

ORIGINAL

BUREAU OF MILITARY HISTORY 1913-21

BURÓ STAIRÉ MILENTA 1913-21

No. W.S. 640

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BUREAU OF MILITARY HISTORY, 1913-21.

STATEMENT BY WITNESS

DOCUMENT NO. W.S. 640

Witness

Commandant Hugh Gribben,
The Laurels,
Kildare,

Co. Kildare.

Identity.

Member of Sinn Fein, Co. Down, 1917;

Vice O/C. Newry Battalion;

Later O/C. do.

Subject.

National activities, Co. Down,
1917-1922.

Conditions, if any, Stipulated by Witness.

Nil

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STATEMENT BY COMMANDANT HUGH GRIBBEN,

The Laurels, Kildare, Co. Kildare.

I was born in Burren about three and a half miles from Newry and about two miles from Mayobridge, Co. Down.

Our first effort in support of extreme republicanism was to start a Sinn Féin Club in Corrags about the year 1917 or early 1918. I remember going around from house to house collecting funds for Sinn Féin and meeting unfavourable receptions in many places where I called. The United Irish League was very strong in the neighbouring district of Burren, and on the other side of Corrags we had a strong branch of the Ancient Order of Hibernians at Grinan. In the Newry and Warrenpoint sides of Corrags there were big Orange populations in which most of the young men were members of the Ulster Volunteers and in 1920 became members of the Special Constabulary. I remember that we of the Corrags Sinn Féin Club went to Mayobridge and organised a Sinn Féin Club there.

As soon as we had set up the Sinn Féin Organisation we started to organise the Volunteers. Eddie Ryan, who came to our district from England, was first Company O.C. I think I was appointed O.C. of the Corrags Company after Ryan resigned his captaincy or left the district. Peter Barry and Paddy Hughes were Company Officers. We recruited about twenty-five men when the Company was formed. In the initial stages we held our Company parades on Sundays. At parade meetings we had close order drill and as we had very little arms we did our drills at the start with staves to take the place of rifles. Immediately after the formation of the Company we started to acquire arms and procured shotguns which in most cases belonged to

our fathers or near relations. Those we used for drill purposes.

When the Newry Battalion was formed about 1918 I usually travelled to a little hall in River Street, Newry, where Battalion meetings were held. I had an elementary knowledge of morse code signalling and I remember I was asked to give lectures on signalling to the Battalion, which I did. I think I was the first Battalion Signalling Officer in the Newry Battalion if such a specific rank then existed. I was certainly appointed by the Battalion O.C. to give signalling instructions.

I can't now remember who was the Battalion O.C. when the Battalion was first formed or the first Battalion Officer. There were Bill Grant, Páid O'Rourke, Jeff O'Hare and possibly Tom Tate. Grant was, I am almost sure, Battalion O.C. from the start up to some time in 1920. Páid O'Rourke may have been O.C. at some time and Jeff (J.F.) O'Hare was a Battalion Adjutant before he was wounded and captured by Crown Forces in the fight at the Egyptian Arch in December 1920. I was appointed Battalion Vice O.C. some time in 1920. I can't now remember what time in that year. During part of the time I was Vice O.C. of the Battalion, Bill Grant was Battalion O.C.

The first operation of a military kind we were asked to carry out was the raid for arms on Ballyedmond Castle in the year 1919. I and a few others from the Corragh Company cycled about eight miles to Ballyedmond on the Saturday night the raid took place. Near the Castle we met Paddy Rankin. Paddy, at this time may have been Battalion O.C. If the Newry Brigade was formed then he was Brigade O.C. My job during the raid was to accompany Paddy Rankin to a gate lodge at the Castle gateway and prevent the occupants of the lodge getting out to raise an alarm. I remained in this position until the

raid was over. No person made any attempt to leave the gate lodge. What I call the gate lodge may not have been in fact the gate lodge. We arrived there at night and as far as I can now remember it was a cottage on the opposite side of the road from the Castle gateway. When the raid was called off about 1.30 a.m. we all went home. This raid for all practical purposes proved abortive as very little arms were procured and a large quantity was expected.

During the year 1919 and possibly during the early months of 1920, I travelled a lot in the South County Down area, organising new Companies and giving lectures to established Companies. I visited such places as Killowen, Mayobridge, Glen, Attacol, etc. It was part of the work of the Newry Battalion officers to go in rotation on visits to Companies when established and to help the local officers with instructions in drill and in matters of organisation. I was not "on the run" during this time and I had to carry on my usual work the next day after paying a visit to a Company the previous night. Some of the places I visited were a considerable distance from my home and I found my programme of work rather strenuous at times.

Following instruction received from Brigade Headquarters we arranged to carry out raids for arms in and around our district. We raided the district of Aughavilla which is near Rostrevor; Narrow Water - a Unionist district containing many Ulster Volunteers, and a place named Commons outside Newry, also Unionist. We carried out a raid on a Flax Seed Mill in the ^{land/}town/of Derrylecka near Mayobridge, and we got a quantity of shotguns (^{ammunition/}about sixty rounds of ammunition) and a telescope. I placed Peter Barry on the road for this raid and whilst I was engaged on the raid inside I heard a shot outside, and on enquiring what had

happened, I was informed that Peter had halted a man coming up the road. When he searched the man he found a bulldog revolver in his pocket, fully loaded. He made a prisoner of the man and placed one or two Volunteers on guard over him to prevent the spread of the alarm that we were raiding. After a time the prisoner escaped from the road into the fields. When he was running away a shot was fired. During this raid we all wore masks over our faces. A Miss Fitzpatrick, a Catholic who was employed in this Unionist house, recognised some of us but she never gave us away.

The first attempt to raid Narrowwater area for arms was made by local men with Bill Grant - our Battalion O.C. - in charge. The first house visited was a Mr. Tom Marsh's, a Unionist and a quiet unassuming and popular man in the district. Mr. Marsh offered some resistance to the Volunteers attempting to force an entrance to his house, and I heard that Bill Grant who was leading, in the effort to obtain admission, covered Mr. Marsh with his revolver and in the excitement of the moment he pressed the trigger but fortunately the round did not go off. This incident gave Bill Grant such a shock that he called off all the remaining raids for that night. When this particular raid was taking place I was with another raiding party at the Commons near Newry. It was the policy in those raids for men to raid in a district where they were not likely to be known.

The calling off of the raids in the Narrow Water area after the incident in Marsh's house made it more dangerous and difficult to carry out further raids there, on a subsequent date, as the Unionist population had been alerted to the possibility of further attempts to raid their houses. When I heard of the incident at Marsh's I decided to raid.

the area at once before the arms or ammunition of the Unionist houses could be collected for safe custody by the R. I. C. Accordingly I brought the Corraghs Company into the area within a week's time. The first house we visited we were refused admission. This house belonged to John Nugent, a Unionist. Notwithstanding the threat to use explosives he refused to open the door. I admired the man's courage. One of my men on that raid was a man named Michael O'Hare who is now Assistant Supplies Officer of the North Pacific Railway, and at present living in Sacramento, U. S. A. I levelled my revolver to fire through the door and O'Hare suggested that I aim high as some of the inmates might otherwise be endangered. I did this and according to the local press my bullet took a slate off the roof. Mr. Nugent then opened the door and we made a thorough search of the house and as far as I can now remember we failed to get anything. We raided several other Unionist houses - Wiers, Dowds, Goulters and Dias. We got a double-barrelled shotgun in Wiers. A woman fainted during the time we were raiding in Dias and we had to help to revive her. As far as I can remember we got a poor return for our efforts in raiding those houses.

The R. I. C. became active after those arms' raids. My place and Peter Barry's place were raided by R. I. C. We had both to go "on the run" and sleep out for some nights until the danger of further police raids passed. From this time onwards my home and Peter Barry's home were frequently raided.

In connection with another raid we carried out at a place named Aughavilla near Rostrevor, we called at a particular house in a Unionist district. We knocked at the door and the woman of the house opened the door and admitted us. We walked into a room and informed the woman that we

were raiding her house for arms. She pointed out her daughter to us, who was in bed, and told us that she was very ill and suffering from T.B. I then withdrew the men from the house. Some time later I was asked to give a report on this incident by our Brigade Headquarters. It appeared that some time after our visit to this house the woman wrote a letter complaining that her house was raided for arms endangering the life of her daughter who was a chronic sufferer from T.B. She addressed the letter to Michael Collins, Dublin.

The raiding of the house was traced to me and I was handed the woman's letter to Michael Collins and asked to make a report on the matter, which I did. The interesting point in this incident was how the letter carried by a British Government Service reached Michael Collins.

Attempted Destruction of Evacuated Barracks, Rostrevor.

Our next activity worth mentioning was in connection with General Headquarters' order to all units to destroy all evacuated R. I. C. Barracks. Rostrevor R. I. C. Barracks was evacuated. The preliminary preparation for the destruction of it was to procure a quantity of petrol or paraffin to start a fire in the building. The Corragh Company co-operated with Warrenpoint Company, of which Paddy McGivern was O. C., to carry out this operation. The Corragh Company in preparation for this affair procured a bugle in Dublin. The purpose of procuring the bugle was to use it to give a distinctive signal to all outposts when it was proper for them to evacuate their positions when the destruction of the Barracks was under way. Those outposts were placed on the Warrenpoint, Killowen and Hilltown roads. The men in those positions were widely spread and the bugle sounding in the stillness of the night was an excellent way to give a

signal to the outposts to come in to a central point in Rostrevor before retreating towards Corragh and Warrenpoint.

Paddy McGivern and I got into the Barracks and collected any inflammable material we could lay our hands on, doped it with a petrol-paraffin mixture and packed it beneath the stairway. We applied a light to this stuff and then awaited outside in the vicinity until we saw the fire going well. The bugle was then sounded and when the outposts came in we retreated towards our various homes. We learned later that some of the local residents succeeded in extinguishing the flames after the stairs and some of the floors had been burned out.

It became necessary to carry out a subsequent operation to complete the destruction of the Barracks. This second operation was carried out under the direction of the late John Quinn of the Milestone, Newry, who I think, was then Brigade Quartermaster. John's plan to destroy the building was to use explosives, having on hand a local Volunteer from the Newry Company who had experience in the use and handling of explosives. John detailed me to take up an ambush position at the bottom of the hill in Rostrevor for the purpose of attacking any enemy force sent into Rostrevor to obstruct the carrying out of the operation. I posted a party of about twelve men in positions on the road near the village and covering the Warrenpoint/Rostrevor road. The only civilians using motor cars at this time after a certain hour at night were Medical Doctors, ^{/Clergymen and the like./} My men were armed with shotguns and small bore rifles. We remained in positions for about an hour or more when we observed the lights of a motor car approaching from the Warrenpoint direction. Word was passed along to John Quinn that military or police were probably approaching our position. As the lights drew

near it became apparent that there was only one motor vehicle approaching and fearing that it might be a doctor or some such person I was anxious to prevent firing on such civilians.

A Volunteer named Con McNulty, who was beside me, was anxious to start firing on the vehicle as it drew near. I told him not to fire. I then went out on the road and halted the car and found that the occupants were a local protestant clergyman and his daughter who lived in Rostrevor. We allowed them to go into their house which was adjacent, and we kept the place under observation. A little time after this John Quinn came to our position and told me that the explosives had been placed in the Barrack building but that they had not succeeded in setting off the charge and that he had given orders to withdraw. The police found the explosives in the building the following day.

Burning Evacuated Barracks, Newry.

Subsequent to this I was mobilised to attend an I.R.A. parade in Newry in a hall or house along the Glanrye River behind Quin's Shop, the Milestone. When I arrived I found a number of Volunteers mobilised there and I think we were all armed. Frank Aiken was present and he announced that it had been decided to destroy both High Street and Canal Street R.I.C. Barracks; that both Barracks had been evacuated by the police and that only some policeman's family resided in each Barrack. Turning to Pat Casey and Me, he ordered us to proceed to High Street/^{Barracks} and to carry out the destruction of it by fire. He informed us that a party of boy scouts were standing-to in a yard convenient to the Barracks and that they had with them petrol tins with a mixture of petrol-paraffin for use in firing the building. He further stated that he with other officers and Volunteers would proceed to Canal Street for the burning of the Barracks there.

Patrick Casey and I left the meeting place and proceeded to High Street. As we were leaving Paddy Rankin volunteered to join us and we brought him along. We got in touch with the boy scouts and on ascertaining that they had everything ready, Pat Casey and I went to the Barrack door, and Paddy Rankin took up position a short distance up the street covering off the Barrack. It was arranged between Casey and I that Casey would do the talking at the Barrack door. We knocked on the door and from the inside a male voice inquired "Who is there?". Casey replied, giving the name of a local R.I.C. Constable. There was a short pause following which the door was opened a short distance, and the person who had opened it from the inside immediately attempted to close it again. The door was fastened on the inside by a chain, which would only allow the door to open a short distance, and the policeman on the inside succeeded in closing and bolting the door in spite of our efforts to prevent his doing so.

Casey then fired a shot through the door which, according to a subsequent issue of the local press, inflicted a slight flesh wound on the policeman's shoulder. As we had no means available to force the door or otherwise get it into the Barrack, we reluctantly withdrew. As far as I can remember before leaving we gave orders to the boy scouts to disperse.

Plans and Preparations for Egyptian Arch Ambush.

I attended a meeting in preparation for the attack on the Egyptian Arch and the simultaneous attack on Camlough R.I.C. Barrack. I remember part of those plans was to fill tins with rags soaked in either petrol or paraffin or both, which could be lighted and thrown from the Egyptian Arch on

to the main Newry-Camlough road so as to light up the road during the ambush. We got instructions to prepare some of those tins and I remember when putting the question of preparing the boxes to the Volunteers in Corragh Company they were critical of the scheme. It was arranged that the arms we had in the Corragh Company were to be taken across to some suitable location on the County Armagh side of Newry town some days prior to the date fixed for the ambush. Carlingford Lough and the river and canal bridges in Newry were dangerous barriers to the movements of our arms and equipment. It was impossible to pass by road from the County Down side of Newry to the County Armagh side except across three sets of bridges over both the Clanrye River and the Newry Canal. The arrangements were that the Brigade staff would send a motor vehicle into Corragh to lift our stuff and convey it to the selected place on the Armagh side. For some days prior to the ambush we had men available at our dumps to hand over the arms, etc., but the motor vehicle never arrived. I made some representation to some person in authority about the failure to lift our arms. The arms available with us were two service rifles captured by Paddy McGivern somewhere in Warrenpoint, and a miscellaneous collection of old shotguns - probably about seven or eight - and two small bore rifles. We had about sixty rounds of shotgun ammunition available but only a few clips of rifle ammunition. We had also available a number of the tin can flares mentioned above which we prepared locally from one pound paint boxes, for lighting up the road at the scene of the ambush.

I don't now propose to give any further details about the plans for the ambush as I am somewhat vague and I might be inclined owing to this vagueness to mislead.

On the evening of the night the ambush was to take place, 11th December, 1920, I attended a meeting or conference which, as far as I can remember, took place in King Street, Newry, opposite Johnny Southwell's place. I received short notice to attend this meeting. My recollection now is that Frank Aiken was the senior officer present. Amongst the things discussed it was decided that the arms held in Corragh area were to be taken through Newry to the Armagh side early that night. A discussion took place as to the means of getting them across. Eventually it was decided that Paddy Shevlin from Warrenpoint would proceed to the Rea and Ross Garage and there, on the pretext that his car had broken down on the Warrenpoint road, hire a motor car to convey him on his journey. Another Volunteer named O'Hare and I were detailed to go out the Warrenpoint road to a point a short distance from Newry and when Shevlin arrived with the car he was to hold up the driver with a gun he had and we were to travel with him to Corragh in the commandeered car. In Corragh we were to load up the arms and other war material in the car and drive it through Newry and out to the vicinity of the Egyptian Arch. Shevlin proceeded to the Garage and O'Hare and I went to the arranged spot on the Warrenpoint road to await the arrival of the car. We waited for a considerable time after the time the car should have arrived and then we knew that the plan to get the car had somehow miscarried.

We heard later that Shevlin succeeded in hiring the car and that when he attempted to hold up the driver, the driver produced a revolver and ejected Shevlin from the car, returned to his garage and reported what had happened to the police authorities. I can't vouch for this as exactly true but I know that shortly afterwards the police and Special Constabulary got out on the streets in Newry, held up and

searched pedestrians and that the Sinn Féin Hall, William Street, Newry, was set on fire between 8 and 10 p.m. that night.

When O'Hare and I had given up hope of Shevlin's arrival where we waited for him on the Warrenpoint road, we walked in towards Newry in the hope of locating him. We failed to see him or to get any information about him and, parting with O'Hare who was a Volunteer in the Newry Company, I decided to return to Corragh and try, if possible, to procure alternative means of transporting the stuff to the ambush position. I found the local Volunteers standing-to, and I explained to them what had occurred and I remember we discussed the possibility of commandeering a horse and cart (or trap). Eventually this plan was discarded. Finally Michael O'Hare (now in Sacramento), some other Volunteers and myself decided that we would try and reach the scene of the ambush, armed with revolvers. We started off and arrived at a place named Courtney Hill near Newry and then we heard that enemy forces were holding all the bridges across both the river and the canal in the town and that there was great military and police activities on the streets. We realised that to get across to the Armagh side was impossible and we abandoned the idea. I would say it was approximately 10 p.m. when we started for home.

Warrenpoint Ambush.

Our next activities followed the receipt of an order from Battalion level that each Company were to carry out an attack on enemy forces in its respective area. It fell to my lot to carry out such an operation in the Warrenpoint district. I accordingly set out collecting information of the movements of enemy patrols, etc. I learned through the medium of a Corragh Volunteer who worked in Warrenpoint, that a patrol of seven R.I.C. men, armed with rifles, were seen

patrolling regularly on the Warrenpoint-Rostrevor road, somewhere around 8 to 10 p.m. I checked up on this and came to the conclusion that the information was correct. It was arranged that a party of about twelve Volunteers armed with shotguns and revolvers, would take up a position on the Warrenpoint-Rostrevor road to intercept this patrol. On moving into the ambush position we had to traverse a district with a large Unionist population and so had to carefully select bye-ways and unfrequented paths with our arms concealed as best we could to get into the position. We had omitted to carry out any previous reconnaissance of the position and as a result the position taken up on this first night was very unsuitable as we would not bring the road fully under fire from the firing positions.

We were disappointed on the first night by the non-arrival of the enemy. We moved on the second night to a position closer to the town of Warrenpoint and took up a more favourable position. We remained in position for a considerable time and again no police patrol arrived and we went home. It was now apparent that our information was wrong and we decided to properly reconnoitre the town and ascertain for certain if in fact any police patrols moved from the Barracks at night. Accordingly Pat Hughes, Ted McEvoy and I went into Warrenpoint, armed with revolvers, on the following night, and we kept the Barracks and the streets under observation but we could not discern any patrol of the size previously reported to us.

On the first or second night we saw one or two R.I.C. patrolling the streets but decided not to interfere with them. I remember, one night, our being in Church Street and on looking around I saw a single policeman approaching the three of us. Pat Hughes wanted to shoot him explaining that he

was fed up by being out every night without having achieved anything. I prevented Hughes from shooting and we later decided to start for home. On our way home we came up a laneway leading from Church Street towards Summer Hill and on emerging from the laneway we walked into a police patrol of five men, all carrying arms. We were completely surprised and we passed around them expecting them to attempt to hold us up, as each second passed, but they did not do so. The movements of the patrol later occupied our attention but although we kept the Barracks and streets under observation each night from shortly after darkness we could not again find a patrol of such a number.

Finally one night we observed a patrol of three or four policemen leaving the Barracks and moving up Church Street towards the Baths. We kept them under observation and came to the conclusion that they would return to their Barracks via Summerhill road and we moved into a position to intercept them there. Our position was behind a medium-sized wall with a bank and trimmed hedge at the top. This position was on the sea side of Summerhill and fairly close to the shore road.

After a time we observed the patrol approaching and I instructed the other members of the party not to open fire until I gave the order. When the order was given we threw four hand-grenades at the patrol and opened fire with our revolvers. All the members of the patrol were seriously wounded but nevertheless they continued to fire on us and we were unable to disarm them. The men who took part with me in this operation were - Paddy Hughes, and Ted McEvoy, of Carrickmacstay district, and Daniel Monaghan, brother of Seamus Monaghan from Banbridge. Following this operation we retreated to the mountain area between Hilltown and

Rostrevor where we lay low for some days before we returned to our own area. The usual raids were carried out by the police and military following this operation as was usual on all occasions when an exchange of shots took place.

Attack at Plaster, Co. Louth.

My next operation of note was an attack on the military guard on a house at Plaster near Dundalk. Again, I was called to a meeting in King Street, Newry, where Frank Aiken informed us that it was the intention to carry out an ambush outside Dundalk the following morning, and we were instructed to collect arms which would be available for us at Charley McGinnitty's place. At McGinnitty's I was handed a Lee Enfield rifle and ammunition and I and several others, including Pat Casey, marched towards Dundalk during the night, and arrived at Faughart in the early hours of Sunday morning.

On arrival at Faughart the Divisional O.C., Frank Aiken, detailed John McCoy and myself with a few other Volunteers to proceed to a large house close by belonging I understand to a John McAllister, for the purpose of getting some food for the men who had travelled long distances. John McCoy who was senior to me, took charge. We arrived at the house, awoke the inmates and after gaining admission arrangements were set on foot to get meals prepared. Subsequently John McCoy left the house for the scene of the ambush position and ordered me to take charge of a guard that was placed on the house. Pat Casey who also left the house to take up position for the ambush, took my rifle with him.

I will now give an outline of the plans of this operation as far as I heard at the time and as I can now remember. A Unionist named Barrett, lived in a house at

Plaster, about two and a half miles from Dundalk. A guard of about thirty military were placed on this house for the protection of the owner. This guard was relieved each morning at about 8 a.m. by a relief party from the military Barracks, Dundalk, who invariably travelled by a large motor tender via Faughart School. The idea behind this operation was to ambush the motor tender carrying the troops, near Faughart School, by placing a large land mine on the road and exploding it when the military tender was over it and then opening fire with rifles and shotguns on the military. A successful result, it was hoped, could insure the capture of about thirty service rifles and ammunition and possibly other arms and military equipment. A signal post was established at Faughart Mount which is a height overlooking the town of Dundalk and the roads leading north from it; the occupied house at Plaster and the roads leading to it; and the ambush position about 500 yards distant. At the place selected as the ambush position the roads approaching it were hidden from the view of the party lying in ambush as were all the other roads leading from Dundalk. A small party of about six or eight I.R.A. men were detached from the main ambushing party to cross a low hill intervening between the ambush position and Barrett's house and to get close enough to the military at Barrett's house to contain them in their position there and to prevent their reinforcing their relief comrades in the event of a lengthy fight ensuing at the ambush position.

In addition to my having charge of the small guard on John McAllister's house, I and two others were detailed to watch for a signal from an officer placed at Faughart Mount. It was explained to us that the military from Dundalk could come to Barrett's by two roads and in the event of their using either routes, the ^{officer/}above referred to, had instructions to signal which route was being used. We were to transmit

whichever signal came to the men at the ambush position.

While we were waiting for any signal which might come, we heard the sound of shooting from the direction of Barrett's house only a short distance away but out of view. This firing continued for some time following which the officer at the signal post commenced to give signals. Those signals were interpreted by us as meaning that enemy forces were approaching on the alternative road they were not expected to travel and where no provisions were made to ambush them. One of the men with me left with this message for the officer in charge of the ambush position. I remained with the guard at McAllister's house. My only arms were now, a small revolver. After a time I noticed that the firing had ceased from the direction of Barrett's and everything seemed to be quiet. The next thing I observed was a lorry load of armed auxiliaries moving slowly along the road from Dundalk and only about 150 yards away. The lorry stopped and the auxiliaries made no attempt to get off the lorry as far as I could observe. I was greatly surprised to find that the lorry came from the direction of the ambush position and must have passed through that position uncollected. The few men with me were under cover around the house. Suddenly I heard some person mentioning my name from behind a hedge and when I moved up to the hedge I saw Seumas Monaghan and Andy O'Hare who asked me what I was doing there. On informing them they gave me to understand that the ambushing party had withdrawn from the ambush position. I then went with Seumas and Andy and we retreated in the direction of Newry. On our journey there an aeroplane passed over us and Seumas was in the act of firing at it when Andy stopped him. On our way into Newry we called into a friendly farmer somewhere about Killeavey and we hid our arms in one of his haystacks.

I heard afterwards that John Quinn who was in charge of the small party who went from the ambush position at Faughart to the vicinity of Barrett's house, got definite instructions from Frank Aiken before his departure for Barrett's, not to fire on the soldiers who were guarding the house as his job was to confine the soldiers to the house during the time the ambush took place on the road at Faughart.

I remember being at an I. R. A. meeting in Newry at which the Divisional O. C., Frank Aiken, made, as far as I can remember, a statement to the effect that the Dundalk Brigade had become disorganised and that it had been decided to carry out a big operation in the Dundalk area to give the men there an opportunity of taking part in an operation which, if successful, would help their morale.

My Capture by British Forces.

Following the attempt at Plaster, I returned to my own area and remained "on the run" there for some time until I was captured by a mixed party of R. I. C. and military at my uncle's place, Burren, Warrenpoint. I was conveyed by them to the Military Barracks, Newry. On arriving in Newry I was lodged in the day room next to the guard room where I was detained for three days. There were two or three other prisoners with me in the day room from Hilltown district. On either the second or third day another prisoner was brought into us, whom none of us knew. After a time this newcomer became very talkative explaining details of his arrest and asking us questions about ourselves. We were suspicious of this man and gave him no information. He was later taken from us and we saw no more of him.

Third Degree Methods used to extract information from me.

It's as well to state that to all appearances the Military Barracks in Newry was controlled by the British Army as a military guard was posted at the main gate. On my third night in the day room at about 1 a.m. a party of police came into the day room and my name was called. I was lying on a wooden bench along with the other prisoners covered with two blankets each, at the time. I was told by the police to get up and to come outside. I went out with them and was conveyed to a cell about one hundred yards or so from the day room. When the cell door was opened I saw Charlie McGinnitty, whom I knew well, in the cell. McGinnitty was ordered to get up and come out of the cell. When he came out I was put into the cell, the light put out and the cell door locked. About a quarter of an hour afterwards I heard voices outside and the door of my cell was opened and a crowd of men entered, some of them in police uniform and some in mufti. They informed me that I was to be shot and they proceeded to blindfold me and secured my hands by tying them behind my back, all the time using threats and foul language. They jostled me about in the cell for some time but did not injure me to any extent. I was then led blindfolded and taken out into the Barrack Square. I soon found that I was being led up a staircase and into a lighted room where there were a number of other men. One of those men stated that I was to be shot but that I could obtain my freedom if I volunteered to give information about Frank Aiken, Pat Casey and some other Volunteers, whose names I now forget, together with information as to the location of arms dumps. I declined to give the information required. They held me there for, what appeared to me, about half an hour, and at the end an order was given - "Take him out and shoot him". I was then bundled out of

the room and taken again to the Barrack Square where they started to beat me. They fired a number of shots which may have been blanks, and all the time enquiring if I was "giving in". Eventually it was ordered that I be stood against a wall where more shots were fired and more questioning took place. Then at the end one of them said, "I will take it on myself to stop your shooting", and he advised me to think things over or words to that effect. I was then taken back to the cell and locked up until morning.

The next morning I recognised another prisoner in the cell next mine as a young man named Pat O'Donnell. O'Donnell did not recognise me for some time as I was besmeared with blood. He then told me that a priest named Father Frank O'Hare was coming to see him that day and that he would tell Father O'Hare of my condition and its cause. Later on that day Father O'Hare visited me in my cell where he remained for a short time and I told him all that happened to me the previous night. As far as I can remember he heard my confession but I am not quite sure. Towards evening a military sergeant and one or two soldiers came to my cell and they escorted me to an ablution where I washed my hands and face as best I could. I remained in Newry military barracks for about two weeks, during which I was fearing small incidents of threats and beatings would take place, but nothing further happened.

Removed to Belfast Military Barracks and Ballykinlar Camp.

Eventually I was removed from Newry to Belfast and was lodged in what was called the 'cage' in Victoria Barracks. This 'cage' was a large military hut surrounded by several lines of barbed wire with guards posted around the wire.

In the 'cage' I met Hugo MacNeill, later Major-General, National Army; Seán O'Reilly, Battalion O.C., Armagh; Tom Corr, and many others I now can't recall.

We were all removed from the 'cage' about a month after I arrived. I think it worth recording the manner of our removal. We were put into a motor tender and then all handcuffed in a circle, i.e. each man handcuffed to a man on each side in such a way as to form a complete circle. Notwithstanding those precautions we were warned by the officer in charge of our removal that an attempt to escape would entail shooting. We were conveyed to Ballykinlar Camp, Co. Down, where we were interned until the 4th December, 1921.

Ballykinlar Tunnel and Attempts to escape Shooting, etc.

I was a prisoner in No.1 Camp, Ballykinlar, and during my time there I saw a small cross erected to mark the spot where two internees - Tormey and Sloan - were shot dead, with, it was said, the one bullet, sometime before I arrived there. The spot where the cross was erected was a considerable distance from the wire surrounding the camp.

Joseph McGrath was Camp Commandant of No.1 Camp for a short time after my arrival. I think he was released from the Camp soon after the Truce, 11th July, 1921, to attend a meeting of Dáil Éireann, being a T.D.

One of the most closely guarded secrets in the Camp was the making of a tunnel by the prisoners from No.2 Hut, D. Line, for the purpose of enabling the most prominent men in the Camp to escape. Considerable progress had been made with this tunnel when a heavy lorry in passing over the spot on a road under which the tunnel passed, sank into the tunnel.

This unfortunate accident gave the secret of the tunnel away to the military and the tunnel was ripped up from the road back into the Camp and traced to No.2 Hut. The occupants of this hut were removed from the Camp and confined somewhere outside. The internees in No.1 Camp went on strike for a short time as a protest against those men's removal, following which the men from No.2 Hut were returned to the Camp.

Another incident which took place whilst I was in the Camp was the escape of Commandant Colgan, a 1916 man, from Maynooth, and another prominent Volunteer Officer from Co. Cork named Maurice Donegan. I was not involved in the plans for this escape but I heard that the guard on duty at the gate had taken a bribe of some sort to let both men out. The night of the escape I was, and had been from my arrival in the Camp, an inmate in Maurice Donegan's hut. A count was conducted each night by a military officer at 7 or 8 p.m. When the time for this count arrived, Donegan had gone. When the officer and his escort came to check our hut an internee from another hut was in Donegan's bed feigning sickness. When Donegan's name was called this internee answered "annseo". Following this the military officer locked us up for the night and the internee who impersonated Donegan rushed from us by the hut window and proceeded to his own hut to answer at the roll call there. This window on our hut had to be prepared beforehand to enable a person to open it and get through it quickly.

The day following the escape Commandant Colgan and Maurice Donegan were recaptured and brought back to the Camp. The military then imposed some restrictions on us as punishment and our Camp Commandant called a strike. Part of our strike methods was the removal of locks and bolts from

hut doors, barbed wire from windows. Huts and their windows were damaged. Parties of five or six men each were detailed to arm themselves with stones adjacent to each light surrounding the camp and at the blast of a whistle they were to smash the lights with stones. Those tactics were carried out for a few days when a settlement was arranged between the Camp Commandant and the military and conditions returned to normal.

During all the time I was in the Camp lectures were given on military engineering. Irish classes were held at frequent intervals during each day. In the autumn months of 1921 parole was granted to a number of prisoners to enable them to visit their homes. On one occasion when men were leaving the vicinity of the Camp going home on parole, a prisoner named Tadhg Barry from Co. Cork was standing some distance from the wire shouting to some of his friends going out, apparently reminding them to deliver some message to people he knew in Cork. It was alleged that a military sergeant named Forde from Waterford, entered one of the sentry boxes, following which a shot was fired and Tadhg Barry fell shot dead. A number of Volunteer officers, including myself, were detailed to mount guard over Barry's remains an hour at a time before his removal for burial.

This shooting embittered the prisoners in the Camp very much and there were many who vowed vengeance on the military sergeant mentioned in connection with the shooting if they found him after their release.

Following my release from Ballykinlar I was met on my arrival at the local railway station by a large and representative crowd who gave me an enthusiastic welcome home. A band was at the station and the journey from the station to my home was something I had not beforehand the audacity to imagine could happen.

This enthusiasm was unexpected and an eye-opener to me. Included in the crowd welcoming me were some former supporters of the Irish Parliamentary Party and members of the Ancient Order of Hibernians, which showed that those sections of the population were losing at least some of their antagonism to Sinn Féin.

Following my release I got in touch with the Volunteer Organisation. For some time I had no appointment in the Volunteers that I can remember. The Divisional O/C., Frank Aiken, some time after my release, appointed me Battalion O/C., Newry Battalion. After my appointment we established a headquarters for a small column of Active Service men at a place named Burren situated well away from any of the main roads in the area. We held frequent meetings at this place. At this stage I can't recall any activities carried out by Crown Forces, such as raids or searching of houses.

John Quinn paid frequent visits to the Corragh district. He was Brigade O/C., No. 2 (Newry) Brigade, at this time. On one of those visits he informed me that it had been decided to capture Mayobridge R.U.C. Barracks. He explained that Pat Casey had contacted a member of the garrison in the Barracks and that this man would leave the rear entrance to the Barracks open when the raid on the Barracks was to take place. John Quinn informed me that I was nominated to take charge of this operation. It was not contemplated that any shooting would be necessary in overpowering the Barrack garrison. It was expected that we would get ten or twelve rifles and rifle ammunition, some revolvers and revolver ammunition by a successful capture of the place. I had a party of men ready for a final briefing on the operation on the night before the attack when a message arrived that the

operation had been called off. When I met John Quinn some time later I asked him about the reasons for calling the operation off and he informed me that it had been decided not to have any such operation for the time being.

I remember attending some meetings of No.2 Brigade in the military Barracks in Dundalk which were presided over by Frank Aiken. At one of those meetings we were given to understand that it had been decided to carry out a full scale attack on the British held parts of Northern Ireland. Arrangements were made to move arms, ammunition, explosives and other war material from Dundalk into South Down area for this general attack. Provisions were also made for the construction of safe and secure dumps for the material on its arrival in South Down.

This war material was conveyed by road to Omeath on the Co. Louth side of Carlingford Lough, and it was then secretly conveyed across Carlingford Lough by boat or at the Ferry on the Newry side of Omeath. We used some of the local boatmen who were friendly disposed towards us for this work. In the South Down side in every district where dumps for the stuff were prepared, Volunteers were standing-to to receive and dump the stuff carried to them by other Volunteers from the point where the boatmen delivered it. There was a British Naval gunboat stationed in Carlingford Lough, equipped with powerful search lights which added to the danger of transporting this stuff by water.

On the plans prepared for the general attack, enemy posts in Newry and Warrenpoint were to be attacked. I can't now remember the details of the plans for Newry, but I do remember that John Quinn was to take personal charge of the attack on Newry town.

I have a hazy recollection that the day was fixed for this general attack on the North but the order for the attack was never given. I know now that the attack was called off at the last minute.

My work from early in 1922 up to my leaving South Down in December 1922, was concerned with the organising, training, equipping and providing for the safety of the men in my Battalion area. From May 1922, there were widespread raids and arrests all over the Battalion area as in all other areas throughout the Six Northern Counties.

Some time before the Civil War broke out, John Quinn came to Omeath and sent a messenger to Corragh for me and Pat Hughes to cross to Omeath to see him. We crossed to Omeath. John told us that himself, Frank Aiken and the 4th Northern Divisional Staff were opposed to the Treaty and that the Divisional Staff were anxious to show a united front in the opposition to the Treaty. John wanted myself and the Battalion Staff to move into the military Barracks, Dundalk, and take up duty there. I told him that the other officers of my Battalion Staff and myself were in favour of accepting the Treaty and that personally I could not see my way to take an armed stand against its acceptance. John did his best to persuade me to change my mind on the matter and finally he stated that he would not ask us to bear arms but to simply occupy quarters in Dundalk Barracks.

I could not agree to any of his suggestions and following this there was a certain amount of unpleasantness between John and me, which manifested itself by John's actions when in our area ignoring my presence in the area and the rank I held in the Volunteers. However, we never had any cross words about the matter.

The next incident of note which registers itself in my memory was the arrival of a Miss Keelan who was in charge of the Cumann na mBan, in Warrenpoint at my place with an order from Frank Aiken which, to the best of my recollection, demanded that I should report to the Military Barracks, Dundalk. I refused to obey this order and I told Miss Keelan that I had not changed my opinions since I discussed the question of the Treaty with John Quinn.

When the Civil War broke out I remained in the Six Counties area and took no part in any of the military operations up to the end of 1922. Finally Pat Hughes and myself were persuaded by Pat Casey, who had joined the Army some time previously and held the rank of Brigadier, to join the National Army, which we did.

One of the pressing reasons for joining the Army was that a certain antagonism towards me by some of my former comrades manifested itself over the question of the Treaty. When I joined the National Army late in December 1922, the Civil War fighting had practically ceased, and I was fortunate in being put in charge of an outpost of the Curragh Camp and never had any occasion to take part in any of the fighting.

SIGNED

Hugh Gribbin

HUGH GRIBBIN, COMMANDANT.

DATE

27th January 1952

WITNESS:

John Mc Coy.
27. 1. 52.

BUREAU OF MILITARY HISTORY 1913-21

BURO STAIRE MILEATA 1913-21

No. W.S. 640