

ORIGINAL

BUREAU OF MILITARY HISTORY 1913-21
BÚRO STAIRÉ MILÉATA 1913-21
No. W.S. 437

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BUREAU OF MILITARY HISTORY, 1913-21.

STATEMENT BY WITNESS

DOCUMENT NO. W.S.437.....

Witness

Comdt. Leo Baxter (retired),
Killin Mills, Longford,
Co. Longford.

Identity

Vice-Comd't. and later Comd't.
4th Battalion, Longford Brigade,
1918 - 1921.

Subject

Activities of 4th Battalion, Longford Brigade,
1918 p 1921.

Conditions, if any, stipulated by Witness

Nil

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STATEMENT BY COMMANDANT LEO BAXTER (Retired),

Killin Mills, Longford.

I joined the Irish Volunteers in 1917 in Ardagh. Joe McGuinness took me into the Volunteers. I took no oath on joining and, as far as I remember, was not issued with a membership card. We paid a small subscription - I think it was twopence per week - towards expenses and the purchase of arms and equipment. This was a brigade levy. A company organisation existed in Ardagh at this time. The Company O/C. was Paddy Trant, I think, and the strength of the company was about thirty at this time. We had no arms of any kind. Our instructors were a couple of British army men who were also members.

There was a Sinn Fein Club in Ardagh and all the members of the Volunteers were also members of this. Parades for training were held twice weekly. At first, training was done in the open under the eyes of the R.I.C., but later, it was carried out in secret. The Volunteers took a big part in the McGuinness election in South Longford and were active in canvassing and other duties on his behalf. Training was continuous all through 1917 and 1918.

During the General Election in 1918 we were very busy - checking up on the register of votes, canvassing voters and arranging transport of all sorts to bring the voters to the polling stations. On polling day we did protection duty on the polling stations and afterwards we escorted the polling boxes to Longford for final counting. The R.I.C. also provided an escort for the same purpose.

At this time there were two battalions of Volunteers organised in Co. Longford: one battalion in the north county and one in the south. In the end of 1918, or early in 1919,

It was decided to organise the county further. A battalion was organised in our area and P. Ryan of Listreena was appointed officer commanding; I was appointed vice-O/C. The adjutant was Paddy Trant and my brother, John Joseph, was Quartermaster. A/Coy. comprised the Legan area; B/Coy. Ardagh area; C/Coy. Carrickedmond area; D/Coy. Edgeworthstown area and E/Coy. Moydore. There was also a half company in the Rathowen district. This was the 4th Battalion, the whole county now being organised into a brigade and known as the Longford Brigade.

A/Company was commanded by Michael Ballesty, afterwards a captain in the army and now deceased. B/Company by Pat Farrell. C/Company by John Scally. D/Company by Felix McCabe; E/Company by James Lenahan. P. McNamara was in charge of the half-company in Rathowen.

By May 1920, the R.I.C. had vacated a number of their smaller barracks and concentrated their garrisons in larger centres. All these vacated barracks were destroyed by burning by the Volunteers on one particular night. This was a country-wide operation and it gave us a great insight into the extent of the organisation of the Volunteers or the I.R.A. as they were now known. After the 1918 General Election, and when the Dail assembled in early 1919, the Volunteers became the army of the Republic and took an oath as such.

Ryan was now deprived of his appointment as Battalion O/C. and I was appointed in his stead. Michael Ballesty was appointed Vice O/C. and I think it was his brother Martin who took over his company.

In the spring of 1920, a general raid for arms took place. This was also a country-wide operation. Every house where there was known to be arms of any sort, or which was suspected of having arms, was visited. In most cases it was

only a matter of asking for the weapons as the people were friendly disposed towards us. The stuff we secured was mostly shotguns and shotgun cartridges. We got no rifles or revolvers and quite a good number of those guns were unserviceable or of an obsolete type.

When the R.I.C. vacated all their outlying stations and these were destroyed, the Volunteers took over the work of policing the country. This entailed a huge amount of duty for them. They were required to carry out the ordinary patrols and guards and, in addition, to make arrests and detentions and hold prisoners in secret places which came to be known as "unknown destinations". They had, further, to arrange for trials before the Sinn Fein Courts and to arrange for the carrying out of the decrees of such Courts; also to canvass the people who had cases for litigation to have same brought before the arbitration courts which were now functioning. Nearly all of this was spare-time duty, as most of the Volunteers were either working men or had their own vocations to attend to and it imposed a severe strain on all concerned. However, it was all faced up to with enthusiasm and goodwill on all sides.

There were still no rifles in our battalion, except one which was loaned by the brigade for training purposes. We had some .22 rifles with which we did some firing practices. Training went on as usual. Pat Garrett, whom Collins had sent down from Dublin as an instructor, visited all the battalions and companies in turn and imparted instruction to them. He had had experience in the British army.

The only operations of a hostile nature indulged in at this time was the cutting of enemy communications such as telegraph and telephone lines and destroying bridges and cutting the roads to make them impassable to them.

The first engagement that the battalion took part in was the attack and capture of Ballymahon R.I.C. Barracks in 1920. About five from this battalion were engaged on this. I was with Connolly boring through the houses next to the barracks. We bored into the house next to the barracks from the adjoining house. The only tools we had for this purpose was a crane hook and we used a sledge to drive this between the stones in the wall at the back of the fireplace. The working party consisted of Connolly, Brian Partridge from Ardagh and myself. We succeeded in making a hole into the room next to the barracks and then through the ceiling of this room on to the roof. Connolly got on to the roof through this hole and then smashed a hole in the roof of the barracks and through this hole he threw a bomb. The explosion from this bomb was fierce. While these boring operations were taking place Sean MacEoin and a party from Ballinalee kept a continuous rifle-fire on the barracks to keep the garrison distracted and to cover the noise of the boring operations.

When the bomb exploded the garrison surrendered. There were about fourteen R.I.C. men in the barracks. All we got out of this capture were two bicycles; the arms, ammunition and other equipment were all taken away by MacEoin and Connolly. This capture gave a great buck-up to the morale of the Volunteers and made them realise that if they had arms they would be well able to deal with any enemy of equal or even greater strength.

Nothing of any great importance happened after the Ballymahon affair until the Terlicken ambush. A patrol of Tans who were in strength in the country now, were in the habit of travelling from Longford to Ballymahon. This patrol consisted of two lorry loads of Tans. It was planned to ambush them at Terlicken. The column from the north county under Sean MacEoin came down for this and were assisted by

some men from the 3rd and 4th Battalions. All were armed with rifles, the rifles for our men being supplied by MacEoin. A concrete mine was placed on the road and well hidden under the road surface. This mine was connected to an exploder which was manned by the "Bug" Callaghan. The remainder of the attackers took up position in some houses on the side of the road and in a farmhouse close by. The attacking party were somewhere between twenty and thirty strong.

The patrol turned up to time, but, on being fired, the mine failed to explode. Fire was opened on the enemy by the rifle men in the houses. They immediately halted and, jumping from their lorries, took cover and engaged the ambushers. The failure of the mine allowed the enemy to get further than they could have got if it exploded, and to get to cover, which otherwise would have been denied to them. The fight lasted for about half an hour and then we had to pull out and break off the engagement. None of our men were injured. Some of the Tans were believed to have been wounded. We had no losses that I know of except the unexploded mine. "The "Bug" Callaghan succeeded in getting the exploder detached and brought it away with him.

We all now moved to Legan. The north county column came back through our area and travelled via Edgeworthstown area back to the Ballinalee area. I wanted to join this column. MacEoin and Ned Cooney had a consultation and, as a result, it was decided to form a column in South Longford - so I was kept over for this.

The South Longford column was now started with Ned Cooney in charge. Amongst the original members, as far as I can remember - were Mick Ballesty, Jim and Ned Ward, John McCormack, P. McNamara, Tom Mullen, Tom Kelleher, the Garraghan brothers, Barney, Bill and John, Peter Fallon and myself. *Mick Robinson*

We were all armed with Service rifles and twenty to thirty rounds of .303 ammunition. The rifles and ammunition were supplied by the Brigade headquarters. Most of the members were "on the run" at this time. We billeted and lived on the people in the country districts. Generally, we were well received by the people.

In April 1921, the column ambushed a patrol of Tans and R.I.C. which was proceeding from Rathowen to Ballynacargy. The ambush took place at Ballycorkey. The column took up positions on either side of the road. The position was not a good one. The road had hedges and bushes along the fence. We were a short bit back from the road. No mines were laid and the road was not blocked. The patrol came on bicycles and were about twenty strong under an officer and outnumbering our party. Fire was opened on the patrol and a scrappy kind of a fight took place. The Tans and R.I.C. took cover on the sides of the road and returned the fire. We could not deal with them in this position and, after about half an hour of desultory firing, we withdrew. We had no casualties and the enemy had none either. This ambush was not well planned and did not go off as well as was expected.

The column remained around the area of the 3rd and 4th Battalions. We broke up into parties of twos and threes and so tactically placed as to be able to come to one another's assistance if necessary. There was no further big activity until June, when the ambush at Turlough took place. This was an ambush of a cycle patrol and was carried out by the South Longford Column, assisted by the local companies. I was not at this affair, so I am not in a position to give details. Our men captured a rifle from the enemy. One of the patrol was wounded, as far as I know. At the time this ambush took place, I was attending a brigade council meeting and so I missed the event.

Some time after this and also in June, Michael Ballesty and I were coming down the road from Legan to Listreena. We were stopped and engaged in a conversation with a man. This man was in his own garden and we were speaking to him over the road hedge. He had been released from gaol and we were talking about his experience. He was not a member of the I.R.A., but ~~that~~ had been brought in by the enemy to try and force information from him. He had given them some information, but not of much value. On looking down the road I was surprised to see some twelve or fourteen R.I.C. or Tans marching towards us. They had dismounted from a lorry further back at a bend in the road. The road was obstructed there by a cutting made across it. We had cycles with us. We immediately mounted our cycles and made off in the opposite direction. As we did so, fire was opened on us. We made our way round a bend in the road and from there we fired a few rounds at them from our revolvers - being the only arms we had with us at the time. We now made off again and made our escape through a graveyard. We dumped our cycles in the graveyard and made across country. In getting away, the enemy shot the nail of my finger and also knocked the hat off my head. We had to jump down a great height from the graveyard and Ballesty sustained a hurt here which afterwards came against him in the army.

After this, the British carried out a huge round-up of the area in which the column were billeted. They had some thousands of troops engaged in this operation and surrounded a big area and thoroughly combed it. We scattered in small parties of twos and threes and hid in the ditches. F. McNamara, my brother and I were hiding in a ditch when we saw a party of cavalry approaching us. There was a local man also with us who was also an I.R.A. man. He said he would go out and meet them. He did so and they inquired of him how they would

get to the road. He said he would lead them to the road and, in doing so, headed them away from us. Eventually, the enemy pulled out from the area without getting even one of the column.

Seamus Conway had come up to us from North Longford and was with us at Ballycorkey. There was nothing of any great importance after this big round up until the Truce came into effect. The only activities were the blocking of roads, cutting communications and intelligence work. This was carried out by the local companies as well as by the column.

As the Truce came into effect our ammunition supply was very low - hardly 25 rounds per man of the column, but, otherwise, the fellows were fighting fit and anxious for more fight. I consider that very little or nothing could be done until the winter when the days would be short and the nights long. In the summer, the long hours of daylight were in the enemy's favour. Should we have to start fighting again we certainly would have to get a supply of arms and ammunition.

There were no spies executed in this area. At least 90% of the people could be relied on and were on our side. The Protestant element amongst the people did not take any active part except in a few instances where their numbers were greater.

The Tans tried to burn the Sinn Fein Hall in Ardagh, but although they set fire to it, they did not succeed. Only portion of the floor was burned.

I was a member of the I.R.B., having joined in 1920.

We had a centre in Ardagh, of which I was head. The membership was small and the only other members, I think, were Tom Keena and Joseph Leavy. We took the oath of the organisation and paid a small subscription - I think it was a shilling per month. There were no special activities in the centre. I represented our centre at the County Centre meetings which were generally held in Longford. Business at such meetings was of a routine nature.

Signed: Lee Barter

Date: 11-10-50

Witness: Matthew Lacey

