

ORIGINAL

BUREAU OF MILITARY HISTORY 1913-21
BUREAU STARE MILEATA 1913-21
NO. W.S. 444

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BUREAU OF MILITARY HISTORY, 1913-21.

STATEMENT BY WITNESS

DOCUMENT NO. W.S. 444.....

Witness

Peter Kearney,
34 Prospect Avenue,
Clontarf, Dublin.

Identity

Lieutenant Battalion Staff (Scouting)
2nd Battalion I Cork Brigade;
Section Commander, Column, 3rd (West Cork)
Brigade, 1921.

Subject

- (a) Knocklong Ambush May, 1919;
- (b) Burning of Income Tax Offices, Cork, 1920;
- (c) Military engagements, Co. Cork, 1920-1921.

Conditions, if any, stipulated by Witness

Nil

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STATEMENT BY MR. P. KEARNEY,

54 Mount Prospect Avenue, Clontarf, Dublin.

I was born four miles outside Dunmanway town in 1899, but spent my early years in Cork City. I remember the formation of the Irish Volunteers and I received most of my national inspiration through reading "Nationality".

In 1917, I joined G/Company, 2nd Battalion, Cork I Brigade, and in 1918, I transferred to A/Company (the College Company), of which Raymond Kennedy was Captain. The College Company was a very efficient unit and, even though a feeling existed that too much could not be expected from such men, quite a number proved their worth in later years. I was appointed Lieutenant of Scouting to the 2nd Battalion, Cork I Brigade, in 1919,

but, as no definite instruction with regard to training was received from G.H.Q., we had to devise our own schemes locally in order to train the men. We had continuous parades and lectures until such time as military activity in the area compelled the scouts to adapt themselves to actual military circumstances. I remember on a few occasions during 1919 and 1920 when playing inter-College hurling or football games in Dublin, the visits were availed of to bring back consignments of ammunition for the Southern Brigades.

I recall May 1919, when some members of the U.C.C. Hurling Team were travelling back to Cork by train when we unknowingly became very closely associated with the ambush at Knocklong. We were travelling in a corridor carriage and were unaware that at the other end of the carriage Sean Hogan was travelling as a prisoner with four R.I.C. men guarding him. I remember the shooting having started and the shouts by the Volunteers to hand over the rifles. I and the other students got out on to the railway line and went in front of the engine. By

this time the R.I.C. man who was uninjured, and who had retained his carbine, appeared on the platform and, taking the group of students to be some of the attackers, he pointed his carbine at us and fired several times. We ran as fast as we could in front of the engine and I can recall being joined by Sean Treacy who was bleeding either from the mouth or the throat at the time. He travelled up the line with us about fifty yards and we asked him how he felt, to which he replied that he was all right and that he could make his own way. We hid behind an embankment until the R.I.C. man came up and marched us back to the train with our hands up. Following our explanation that we were "innocent students" travelling back from Dublin, we were permitted to continue the journey. I remember having seen one policeman dead in the carriage while a second was groaning and in a dying condition. The train proceeded to Cork without any further incident.

During 1920, I took part in the burning of the Income Tax offices in Cork city. I recall being in a raid for equipment in Marsh's yard when the party was surprised by the unexpected entrance of Marsh, the owner; in the altercation which followed, Marsh was shot accidentally.

During that year I was mobilised for an attack on a patrol of British cyclists near Douglas, which did not materialise. I remember having done a lot of scouting in connection with the proposed general attack on groups of R.I.C. men stationed throughout the city on the streets at night time, but this attack never materialised.

I remember when Cork was burned and the Volunteer Companies were organised to prevent looting, the College Company operated in Oliver Plunkett St. and did their best to safeguard the property of the citizens.

Towards the end of 1920, with armed sections of the College Company, I was lying in ambush at the Fire Brigade Station in Sullivan's Quay, in the Catholic Young Men's Hall, and along the Western Road, but these attacks did not materialise.

I went to Dunmanway at Christmas 1920, and about this time Mick Crowley of Kilbrittain, who was an engineering student at University College, Cork, induced me to transfer to the Flying Column of Cork III Brigade, where greater activity was prevailing at the time.

Early in 1921, the Flying Column in Cork III Brigade consisted of from 20 to 60 men, all armed with rifles and all reasonably well-seasoned. The activities of the Flying Column in January were mostly confined to attacks on police barracks in Drimoleague, Innishannon, Kilbrittain, and the military barracks at Bandon. During the lull of the activities in the Flying Column, Mick Crowley and I would return to Cork City, generally using the route from Gurranreigh, Crookstown, and back into Wilton, near Cork. Even though this meant travelling through both Cork I Brigade and Cork III Brigade, the organisation of transport was excellent at the time and there was no difficulty in having a relay of horses and traps provided to cover the distance of about 30 miles. We generally made Sullivan's of Gurranreigh our first definite halt after leaving the city. It was a very safe district and the family were most hospitable and national-minded. We were still students in the College and, particularly in case of arrest, we had a good excuse for travelling as the students were always considered harmless by the British authorities.

Early in February, Mick Crowley and I made a further trip from Cork City to the Cork III Column, going via Crookstown, Gurranreigh, Castletown-Kenneigh to Ahlochill,

making contact without any difficulty with each adjoining Company Captain.. The Captain of Ahichill Company brought us to the Flying Column which had just retreated from the encirclement at Burgatia House, Roscarbery. Even though the men had a rather trying time, they were all in excellent spirits, including the man who was wounded. That particular column - about 40 strong - attacked Drimoleague barracks, endeavoured to attack a patrol of British soldiers in Skibbereen town and also laid in ambush on the Bentry-Glengarriff road for lorries which did not travel. The Column travelled at night time and very often it arrived at its destination early in the morning with the men very much drenched by rain and very little accommodation for drying their clothes. The people generally were extremely friendly and helpful and, to our knowledge, there were very few occasions when actual information of the presence of the column was sent by the local people to the British authorities in the adjoining towns. In some districts in which we were billeted the people were very poor and we had to do a certain amount of foraging amongst adjoining houses where they were better able to provide food.

The local company was always notified in good time of the approach of the Column and, by the time the Column arrived at its destination, the major portion of the local company would be mobilised and ready to act as scouts or armed sentries for the night or nights which the Column would stay in that area. The local men also provided billets and directed the sections of the Column to their houses. In some of the western districts of West Cork the people were somewhat poor, but the Column had to choose as billets those districts which were safe and where they could not be surprised easily by the enemy. The food generally in such districts was, by comparison, only fair and not helpful in building up the necessary stamina for undertaking long journeys. During the

existence of this Column Mick Crowley's brother, Paddy, was shot by the British in a raid at Kilbrittain, and I travelled with Mick to Kilbrittain for the funeral. During that distance of approximately 40 miles, we had no difficulty in securing transport from one company to another.

I travelled back to Cork City with Mick Crowley about the end of February and about the second week of March we again travelled back to Dunmanway area with a few additional Volunteers from the College Company for the Column. Their names were Eugene Callaghan, Dr. Con Lucy and Jeremiah McCarthy. A large column of approximately 100 rifles was mobilised at Balteenbrack, about four miles east of Dunmanway, about a week prior to Crossbarry. We went east towards Newcestown, across Bandon river, making for Shippool on the Innishannon-Kinsale road. We had received information that Major Percival travelled from Bandon to Kinsale every Wednesday, but, as this particular Wednesday coincided with St. Patrick's Day, Percival must have decided to honour St. Patrick in Bandon, because he did not travel.

We stayed in Shippool for two days and, as this was a partially hostile area, it is very probable that information of our presence was sent to the enemy. After the second day we retired north and across the main Bandon-Cork road, making towards Crossbarry. The Column was divided into about seven sections of 14 men each and each section was duly sent to its billet. I was in charge of one section. An armed sentry was posted outside the billet while unarmed sentries were available throughout the whole locality. The night was very calm and, very early in the morning, the sentry reported the noise of lorries moving in the distance. The entire section was got out of bed and preparations were made for immediate departure, if necessary. I sent a scout to column headquarters to report the approach of the lorries, but their particular noise had

been heard by all sentries on duty. We received instructions to proceed to column headquarters, which we did forthwith, after having had a hurried cup of tea.

It was almost daylight when the entire column assembled, and each section was posted to a particular portion of the roadway along which the enemy was expected to travel from Bandon. It has not been definitely established which section occupied the furthest point of the position from Bandon. I believe it was my section, but it has been stated by others that it was Denis Lordan's section.

At any rate, we built up a protective defence on both sides of a gate leading into a field at a turn on the road leading to Cronin's publichouse. The lorries came very slowly into position and I can still recall the drone of their engines as they sounded so clearly for a few minutes in the stillness of the morning and then became silent for a similar space of time, moving only a few yards at a time, apparently taking all possible precautions against surprise. A mine had been placed in the roadway very close to my section, with Peter Monaghan in charge, but the enemy lorries did not get within fifty yards of it. Someone of the enemy must have noticed some movement in house which was being used as column headquarters and which was partially barricaded. He uttered a warning and jumped from the lorry. He was followed by other British soldiers and immediately the shooting began. There was not a large number of the enemy in the first two or three lorries. They were, apparently, holding those for prisoners. Among the enemy was a Volunteer hostage named White who, at the first indication of an ambush, dived for it and got behind our lines safely.

After the first few volleys from the Column there was scarcely any fight left in the enemy. Those who were in

the lorries which came into the position, and who had not been killed, jumped over the ditch on the other side of the road and endeavoured to escape across to the railway line. As my section was completely outside the line of fire, I decided to cross the road and cut off the escape of the enemy. We moved slightly to their rear and shot several of them in their attempt to escape. The balance of the enemy who did not come into the position fled from their lorries back in the direction of Bandon and I believe they did not re-group or hinder us seriously during the remainder of the day.

The arms of the enemy were now collected and these included our first Lewis gun which we regarded as a real prize. At that stage I was under the impression that the fight was over, as my section had no knowledge of the presence of further forces of the enemy. While going back to our original position, shots started to come from a point well at the back of the general position. This was actually an attack by the enemy on a section commanded by Tom Kelleher who were holding a house at the back of the ambush position. The enemy were in large numbers, and the officer in charge was endeavouring to persuade them to charge the house occupied by Tom Kelleher's section. He stood up on the ditch and urged them on, but he immediately fell a victim to a deadly shot from one of Kelleher's men, and any enthusiasm for a charge that may have existed in the ranks of the enemy automatically subsided.

James Murphy (Spud) was sent with a section of men to relieve Kelleher, and between them they had no difficulty in holding off the enemy. About the same time, a further section of the enemy appeared at Cronin's publichouse which was from 50 to 100 yards to the left and partly in front of my section and that of Denis Lordan, holding the extreme

eastern point of the ambush position. An officer and a section of the enemy fired at us and then managed to cross the road to better cover. We had not been anticipating an attack from that particular point and it was this very group of the enemy who were responsible for any deaths incurred by us. Peter Monaghan was shot while sitting beside his battery near the land mine and I believe the other two men who lost their lives were also killed quite close to the same spot. Dan Corcoran of Newcestown received a bullet wound in the thigh, and we were most anxious to remove him to safety, but we had to wait for the whistle from the Column O/C. before retiring, even with our wounded. Eventually the whistle sounded and Denis Lordan brought Dan Corcoran on his back most of the way out of the ambush position.

In the meantime, the enemy lorries were burned and we were very fortunate in having had wonderful cover in a little laneway that led from the ambush position and travelled for a mile or more in a northerly direction. We retired back to Tom Kelleher's farm which was several miles from the scene of the ambush and there we lined up and were glad when Tadhg O'Sullivan, the quartermaster, produced a glass of whiskey per man. While we were lined up in the yard we noticed, away to our left up on the hill, what appeared to be armed men making in our direction and we eventually realised they were Auxiliaries. The Column O/C. decided to move off and leave a section behind to deal with the Auxiliaries. That section included Mick Crowley, Jack Corkery, O'Donohue, one other man and myself. While the column moved away we raced up a laneway to head off the Auxiliaries while they were making for the same spot - apparently. We got there first, just ahead of them, and the first Auxiliary, who was still dashing wildly onwards, fell dead in his tracks. The rest of them kept at a very safe

distance while we remained under cover so that they could not judge our strength in any way. When some time had elapsed the Auxiliaries must have decided to retreat and we followed in the direction of the column, acting as a rearguard section, but without any further contact with the enemy. The column moved approximately 8 miles, I'd say, from Tom Kelleher's house, and the possibility of encirclement by the enemy was still so acute that it was decided to occupy two adjoining billets until night would fall. Naturally, we were not in a position to do any foraging for food that day and it was easy for fifty men to dispose of what food was in the farmhouse. As night fell, we marched to Gurranreigh, and there we were safely outside the ring in which the enemy was trying to enclose us.

We were sent to billets in the customary way and, after having had a good meal, the section commanders were summoned to O'Sullivan's headquarters where we discussed the merits of the day's activities.

We had three killed and two or three wounded, but the enemy certainly lost 30 or 40 killed, as well as having given us a very good insight into their actual lack of courage and fighting spirit. Apart from the machine gun, we captured 40 or 50 rifles, with a corresponding quantity of ammunition.

The morale of all our men was excellent on that day, and I have almost omitted to mention the presence of Flor Begley with his bagpipes, who started to play immediately after the first volley was fired by us into the ranks of the enemy.

After two days' rest at Gurranreigh, where we were not interfered with by the enemy, the same column minus casualties moved southwards across the Bandon river for the

purpose of attacking Roscarbery barracks. A large mine containing 50 lbs of explosives had been specially made by Captain McCarthy in the Clonakilty area for the Roscarbery barracks, and it was delivered to the column in a coffin-like box in the Clubhouse Coy. area.

I recall how on a Saturday night when the column was halted in the Clubhouse area, about four miles south of Dunmanway, the entire local company was mobilised for duty that night and the following day. The 2nd Lieut. of the Coy. said he could not report for duty on Saturday morning as he intended to receive Holy Communion. He was courtmartialled and was sent working in the Newcestown area for approximately one month. This decision had no anti-religious taint, but it showed the determination of the officers in charge who were themselves good Catholics.

The column proceeded in the direction of Leap and from there it proceeded to march on Roscarbery. As far as I can recall, only one man of the Roscarbery Company was aware of the attack beforehand. All roads leading to Roscarbery were well blocked to prevent a surprise arrival of the enemy, and when the column reached a mile or two outside of the town all boots and shoes were removed and carried around the neck, the men walking into the town in their stockings. Consequently there was no noise and no alarm whatever.

I do not recall how the heavy mine was carried into the village, but at some stage, when about 40 yards from the barracks, it was placed on the shoulders of Christy Connell, Jack Corkery, Tommy Kelleher and myself. The fuses were then set alight and we proceeded towards the barrack, well guarded in front and each side. When we reached the gate of the barrack it was closed, and I distinctly recall the noise it made being pushed open. Nevertheless, there was no alarm

and we laid the mine against the door without any incident. The previous day was pay-day for the R.I.C., who were known to indulge very freely in the local publichouse. We then retired to cover and a storming party of from 12 to 20 men with fixed bayonets was formed to rush into the barracks when the explosion had created the necessary opening. A terrific explosion occurred a few minutes later, but it did not result in creating an opening sufficiently large to permit the men to get through, consequently the charge into the barracks was abandoned. A section of riflemen was sent into position in houses opposite the barracks, and I recall the wild shouts of Jeremiah McCarthy and Neilus Connolly as they poured shots into the barracks while calling on the police to surrender. Quantities of petrol and paraffin were secured in the village and we brought a number of Mills and home-made bombs into play. The police fought back and threw out bombs over the barrack wall which exploded harmlessly. As this method of attack was not having the desired effect, we introduced flame-throwers and eventually set the barracks on fire.

At this stage the majority of the police made their escape through the windows at the back of the barracks and found shelter in the local convent and elsewhere. When it was definitely established that this outpost was of no further value, the column was mobilised and we marched in the Dunmanway direction about 6 or 8 miles away. We had suffered no casualties, while the enemy had two killed, two or three seriously wounded, with most of the others wounded in some manner - out of a garrison of, possibly, twenty R.I.C.

In the meantime, British reinforcements were congregated on Roscarbery, but they made no contact with the column and on the following night we withdrew to north of the Bandon

river. The column was disbanded shortly afterwards and I made a visit to Cork City with Mick Crowley and some others. In the interval, four Volunteers of Cork I Brigade had been shot unarmed following the Dripsey ambush and it was stated that while being carried in a lorry through Cork City their blood was dripping from the lorry. I also understand their tongues had been cut out. As a reprisal, it was decided by Cork I Brigade to shoot every possible member of the enemy on sight.

At 7 o'clock a few days after that occurrence, I mobilised with the College Company who were assigned Patrick St. as an operation area. Eugene Callaghan, Mick Crowley and I patrolled the portion of Patrick St. nearest Patrick's Bridge and just about a minute or two before 7 o'clock we found ourselves immediately behind two military policemen who were walking towards Patrick's Bridge. When we reached Mangan's Clock, there was still one minute to go. We followed them as far as the Bridge, but as it was not yet time to start shooting, we had to let them go their way and search for some new prey. We could only locate one British soldier and, as the firing had started in some other part of the city, we shot him immediately. At that time the people were so accustomed to alerts that the streets would be cleared a few seconds after the discharge of the first warning shot. That was the case in this particular instance, and we found ourselves alone in Patrick St. and on the wrong end of it. When we came near Woodford Bourne's Corner, it was getting dark and we heard a shout telling us to put our hands up. We thought this might have come from some of our own comrades, and as we did not respond, a shot was fired at us. We continued to advance on the Auxiliary who had attacked us and fired at him in the partial darkness. He must have run towards his barrack as we had no further difficulty in crossing the Grand Parade, the North Main St.

and going towards the Mardyke, where we dumped our arms. I travelled back to West Cork with Mick Crowley and we were instructed to reorganise some of the companies in the Skibbereen battalion area where a sufficient amount of pressure was not being exerted on the enemy.

On the 14th May I took part in the attack on the enemy in Bandon town with Tom Barry, Sean Lehane, Mick Crowley and Billy O'Sullivan. We had our one machine-gun, two rifles and several revolvers, while Sean Lehane drove the motor car in which we travelled. We emerged on the main Dunmanway-Bandon road about three miles from the latter town and then headed for Bandon. The hood of the car was down, the Lewis gun rested on the framework of the windscreen and we proceeded at a reasonable pace, very much on the alert. Close to the town of Bandon we passed an enemy sentry and, as it appeared that they were very much on guard, we decided to open fire on a group of the enemy who were playing football in a field adjoining the barrack. After staying in the town for ten minutes we retreated back the same road, but the enemy outposts were, apparently, too terrified even to fire at us. We endeavoured to take the car off the main Dunmanway road a few miles outside the town of Bandon, but as the incline was too sharp, the car would not travel forward due to a small supply of petrol, consequently, we had to put the car in reverse and back up the hill. On reaching the top of the hill, we set the car on fire and proceeded across country.

Shortly afterwards I again came into Cork city and had made arrangements to travel to Dublin with the University College Cork (either hurling or football) team. Tom Barry travelled to Dublin by train too. Eugene Callaghan was with me and we stayed in Dublin two or three days, but did not meet any G.H.Q. officers.

The Cork III Flying Column was to be mobilised on 27th or 28th May, and Eugene and I travelled by train from Dublin to Dunmanway. Also on the train travelling the whole way were some Auxiliaries. On getting out at Dunmanway we entered Bernard's Hotel which was just at the railway station and which was a haunt of the Auxiliaries. We probably had one drink and then walked out into the country towards Drinagh without any interference from the enemy. We were reasonably well-dressed at the time and I am of the opinion that the British did not associate any well-dressed individual with the I.R.A. or its associates. The column was mobilised two miles west of Drinagh village and the section from the 1st Battalion (Bandon) had difficulty in making their way to the mobilisation centre on account of the presence of Percival's flying column who were at that time starting operations to cover the entire area of West Cork in conjunction with other enemy military units. As far as I can recall, every battalion commandant of Cork III Brigade joined the column on that occasion though they did not necessarily become officers of the column.

We mustered well over 100 rifles and decided to engage in battle with the Auxiliaries from Dunmanway. We took up positions on the Dunmanway-Drimoleague road and a small section was detailed to attack the police barracks at Drimoleague in the hope of inducing the Auxiliaries from Dunmanway to travel to their aid. For some reason they did not travel and as our presence became known we had to retreat to the west. In the meantime Percival's column was also moving west. We eventually reached Borland, north of Bantry, and as the enemy was still closing in, it was decided to cross the mountains into Valleydesmond and to Gougane Barra. Apart from Percival's column, which was estimated at 1,000 strong, other enemy forces including artillery were concentrated at Ardrigole and Coomhola. It was a tough

proposition descending Vallydesmond in the darkness of the night and I remember our men having difficulty carrying the machine gun down over rocks on which they had to slide from one end to the other, but, fortunately, we had no casualties whatever. The column was disbanded shortly afterwards, each unit returning to its battalion area, dumping arms and remaining in its own neighbourhood. About this time it was proposed to bring a shipload of arms into the Unionhall area. Mick Crowley and I went to Glandore, made contact with the local company officers and scouted the immediate district of Glandore and Unionhall (a detachment of Marines were stationed at Unionhall). It was proposed to take the arms, when landed, by road to the north of Dunmanway, and Mick and I scouted these roads to make sure that lorries or cars would be able to effect a passage and that no blockades of our own existed. I understand the arms were to come from Italy, but I have no idea why they failed to arrive or why the arrangements were cancelled.

I recall one night when travelling in a pony and trap with Tom Barry, west of Drinagh village. We were anxious to go through the village, but wished to have it scouted. One of the local Volunteers was sent into the village while we waited outside for his return. He eventually came back and reported "all clear". I met that Volunteer about ten years ago here in Dublin. He was then a Christian Brother and he told me that after he had left us that night, instead of going into Drinagh village, he jumped inside the ditch and came back later without having scouted the village at all. His attitude was that we were fully armed and could defend ourselves, whereas he was sent into the possible jaws of the enemy without being able to protect himself in any way.

The 3rd Dunmanway Battalion had been falling away rather badly since the Kilmichael ambush. A number of men out of

that battalion had fought at Kilmichael, but the strain had affected their nerves to such an extent that a number of the battalion officers were practically useless from that time on, and no resistance was being shown to the enemy who were very overbearing. It was decided to make a change in the battalion control and in July 1921, Sean Lehane was appointed battalion commandant and I was appointed vice-commandant. Fortunately or unfortunately, we did not have any great opportunity to test our strength with the enemy, as the Truce was announced shortly afterwards.

During the operation of the brigade column, particularly when it numbered 100 or more, and when sections were 14 or 16 strong, it was not possible to secure reasonable sleeping accommodation in any house in which we were billeted. On many occasions we brought straw into the kitchen and slept on the floor in front of the fire and on many other occasions we slept in the hayshed and were glad to have it.

During the Truce period, when one would expect that enemy pressure would have ceased, it continued, and they (the enemy) behaved in a very provocative manner in Dunmanway district, chasing Volunteers off the streets. This was reported to us and we decided that action was necessary in order to prevent its continual recurrence.

With two other men I patrolled Dunmanway town in a motor car one evening after dark. After passing to and fro on a few occasions, some of the Auxiliaries endeavoured to stop the car and, as we did not halt, they struck the windscreen with ashplants. We retaliated with one revolver shot. They fired back half a dozen and with the aid of a carbine we drove them off the street. They brought out armoured cars and patrolled the town and, naturally, we retreated to the country. Sean Murphy,

Battalion Adjutant, got a bullet through the skin of his poll on that night. That stopped the Auxiliaries' provocative attitude.

Signed:

P. H. Kearney

Date:

6th Nov 1950

Witness:

[Signature], Lt Col.