell back behind the high fence over which he was peering. After emptying the pan and our rifle magazines, the car was turned on the roadway as it would have been suicidal to attempt to reach the auxiliary post, which would mean being open to flanking fire from the barracks and frontal fire from the alerted Auxiliaries. We retired to Newcestown from where the sortie started, without casualties. An enemy statement later admitted one soldier dead and several wounded which, undoubtedly, would not have been an overstatement, so we considered the affair had been satisfactory.

Shortly after our daylight raid on Bandon and other enemy posts, the column was disbanded for some days, the men retiring to their own battalion areas. The column O/C. was requested to report to G.H.Q., and Peter Kearney, Eugene Callanan, Dr. Con Lucey and I were granted some days' leave for which we decided to go to Dublin. We had an uneventful journey, proceeding by train from Cork city, to the best of my recollection, and staying at the North Star Hotel at Amiens St. We were in the hotel when we heard the firing which presaged the destruction of the Custom House.

On our return to Cork III area, the column was reformed and we occupied several ambush positions in the Clonakilty-Dunmanway areas without encountering enemy forces which, at this period, only travelled apparently when absolutely essential and then in strong force. This period of relative quiet preceded a vast round up by British forces from which the column was extricated only by forced marches, the last over 24 hours, through treacherous boggy mountain paths, which culminated at Gougane Barra, just outside the area combed by the British forces, with the roadless Kerry mountains to our back, ensuring a line of relatively safe retirement despite the strength of the attacking forces.

This round up had lasted for five days and was, from the British viewpoint, a complete failure. Shortly after this, we arrested a number of loyalists in our area, the most prominent being Lord Bandon, and held them as hostages against executions of our men.

I took part with Commandant Jim Hurley of 2nd Battalion area (Clonakilty) in the arrest of two Justices of the Peace. While rumours of peace talks were growing apace, nevertheless it came to our knowledge that the British were planning the taking over as military barracks of the workhouses in the area, which, being strongly constructed, could be easily turned into strong fortresses. With the Brigade O/C., Liam Deasy, I took part in the evacuation of patients and burning of workhouse at Skibbereen, Bandon, and the Schull buildings were also destroyed at the same time.

While no major engagements with the enemy took place in the Cork III Brigade area during the latter weeks prior to the declaration of the Truce, a constant harrying of the enemy by sniping attacks on barracks, occupation of Bandon, in anticipation of military patrols on a number of occasions, road trenching, etc., kept the I.R.A. continually on the move.

In the latter part of June, while in the 2nd Battalion area it was decided temporarily to disband the column. Some of the sections had actually moved off to their respective areas when we got word that a large force (over 100) Auxiliaries had entered the village of Rosscarbery. I took my section of about 15 men to the rear of the village which lies in a basin at the foot of steep hills, while the column O/C. took the remainder of the men into the village from the east side. To reach our position it was necessary to crawl the last 100 yards on hands and knees, as we expected the enemy to have placed outposts guarding their rear. Just as we arrived at

the last fence between the hilltop and the town, an Auxiliary suddenly rose from the other side of the fence where he was concealed and shot the man on my immediate left in the thigh and immediately dashed for cover towards the brow of the hill about 20 yards distant. I decided to ensure that this enemy would pay the ultimate penalty, and purposely delayed firing until certain that I had him fully in my sights. To my chagrin, I had what I believe was the first misfire for my period with the column. General firing had now started with the section in pursuit of the enemy and, though I had a snap shot at my first adversary, I am not confident that I dispatched him. Due to the strength of the enemy and our small force, we were content to drive them back on the village from which, on our withdrawal, they hurriedly left. This was actually the last action the column had, though in the first week of July with the battalion commandant, Jim Hurley, we entered the town of Clonakilty with the column sections, remaining there for several hours without the enemy making their appearance. A few days later, the Truce came into operation, thus concluding the activities of the Black and Tan war.

Before concluding, I feel I should state that a perusal of the foregoing may give the impression that the period covered was primarily a time of hardships and terrors, but there were compensations. For instance, it became nearly a nightly practice when the column assembled at H.Q. billet to have some good singers, like Peter Kearney or Sean Lehane, to inspire us with the war songs of other days, like Sean O'Duibhir a Gleanna or the Battle Hymn, for which rendering the setting was most fitting.

Again, we had in the column Paddy Walsh of Ballineen area, whose forte was improvisations of modern words to old airs, and so, such songs as "The Boys of the County Cork", "Barry's

Column" etc., etc., came into being. Again, while waiting the closing in of the enemy from all sides at Crossbarry the column O/C. spiritedly played airs on the piano, in our Unionist H.Q. house. Another recollection is the calling for volunteers by the O/C. for entering of Skibbereen, and his stressing the fact that such volunteers must be fleet of foot as a considerable open space would have to be traversed speedily if the enemy were contacted in force. The first volunteer to step forward was Captain Jackie O'Neill of Kilbrittain, who was not long after undergoing medical treatment for a bad heart. He was solemnly passed as 'eligible' by the O/C. for the sortie, who knew he would be most aggrieved if not in the forefront.

The end of our incursion to Skibbereen was amusing. We had found it necessary to detain all the residents returning from the west entrance, so that news of our presence would not be carried prematurely to the military, whom we had expected to patrol the town, particularly as some of its leading citizens were not regarded as being sympathetic to the I.R.A. We held them in a yard convenient to an occupied street corner and, when we finally decided to leave town, I got the not unpleasant job of making some of them sing the National Anthem. I also ordered a drink at a nearby publichouse for the rearguard (including Jackie O'Neill). We had procured two jaunting cars to take us to rejoin the column, the owner having to be forcibly persuaded to supply same, so I felt it safe to indulge in the luxury of that drink. I do not recollect having money to pay for it either, but felt that the residents owed us something for the impromptu concert.

Another episode comes to mind in connection with a company camp, formed of wanted men at Kilbrittain in 1918. A Volunteer from another company came to join us and was not very popular, some of the men considering that he was not a 'wanted' man. My brother Con was addicted to 'sleep walking' and lurid tales were circulated in the hearing of the

stranger of how dangerous he could be in this condition. The stage being thus set, Con started up during the night making a fearful din. The stranger hurriedly decamped, taking some of his garments in his hands, and was pursued by Con, armed with two guns, for a considerable distance. The stranger did not return to that camp and indeed, to the best of my recollection, shortly afterwards dropped out of the national movement.

Such incidents occurring over the years tended to lighten the hardships of, very often, poor quality food and primitive sleeping accommodation. I have seen six men squeezed into a bed designed for two and, as often as not, our bed was a bundle of straw on the kitchen floor. This, again, was offset by the splendid hospitality of those people in the poorer parts of the area who cheerfully gave ~~the~~ their often meagre all to 'the boys', as they affectionately called us. At the latter part of the campaign, we billeted when possible on the wealthy 'loyalists', or forced contributions from them of cattle, which were killed and dressed by the column butcher and distributed to billets. The column's journeys were generally made under cover of darkness, often arriving at new billets in the early hours of the morning.

I cannot conclude without paying a tribute to the efficiency of our brigade quartermaster, Tadhg O'Sullivan, R.I.P. He was more than a good Q.M., he was a wizard at producing food, clothing, etc., when most required. The column 'trench coats' and good stout boots - the greatest requisite for men almost continuously on the move in all weathers - were always to be had for the asking.

Even in the most adverse circumstances, grumbles were

very seldom heard from the men, which speaks highly for the officers in charge. Indeed, I consider the men of that time were in closer communion of spirit than even blood relations, and the death of one member caused a feeling of grief and loss to all.

I am sure that Ireland will always produce men of that type when her needs demand them.

Signed: Michael J. Crowley

Date: March 22<sup>nd</sup>. 1957

Witness: J. P. [Signature]

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