

ORIGINAL

BUREAU OF MILITARY HISTORY 1913-21
BÚRO STAIRÉ MILEATA 1913-21
NO. W.S. 1627

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BUREAU OF MILITARY HISTORY, 1913-21.

STATEMENT BY WITNESS.

DOCUMENT NO. W.S. 1627.

Witness

Charles Conaty,
Ballyhist,
Carnaross,
Co. Meath.

Identity.

1st Lieut., Stonefield Coy.
O/C, 2nd Battn., No. 3 Brigade.

Subject.

Stonefield Coy., I. Vols., Co. Meath,
1919 - 21.

Conditions, if any, Stipulated by Witness.

Nil.

File No S. 2959.

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STATEMENT OF CHARLES CONATY,
Ballyhist, Carnaross, County Meath.

I was born in the month of September, 1901, and attended the local National School until I was 15 years of age. After leaving school I was employed as assistant land steward on the Everard Estate.

I joined the Stonefield Company of Irish Volunteers in May, 1919. Seamus Cogan was Captain and Michael Wynn was 1st Lieutenant at the time. I don't remember who the other officers were. We numbered only ten men and had two rifles. We had no other arms. We drilled once a week. In the month of June or July a parade of all Companies in surrounding areas, including Carnaross and Ballinlough, took place in Rooney's field in Seymourstown. The total strength of those Companies on parade was about sixty men. The officers present included Seamus Cogan, Sean Hayes and Tom Manning. We carried out some foot drill and field exercises.

In the spring of 1920, all companies in the vicinity of Stonefield were formed into a battalion. They included Carnaross, Stonefield, Ballinlough and Oldcastle. Our Captain, Seamus Cogan, became Battalion O/C. I can't recall who the other officers were. Following the appointment of Seamus Cogan as Battalion O/C., Michael Wynn became Captain of Stonefield Company and I became 1st Lieutenant. We were the 5th or Stonefield Battalion of County Meath Brigade. Following instructions from the Brigade O/C., Seán Boylan, the Stonefield Company, in charge of Seamus Cogan and Michael Wynn, raided the Income Tax offices in Oldcastle in the month of May, 1920. All documents, ledgers and correspondence were seized and burned outside the town. The Oldcastle Company, being familiar with the area, did guard duty while the raid was in progress.

Around this time a Volunteer named Clinton was shot dead by an ex-British soldier named Gordon. A gang of ten local men, which became known as the Cormeen gang, were responsible. The trouble arose over a land dispute. The Clintons had secured the disputed land in face of strong local opposition. Gordon had been hired by the gang to shoot Clinton which he did after shooting two horses just as they were being attached to a plough by Clinton. All of the gang were arrested by Seán Boylan, O/C., and members of the I.R.A. Gordon was arrested later. They were detained at Bolthown House, Kells, and other places for several months before being tried. With other Volunteers, I was on guard duty at Bolthown House for about a week when they were transferred to the Bohermeen Company area. The gang were tried by a Military Court held near Dunboyne. They were all sentenced to deportations and escorted to the North Wall, Dublin, where they were put on board a boat for Liverpool. Gordon was subsequently tried and sentenced to death. He was later executed. Our Battalion O/C., Seamus Cogan, was a member of the Court that tried the gang and Gordon.

On the 20th or 22nd July, Seamus Cogan was shot dead on the outskirts of Oldcastle. He, with other Volunteers, was taking a prisoner in a commandeered motor car to an "unknown destination" when they ran into a group of military outside the town. It appears that the military called on them to halt, but they did not do so. After an exchange of fire it was found that Cogan was shot dead and a couple of his companions were wounded. After Cogan's death Sean Keogh became Battalion O/C., Peter O'Higgins became Battalion Adjutant and, to the best of my knowledge, Barney Harte became Quartermaster.

Seán Keogh had been Battalion O/C. for about two months when he was arrested. In the meantime a vacated R.I.C. barracks at Crossakiel was burned down by members of Ballinlough, Stonefield, Whitefield and Carnaross Companies. By this time companies had been formed in Whitegate, Ballinacree and Moylough areas and had been incorporated into the Battalion. A general raid for arms in the Battalion area took place around this time. About forty shotguns and various types of revolvers were seized. In one case we knew of a man who held a shotgun and a revolver. He refused to let us have either. We searched his house but could not find them. A week later we tried again. He eventually handed us the revolver and told us that he had given the shotgun to the R.I.C.

Shortly after this Seán Keogh was arrested and Tom Manning replaced him as Battalion O/C. As 1st Lieutenant of Stonefield Company, I attended all Battalion Council meetings. At a special Battalion Council meeting held in the Carnaross Company area - which was attended by members of the 4th Battalion Staff, including Tom O'Reilly, the 4th Battalion O/C., Pat Clinton, Paddy O'Reilly (Captain of Moynalty Company) and Patrick Farley - the Brigade O/C., Seán Boylan, who presided, announced that an ambush of enemy forces would have to be carried out in each Battalion area and suggested that the preparation of plans for the attacks be made immediately. Tom Manning, our Battalion O/C., stood up and opposed the idea, saying that we had insufficient arms or ammunition to meet any reprisals which were likely to follow. He was supported by Peter O'Higgins and other officers including the officers of Ballinlough Company (5th Battalion). The officers of the 4th Battalion agreed to formulate plans for an ambush in their area.

That night Seán Boylan stayed at my house (as he often did while in the area). He was upset over Manning's attitude and asked he who he could appoint in his place. I suggested David Smith. He was appointed next day and Tom Manning was reduced to the ranks. At the same time Peter Connell was appointed Battalion Adjutant and Matt Tevlin became Battalion Engineer.

On the following Sunday night (it was the month of December), with Seán Boylan, David Smith, Peter Connell and Matt Tevlin, I attended a meeting in the old workhouse in Delvin. Pat Clinton and other officers of the 4th Battalion were present, as well as all the Brigade officers including Eamonn Cullen, Engineer; Seamus O'Higgins, Quartermaster; Seamus Finn, Adjutant; and, of course, Seán Boylan, O/C., who had come along with me. An officer from G.H.Q. presided - I forget his name. The purpose of the meeting was to organise and formulate plans for attacks on enemy patrols and outposts. Seamus O'Higgins was to be supplied with a complete list of all arms in the Brigade area and, after some discussion, it was arranged that Eamonn Cullen should come into the 5th Battalion area to instruct us in the making of mines and bombs.

A short time subsequent to our meeting in Delvin, plans had been made for an attack on Oldcastle R.I.C. barracks. It was arranged that we would all meet at Ballinvalley about one and a half miles from the town. The attacking party numbered about forty men, four or five of whom carried rifles; a few had revolvers while the remainder had shot guns. The men included members of Carnaross, Stonefield, Whitegate, Ballinlough and Oldcastle Companies. All of the Carnaross Company, five or six of the Oldcastle Company

and about six of the Ballinlough Company reported. Pat Farley and David Smith were among the senior officers present.

When I got there I noticed a man dressed in black walking up and down near our men. After a while he approached a group of our men and asked, "Who is in charge?" He warned them that we were going to our deaths, that the Military were in the town and were aware of our intentions and were waiting for us. After discussing the situation with those present Pat Farley called the whole thing off. The man in black was a local priest. Paddy McDonnell, Battalion I.O. and Police Officer of the 5th Battalion had just previously commandeered a taxi which he intended to drive into the town with the object of drawing out the Police. Needless to say he did not do so when he heard of the situation. He was subsequently shot dead by the R.I.C. in trying to evade arrest, in March, 1921.

A month or so later, a few of us met in a house near Virginia Road railway station. Those present included Pat Farley, David Smith, Peter Connell, Tom and Patrick McDonnell, Mick Wynn, myself and three others. Here we arranged to try once again to attack the R.I.C. patrol in Oldcastle and decided to do so on the fair day in February, 1921. Selected men from each Company were to be asked to take part. Before the fair day Paddy McDonnell called us together and questioned each one in turn as to whether we had told anyone of our proposed attack. No one admitted having mentioned the matter to anybody. He told us that the R.I.C. in Oldcastle knew of the time and date of our proposed attack. We had to call it off once again. We had intended to use the five rifles already mentioned as well as shotguns.

On the 27th March, a Battalion Council meeting was held at Farley's of Clonagrouney, which I attended. At the meeting an ambush was arranged for Sylvan Park on the Kells to Oldcastle Road, Ballyhist, the townland in which I lived, in the Stonefield Company area, was used extensively by the Brigade staff as a safe place of retreat and here they spent a lot of their time while "on the run". Following the meeting Seamus Finn, Brigade Adjutant, arrived at my father's house. I told him of the proposed attack and of the site selected. He examined it and approved. Our intention was to attack a patrol lorry of Military who travelled the road fairly regularly.

On the night of the 31st March, Seamus Finn, with forty I.R.A. men, occupied a vacant house, the property of a man named Terence Bennett, close to Sylvan Park. As we were about to occupy the house we arrested a man named Jimmy Shields: he had seen us and we were afraid he would spread the news of our presence. Included among the officers were : David Smith, Peter Connell, Matt Tevlin (Engineer), Mick Wynne (Captain of Stonefield Company), Phil Tevlin and Seán Keogh, the former Battalion O/C., who had been arrested some time earlier and had been released by this time. Our arms consisted of nine rifles - three of them our own; the other six being supplied by Seán Boylan - and about thirty shotguns.

At 7 a.m. next morning scouts were placed on ^{Brumbaragh} ~~Brambaragh~~ Hill and ^{in woods} Ball-alley situated on the Kells side of Sylvan Park. At the same time, Matt Tevlin, assisted by three or four Volunteers, laid two home-made land mines in the centre of the road in the ambush position. Tom Mulvany, Pat Dunne, Ned Connors and myself, armed with rifles, were allocated a position at the entrance gate

to Sylvan Park House, which was on the left-hand side of the road from Kells to Oldcastle. The shotgun men were placed in extended formation above and below the land mines on the left-hand side also. Seán Keogh, Pat Tobin and Harry Lee armed with rifles, were placed away on the right-hand side at least 150 yards nearer Oldcastle. Matt Tevlin and his helpers, having laid the mines, took up positions on the right-hand side also.

When all was ready a postman - an ex-British soldier called Shorty Smith - arrived in the ambush position with a pony and sidecar, bringing the mail from Kells to Crossakiel. He was followed by a tramp tailor and another ex-British soldier. We arrested the three of them and took them to an outhouse at the back of Sylvan Park House where they, with shields, were held under an armed guard. The pony and sidecar were also taken to the back of Sylvan Park House, which was behind us on the left-hand side of the road.

We remained in positions until 3 p.m. There was no sign of our expected Military lorry in the eight hours' wait. At 3 p.m. it was decided to lift the mines and move off. They had just been lifted when a signal was transmitted from Drumbarra^{gh} Hill via ~~the~~ ^{crossroads} Ball-Alley that the lorry was coming. When the lorry came into the ambush we opened fire from our position. It was a lorry load of Tans; we saw one of them drop to the floor of the lorry wounded. They returned the fire and drove out of the ambush position. We then dispersed. We had been instructed ^{originally} /not to open fire until the mines had exploded.

The lorry we attacked was not the usual one that went that way. It so happened that Mrs. Booker, wife of the Postmaster at

Crossakiel, had gone into the Kells Post Office and subsequently to Kells R.I.C. barracks to report that Shorty Smith with the pony, sidecar and mails had not arrived at Crossakiel Post Office that morning and was missing. The Tans and R.I.C. had come out in the lorry, which we attacked, to trace him.

On the following Monday, the 4th April, a big wound-up by Military, R.I.C. and Tans took place in the Battalion area. About eight I.R.A. men were arrested, three of those were released after a few days; the rest were detained in Kells and other places and eventually sent to the Curragh where they were interned until after the Truce.

A reorganisation of the Meath Brigade now took place. Our Battalion, the 5th, now became the 2nd or Stonefield Battalion of No. 3 Brigade, which was one of nine Brigades comprising the 1st Eastern Division. The No. 3. Brigade had four Battalions at first; they were :- Newcastle or 1st, Stonefield or 2nd, Virginia or 3rd, and Bailieboro' or 4th. Subsequently two further battalions, formed from one or other of the first four, were established and became known as the Oldcastle or 5th and the Lurgan or 6th.

The companies comprising the 2nd Battalion were : Carnaross, Ballinlough, Stonefield, Whitegate, Fennor, Ballinacree and Moylough. Oldcastle Company, which was in the 2nd Battalion at first, subsequently went into the 5th Battalion.

The officers appointed for the 2nd Battalion were : Battalion O/C. Charles Conaty (myself) Vice O/C. Michael Wynne, Adjutant, Peter Connell, Quartermaster, Bryan Daly, I.O., Matt Smith, and Engineer, Matt Tevlin.

The 3rd Brigade officers appointed were Brigade O/C. Patrick Farley, Vice O/C. Sean Farley, Adjutant, T.P. McKenna,

Quartermaster, David Smith, I.O., Ralph McKenna, Engineer, Dick McKenna and Police Officer, Peter O'Reilly.

Following the reorganisation, Carnaross Company carried out an ambush at Drumbara under their own officers. The details of this ambush may be obtained from Jack Lynch, Postman, Carnaross.

Eamonn Cullen, our former Brigade Engineer, was appointed Divisional Engineer. He, Mick Wynn and myself, had a narrow escape in Ballyhist around this time, when fourteen lorry loads of Military and Tans in charge of General Tudor, made a sweep of the area. Cullen and Wynn had been staying in my father's house at the time. One morning a strange man was seen by my sister running out of the yard. We surmised he was a spy and that he had subsequently conveyed the news to the authorities that Cullen was in the area. We managed, however, by great strategy, to evade arrest.

At the latter end of June, 1921, a Brigade Active Service Unit or Flying Column was formed. We numbered about thirty; all or nearly ^{all} were Brigade or Battalion Officers in the No. 3, Brigade. We camped on Mullagh Hill in the open, where we went through a course of training for a period of one week. We all had rifles. Our training officer was an ex-British soldier named Joseph Carolan of Killeeter, Mullagh. T.P. McKenna, Brigade Adjutant, gave lectures on discipline and other matters.

Apart from the events related a lot of work went into the preparation of several ambushes which never materialised during the period, due to shortage of ammunition or other causes. Raids on mails were frequent but, in no case, did we, in the

censoring of letters, find a leakage of information to the enemy, though, I must say, they were well informed.

Raids were also carried out on Virginia Road Railway Station, where boycotted Belfast goods were seized and subsequently destroyed.

SIGNED: Chas. Conaty

DATE: 11th June 1957

WITNESS: John J. Daly

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