

ORIGINAL

BUREAU OF MILITARY HISTORY 1913-21

BURO STAIRÉ MILEATA 1913-21

No. W.S. 493

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BUREAU OF MILITARY HISTORY, 1913-21.

STATEMENT BY WITNESS

DOCUMENT NO. W.S. ....493.....

**Witness**

Captain Seamus Kavanagh,  
12 Achill Road,  
Drumcondra, Dublin.

**Identity**

O/C. 'H' Coy. 1st Battalion Dublin Brigade  
Irish Volunteers 1917-1921.

**Subject**

- (a) Attack on British troops at  
Church St., Dublin, 20.9.20.
- (b) Capture of Kevin Barry.

**Conditions, if any, stipulated by Witness**

Nil

File No. S. 935.....

Form B.S.M. 2.

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STATEMENT BY CAPTAIN SEAMUS KAVANAGH,

12 Achill Road, Dublin.

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Attack on British Troops - Monk's Bakery,

Church Street, Dublin, 20th September, 1920.

On the re-organisation of the Volunteers in 1917 I was appointed Captain of "H" Company, 1st Battalion, Dublin Brigade.

1. Information re British Movements.

Sometime in the middle of September, 1920, Volunteer M. Douglas, a member of "G" Company, 1st Battalion, informed me that British troops called to Monks' Bakery, Church Street, Dublin, for bread rations every Monday and Thursday mornings between 11.00 and 11.15 hours. The party, he said, came in a lorry and usually comprised 1 officer and a driver in the cab, and 1 N.C.O. and 8 privates in rear. The lorry came from the Royal (now Collins) Barracks, then garrisoned by the 2nd Battalion, Duke of Wellington's Regiment.

Generally the officer and 1 soldier went into the bakery at once. Some of the other troops got off the lorry and went into a shop opposite for cigarettes or sweets. Four or five soldiers generally remained on or with the lorry. No particular security measures were taken. Within 10 to 15 minutes the lorry was loaded with bread hampers from the bakery, the troops all got aboard and the lorry returned to barracks via North Brunswick Street.

## 2. Preliminary Reconnaissance.

I decided to check up on this information for myself. On the following Monday morning (September 13th), I went down to Church Street at 10.50 hours and studied the area, its approaches and lines of retreat. The British lorry arrived at about 11.05 hours from the direction of North King Street. The subsequent movements of the British party coincided in every way with the information I had received. In fact, my informant's report was correct in every detail.

I decided how I would post my men if I got authority to attack this party, paced out the distances, etc. I then went into the bakery and interviewed J.J. Moore, the foreman carpenter, whom I knew personally and who was friendly disposed to the Volunteers. I explained my mission to him. He showed me all over the premises. Through a yard at the back there was a passage leading into a shop in North King Street, which would provide a useful line of retreat should I decide to place any men in the yard. I saw I could also place a man or two in the shop, if I so desired. In a loft overhead there was a window overlooking the spot where the lorry stopped, where I first considered placing a man with grenades in case the surprise I had planned did not materialise. (N.B. I subsequently rejected this part of the plan because the grenades would be as dangerous to our men as to the enemy). Mr. Moore also showed me where the telephone was situated.

On the completion of this reconnaissance I felt that I had overlooked nothing. I had studied the enemy

movements, had gone over the area and the bakery building in detail, and finally Mr. Moore had confirmed my information and my own observations that the British party did not exceed 1 officer and 10 other ranks.

### 3. Authority for Operation.

My next move was to call all my officers and N.COs. to a meeting of the Company Council on that Monday night. I discussed the proposed operation with them, went over the plans I had formulated and tentatively selected the men for the job. All the officers and N.COs. were thrilled and enthusiastic.

I next applied for permission for the operation as Monks' Bakery, Church Street, was just outside my (E) Company area, but inside another Company area in the 1st Battalion. All Companies and Battalions were of course confined at this time to operations in their own areas, unless special permission to the contrary was obtained. I interviewed my Commanding Officer, Commandant Tom Byrne, O/C. 1st Battalion, re this and outlined my plans. He seemed very pleased with the general scheme but he was doubtful about my Company going into another Company area, and said he would have to refer the matter to the O/C., Dublin Brigade, Brigadier Dick McKee. He promised to let me know the result at my Company parade on the following Thursday.

In the interval, fearing I might be turned down, I got in touch with the Vice-Brigadier, Peadar Clancy, an old 1st Battalion man, who always had a soft spot for "H" Company. We discussed my plan in detail. He made some very useful suggestions, and in his usual cautious

way warned me against over confidence. However, he himself brought me to the Brigadier, who subjected me to a severe cross-examination regarding the entire scheme, including my information as to the British movements, my own plans and the men I proposed to detail for the operation. Most of these had been on jobs before, including the raid on the King's Inns the previous June. "H" Company men on this operation included Kevin Barry, Frank Flood and Tom Kissane.

At the end of a long interrogation the Brigadier told me he would let me have his decision later, but as I left the room Vice-Brigadier Peadar Clancy gave me a wink as much as to say "it would be all right".

The Company paraded as usual on Thursday night, September 16th, at 41 Parnell Square. At this time only the officers and N.C. Os. were in the secret and the usual programme of training was carried out. The O/C., 1st Battalion, Commandant T. Byrne, arrived during the parade, called me aside and told me that the operation was approved for Monday, September 20th, but that I was not to tell the men until the following Sunday, September 19th. He asked me who I was putting on the job, and when I gave him the tentative list of names he said, "A better bunch you couldn't get".

I dismissed the Company early that night and shortly afterwards Vice-Brigadier Peadar Clancy arrived. He confirmed the news the O/C., Battalion, had given me, and told me that if we pulled this off, it would be a great feather in "H" Company's cap, and would help to arouse the enthusiasm of the whole country.

4. Volunteers Participating in Operation.

I decided to take charge and detailed the following for the operation :

Lieutenants	-	T. McGrane and R. Flanagan.
Section Commanders:	-	T. Staunton, S. O'Neill, F. Flanagan, F. Flood, M. Higgins, C. Robinson and D. Golden.
Assistant Quartermaster		T. O'Brien.
Squad Leaders	-	P. Kenny, P. Young, K. Barry, and D. MacDonagh.
Volunteers	-	E. Fox, T. Kissane, M. Robinson, H. Murphy, J. J. O'Carroll, J. Carrigan, M. Douglas, S. Keating, J. O'Dwyer and J. Moran: a total of 25 officers, N.C. Os. and men.

Company Quartermaster M. McGrane was also ordered to report with the revolvers of the men whose arms were usually held in Company Dump, and four hand-grenades.

A van to collect the captured rifles if successful, driven by D. Golden with J. Carrigan, was to report to vicinity of Monks' Bakery. (See K on attached sketch map).

5. Preliminary Orders for the Operation.

On Sunday night, September 19th, the selected men were mobilised to meet at 41 Parnell Square. Each man was told he was to report at The O'Flanagan Sinn Féin Club, Ryder's Row, at 09.00 hours on the following Monday morning. No man was to carry any paper or anything on his person that would identify him. No further information was given to any Volunteer except to Kevin Barry.

I then called him aside and asked him if he had not to sit for an examination the following day. He said, "Oh, that will be all right". I told him I didn't want him to miss another examination, knowing as I did that he

had already missed one on the day of the King's Inns raid. He replied, "How do you think I could sit for an examination, knowing this job is on and me not on it?". Why, there might be another machine gun for "H" Company, and I'd hate to miss it". (The point of this remark lies in the fact that it was Kevin Barry who personally carried off the Lewis Gun captured in the King's Inns raid). I saw the look of bitter disappointment on his face when he thought he was not going on the raid, so I said, "All right, but when you go back to the College tell Dr. McKinney you have an important appointment to keep".

(N.B. Dr. McKinney is now Colonel T. McKinney, A.M.S., Director of Medical Services, Defence Forces).

I knew that at that time Dr. McKinney had been recommended for membership of the I.R.A. and was then teaching in University College, Dublin. I thought he might be able to do something about Kevin's lost examination). He had done something similar on the occasion of the King's Inns job. I can never forget the look of delight on Kevin's face when I told him he could come on the job.

#### 6. Final Orders for Operation.

On Monday, September 20th, 1920, all the men detailed reported sharp at 9 o'clock with one exception - Squad Leader, Kevin Barry. He arrived ten minutes late and explained that he had been to the College and made everything right about his examination. Each man was issued with a revolver and six rounds, and four of the men got hand-grenades. Kevin Barry's own revolver - a short Webley - had already been issued when he reported, and he was issued with a Parabellum instead. He was not

pleased with this, and the other Volunteers chaffed him about it.

A plan of the area was drawn on a blackboard similar to sketch plan attached; each man's position marked, and the development of the plan worked out in detail. I gave the party particulars of the job we were about to carry out, and pointed out the spot where the lorry usually halted - marked X on sketch plan. I informed them that I had selected the public-house as the most suitable position for command post, where I could observe the movements of the enemy and some of the occupied positions. I detailed Section Commander F. Flood, Volunteers T. Kessane and M. Robinson to accompany me - 'A' on sketch.

I detailed Section Commander M. Higgins to take up his post at 'B' on sketch. His duty would be to cover the raiding parties and prevent surprise from the direction of Bridewell or Royal Barracks.

Section Commander C. Robinson would take up position at 'C' with same object.

2nd Lieutenant R. O'Flanagan, Section Commander S. O'Neill and Squad Commander K. Barry would take up position at 'D' and would advance <sup>on</sup>/right of lorry when signal would be given.

Lieutenant T. McGrane would take charge of party consisting of D. MacDonagh, Volunteers J.J. O'Carroll and M. Douglas inside of bakery yard. Douglas and O'Carroll to hold up soldiers; D. MacDonagh to dismantle telephone - 'E' on sketch.

Section Commander F. Flanagan and Volunteer T. Keating to take up position between shop and yard to prevent



surprise and keep line of retreat open - Position 'F'.

Volunteers H. Murphy and J. Moran to take up post at corner of Lisburn Street and as rere parties moved on lorry they would advance from front on right side of lorry - Position 'G'.

Assistant Q.M. T. O'Brien and Volunteer P. Young would take up post at corner of North Brunswick Street, keep North Dublin Union under observation and deal with any enemy advance or prevent surprise from North Dublin Union or Royal Barracks - Position 'H'.

Section Commanders T. Staunton and P. Kenny, Volunteers E. Fox and S. O'Dwyer take post at apposite corner, keeping out of sight of enemy until they got signal from A/Q.M. O'Brien, when they would then come into Church Street and advance on to front left of lorry and deal with drivers and anyone else in cab - Position 'I'.

Section Commander D. Golden and Volunteer J. Carrigan would take up post with them outside public-house, act as covering party in case of surprise from Broadstone or King's Inns, at the same time be ready to move down beside lorry for rifles in the event of our objective being successful - Position 'K'.

I was to give the signal for attack by taking out handkerchief and pretending to wipe my mouth or blow my nose. On this signal being given the men detailed to do so were to close in on the lorry simultaneously, draw their guns and shout "Hands up".

If the surprise was successful and the British surrendered, the Volunteers covering the sides of the lorry were to keep the troops covered; the men at the rear of the lorry were to disarm the British and load the rifles.

and equipment into the waiting van, which was then to proceed to the arranged dump. The covering parties were to watch the approach from the North Dublin Union, Broadstone, Kings Inns, Royal Barracks and Bridewell, all of which were occupied by the British. On the van getting clear with the capture - rifles and ammunition - the troops were to be herded into the bakery and locked in, the Volunteers were to disperse on my whistle signal and report individually at the Parnell Monument.

If the surprise failed and the enemy showed fight, the advancing Volunteers were to open fire and evacuate the area as quickly as possible without any signal. The covering parties were to cover the retreat. The men in the bakery were to retreat through the shop in King Street and report as arranged with the others.

Everyone expressed having himself quite clear as to their position and tasks. The party moved off in twos and threes. The blackboard was cleared and put away by Company Quartermaster McGrane, who then proceeded to Company Dump to receive rifles and ammunition if we were successful.

7. Positions occupied by Volunteers.

(See attached sketch map).

The party arrived in the area at 9.45 hours and took up allotted positions as follows :-

- 'A' - Captain S. Kavanagh,  
Section Commander F. Flood and  
Volunteers E. Kissane and  
M. Robinson.
- 'B' - Section Commander M. Higgins.

- 'C' - Section Commander C. Robinson.
- 'D' - Lieutenant R. O'Flanagan,  
Section Commander S. O'Neill,  
Squad Leader K. Barry.
- 'E' - Lieutenant T. McGrane,  
Squad Leader D. McDonagh,  
Volunteers J. Carroll and  
M. Douglas.
- 'F' - Section Commander F. Flanagan and  
Volunteer T. Keating.
- 'G' - Volunteers H. Murphy and  
J. Moran.
- 'H' - Assistant Quartermaster T. O'Brien  
and Volunteer P. Young.
- 'I' - Section Commander T. Staunton,  
Squad Leader P. Kenny,  
Volunteers E. Fox and S. O'Dwyer.
- 'K' - Section Commander D. Golden and  
Volunteer J. Carrigan.

The three Volunteers with me went into the public-house and ordered minerals to obviate suspicion. From the window of this public-house we could see the lorry arriving and all parties concerned could see my signal to advance on the lorry when I came out to the door.

#### 8. Details of the Operation.

The first thing that we noticed was that the lorry was very late. Every man was in position by 10.50 hours and the lorry did not arrive until half an hour later, at 11.20 hours. From my position I could see the looks of anxiety on many of the men's faces as they waited.

When it did at last arrive the rear was crammed full of troops. Instead of the nine or ten we

expected I estimated there were about twenty. I wondered why there were so many on this occasion of all days, certainly at least twice as many as we had counted on. Frank Flood cheerfully commented that it was "going to take twice as long to collect all those riflēs". Someone else wondered would they all fit in the van. There was no question of drawing back but I felt we were in for a fight. From where I was I could see Kevin Barry at 'D' calmly pretending to read a paper, but another man was popping his head round the corner and drawing back. Frank Flood commented that "if that fool doesn't stop popping his head around the corner, he will have us all spotted and we'll have to fight our way out".

Tom Kissane and I went out to the door of the public-house and pretended to be talking to each other before parting while I tried to count the men in the lorry. Unlike previous occasions the officer remained in the front of the lorry with the driver; the troops also remained in the lorry and 1 N.C.O. and 1 private only entered the bakery. As far as I could see 15 troops remained on the lorry, making a total of 19, all ranks. I decided to wait for a little while to see if any of the troops would alight and go into the Sweet Shop as usual. Frank Flood and Mick Robinson had now joined me at the door. Frank again drew my attention to the Volunteer at the corner who was talking to Kevin Barry and turning his head anxiously in our direction.

I was afraid if we waited any longer he would draw the attention of the British to us, so I took out my handkerchief and gave the signal to advance, saying, "We'll move in the name of God". One of the others said, "Amén". Having given the signal I looked to see if the

men at 'D' were moving. They were. Kevin Barry still had his paper in front of him; Lieutenant O'Flanagan was moving along the wall, with S. O'Neill on the outside. As soon as they got in line with my party we advanced with them towards the rear and side of the lorry. Section Commander T. Staunton's party 'I' were advancing on the left front of the lorry and H. Murphy's party 'G' on the right front. The tailboard of the lorry was down. One of the Volunteers (not Kevin Barry) as a result probably of over anxiety, ran out in front shouting "Hands up" and fired; it was now obvious we were in for a fight, as most of the British troops were standing up grasping their rifles and watching us.

I gave the order to fire, at the same time opening up myself. We drew our guns and charged, shooting as we ran forward. Some of the troops put their hands up, others returning the fire. I could see right into the rear of the lorry at this time and saw some of the British falling. I particularly noticed one soldier swinging his rifle to hit one of our men. I do not think he succeeded because this soldier fell almost immediately as if hit by a bullet.

Both sides were shouting and shooting at this time and we began to retreat as arranged firing as we went. I could see more British soldiers falling as if shot or trying to take cover behind their dead and wounded comrades. Their officer was certainly hit as I saw his head and arm slumped over the side of the cab.

We could hear their bullets flying past and hitting off the walls and ground. The object of the attack failed, that of capturing the firearms, and it was realised by the Volunteers that to retire without losses was the only alternative and by keeping up steady firing succeeded in confining the troops to the lorry, thus helping in a

successful retirement. As we fell back I looked all round to see if there were any casualties among our men but I could not see anyone lying around. I had noticed Lieutenant Flanagan run by with his hands to his head just after we opened fire, and thought he might have been hit on the head by the soldier with the swinging rifle. I learned afterwards he had been wounded in the head by a ricochet.

As we left Church Street, Mick Robinson almost fell over a bicycle left abandoned by someone in the centre of the road. I can still hear his swearing heartily and Tom Kissane laughing equally heartily. I saw Section Commander M. Higgins firing from his position at 'B' covering our retreat until we got round the corner.

Maurice Higgins and I went into the Capuchin Church for a few moments and said a prayer of thankfulness for coming out of that hell alive. When we came out of the Church we saw another party of British troops and some auxiliaries arriving and cordoning off Monks' Bakery. We went into a provision shop owned by a sister of Senator Martin Conlon's, whom I knew. She sent us upstairs and looking through a window we saw a lot of commotion around the lorry we had attacked. I suggested to Maurice Higgins that we leave our revolvers with the lady of the shop and go out and mingle with the crowd to see what information we could collect. She tried to prevail on us not to go, and by the time the argument was over and we got out to the crowd the lorry had moved off. We heard in the crowd that a big number of the British had been killed and wounded, but a man had been caught under the lorry and taken into the bakery by the British.

We left the scene and proceeded to Parnell Monument as arranged. All the party reported except Lieutenant Flanagan and Squad Leader Barry. One of the men reported that Lieutenant Flanagan had been wounded and we decided that Kevin Barry must have been captured. We did not know whether he had been wounded or not. The exact circumstances of his capture is veiled in uncertainty, but from data obtained shortly after the operation it was learned that during the engagement he took cover underneath the lorry, for the purpose of fixing a jamb in the Parabellum pistol which he carried, but before he had time to do so the British troops made him a prisoner.

#### 9. Conclusion.

Accompanied by, I believe, Lieutenant McGrane, Section Commander O'Neill and Volunteer O'Brien, I then went off to Kevin Barry's house and broke the news to his mother and sisters. They were, of course, broken-hearted, but like the majority of the relatives of the men in the fight for freedom, stood up marvellously to this ordeal, and proved worthy of such a son and brother. We removed Kevin's rifle and equipment before we left.

My next concern was to report the result of the operation to Brigadier McKee at 44 Lower Gardiner Street. He had already heard the news before I got there. I told him how we regretted that the objective was not a success but said I felt we had given a good account of ourselves. He shook hands with me, told me not to take it too much to heart, said it was a pity that we had not captured the rifles without having to open fire, but that we had acquitted ourselves well and put up a good fight. It was unfortunate that Kevin Barry had been captured and

Lieutenant Flanagan wounded, but as long as the Dublin Brigade had men like "H" Company it had men to be proud of.

The loss of Kevin Barry was a great blow to his comrades, and the reports of the tortures he had to endure in the vain effort to make him give the names of his officers and comrades in the attack nearly broke our hearts. But knowing him as we did we never doubted him for one moment.

Our next aim was to find ways and means of rescuing him from the enemy. However, G.H.Q. and the Brigade took this upon themselves and these efforts and the results form another chapter in the story of the fight for freedom.

May Kevin Barry's sacrifice be an inspiration to the boys of to-day and the future to fight on for the complete freedom and unity of Ireland and for its maintenance when fully attained.

SIGNED

*Seamus Kavanagh* Captain.

(Seamus Kavanagh)

Army Ordnance Corps (Ret.).

Late O/C. "H" Coy., 1st Battalion,  
Dublin Brigade, I.R.A. (1917 - 1921).

DATE :

*19<sup>th</sup> March 1957*

WITNESS :

*Sean Brennan*

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