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BUREAU OF MILITARY HISTORY, 1913-21.

STATEMENT BY WITNESS

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Witness

John McGahey,
Drumcavney,
Swan's Cross,
Co. Monaghan.

Identity.

Member of Rockcorry (Co. Monaghan)
Irish Volunteers, 1914-1921.

Subject.

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C O N T E N T S

	<u>Page</u>
1. Rockcorry Company, Irish Volunteers, 1914-1916: Fr. Laurence O'Cieran.	1
2. Raids and arrests after Rising, 1916.	2
3. East Cavan Election.	3
4. 1918. Dispatch carrying.	3
5. Ernie O'Malley in Co. Monaghan.	4
6. Ballytrain Barracks attack.	4
7. General raid for arms, September 1920.	5
8. Shooting of Peter O'Reilly in raid on Crawford's house.	6
9. "B" Special Constabulary activities.	7
10. The Flying Column organised.	8
11. Flying Column activities.	9
12. Ballybay ambush, January 1921.	10
13. McQuillan, The Spy.	10
14. Execution of Larmer for giving information to the enemy.	12
15. Arrests and courtmartials.	13
16. Trenching and blockading roads.	14
17. Belfast boycott.	15
18. The Clarke Family, Ballybay.	16
19. Arrest during big round-up.	17
20. Meet McQuillan, the Spy, in Victoria Military Barracks, Belfast.	17

Statement by John McGahey,

Drumgavney, Swan's Cross,

Ballybay, Co. Monaghan.

I first joined the Irish Volunteers about the first week in March 1914. Our local Company - Rockcorry Company - was organised by our local Parish Priest, Father Laurence O'Ceiran. This Father O'Ceiran was a pioneer in the Sinn Féin Movement and was one of the men who attended the inaugural meeting in the year 1905 at which Arthur Griffith started Sinn Féin.

The Rockcorry Company of the Volunteers was the first organised in Co. Monaghan. We had about 32 men in the Company. A Company may have existed in Carrickmacross when our Company was formed, but I believe that Rockcorry was the first. Later a Company was formed at Greenan's Cross. Paddy Whelan, J.P., C.C., and Coroner for North Monaghan was the Company Captain.

In the summer of 1914, our Company received 13 rifles, two of which were magazine rifles and eleven were Martin Henry's single shot rifles. I don't know where the rifles actually came from but I expect we got them through Fr. O'Ceiran's great influence.

After the outbreak of the Great War in August 1914, when the split in the Volunteers took place, all over Ireland, there was no division of opinions in the Rockcorry Company. Fr. O'Ceiran's influence kept our Company all loyal to the leadership of Professor Owen MacNeill.

We continued training and drilling up to Easter Week, 1916. A barn at the farmstead of my home was used as a drill hall up to the eve of Easter Week, 1916.

Before Easter Week we got no information that an impending resort to an armed rising was contemplated. The first intimation we received of the rising was the news that fighting was on in Dublin City. When we heard of the outbreak of fighting in Dublin we got together and Fr. O'Ceiran addressed us, advising us to await orders before we should take any military action. All during the time the fighting was on in Easter Week we awaited orders. No orders came.

When the rising was over, the R.I.C. went around and arrested some men, including Mr. Peter Gallagher, N.T. and Frank Clarke. Both these men were members of the Volunteers. They were released almost immediately after their arrest. Fr. O'Ceiran's house and a number of other local houses were raided by military and R.I.C. looking for arms. They were making a particular search for the rifles we had. In all those raids no rifles or arms were captured.

During the raid on Father O'Ceiran's house, the priest told the raiders that there was one room in the house that they could not search as it was an Oratory. The officer in charge of the raiding party insisted in searching the whole house, so Fr. O'Ceiran had to remove the Blessed Sacrament from the Oratory to another room before the search on the Oratory took place. During this removal of the Blessed Sacrament, Fr. O'Ceiran asked if there was any Catholic amongst the raiders. Several of them said "Yes". He then told them to get down on their knees whilst he was carrying the Blessed Sacrament past them. They did as he told them.

From Easter Week, 1916, up to the year 1918, nothing much happened in the Volunteers. In June, 1918, when the East Cavan Bye-Election was held we mobilised the

Rockcorry Company and we marched into Cootehill on the morning of the polling. We gave a hand at the work of the election during polling. We returned home on the day after the Election when the result was declared. At this time our Company was only 15 strong as all the older members who were linked up in the Volunteers at the split had now dropped out.

After Easter Week, 1916, Fr. O'Ceiran was changed by his Bishop from our parish to the parish of Pettigo. So we lost his great help and influence in the republican movement.

Nothing much happened from June 1918 up to the end of that year. In the latter part of 1918, Mick McCabe and I went into Clones to see Owen O'Duffy. We met O'Duffy and Dan Hogan at Tummon's Hotel. We discussed with O'Duffy and Hogan the question of re-organising the Volunteers all over Co. Monaghan. Shortly after this a campaign to re-organise was carried out. When this re-organisation took place our Company had dropped in membership to 10 men. James Timmonee was appointed Company Captain - he was a nephew of Fr. O'Ceiran's - and my brother Ned was appointed 1st Lieutenant.

Rockcorry Company was a link in the principal line of communications for despatches, connecting North and South Monaghan, and handling all the despatches passing to and from G. H. Q. in Dublin and serving all areas north of us in the present Six Counties area. This carrying of despatches was a constant and heavy job, especially during the years 1920 and 1921. I often saw three Volunteers on duty at the same time carrying despatches. Our Company was small in numbers and all were kept busy on despatch duty.

Some time about early January 1920, Ernie O'Malley arrived in Co. Monaghan. He was sent to us by G.H.Q. to organise and drill the Volunteers. He spent a good part of his time in our part of the country. He stayed at a place named Latton and from there visited the surrounding Companies. He gave our Company a good deal of attention as we had 13 rifles. He gave us lectures on musketry and drilled us with rifles.

Attack on Ballytrain Barracks, February 1920.

A meeting was held at my home at Carravacken where Owen O'Duffy, Ernie O'Malley, Terry McGee, my brother Ned, James Timmonev and myself took part. This meeting was to make the final arrangements as far as our area was concerned for the attack on Ballytrain (Shantonagh) Barracks. The part that Rockcorry men was to take was detailed to us.

On the night of the attack our Company of 10 men marched into the vicinity of the Barracks carrying our 13 rifles. James Timmonev was detailed to Mitchel's shop. Paddy McCabe and John Donnelly of Newbliss went into Mitchel's lock-up store adjoining and attached to the gable of the Barracks. Those two men were experts on explosives and were in charge of the mining operation on the barrack gable. My part was on patrol with some other men, marching between the main road barricade on the Cootehill-Latton road and the Barracks. My brother Ned was in charge of some men at this main barricade. I don't propose to go into detail about what took place during the attack on the Barracks as many others were in better positions to see what happened and to describe it now.

The Barracks were captured with all the arms and other war material such as hand-grenades, etc. There were no casualties on the Volunteer side; one of the R. I. C. garrison was wounded on the foot.

When the R. I. C. surrendered and the excitement of the attack had somewhat abated, we made a check on our rifles and found that two were missing. I realised that some person or persons had made love to them and that it would be a rather difficult matter to locate them, so I got my hands on two Lee Enfield rifles which I took away with me to make up for the loss of our own Martinis.

General Raid for Arms, September 1920.

The first house we raided in the general raid for arms was a Unionist house named Millars. This house resembled a military fortress in size and strength. Our party in this attack numbered 18 men and were all from Rockcorry Company. James Timmoney, Company Captain, was in charge. Amongst the occupants of Millar's house on this night were six fully armed men - four Millars and two serving men. On our party's arrival at Millar's house we approached the entrance to the dwellinghouse and knocked on the door to gain admittance. The men inside immediately opened fire on us. We were forced to take cover and we then replied to the fire. Then the fire from the house became particularly heavy. We moved into some sheds at the back of the dwellinghouse, and the exchange of fire continued for about half an hour.

At the end of this time we realised that we could not force an entrance to the house and that the position occupied by the Millars being so secure that there was little likelihood of our inducing them to surrender by rifle fire, so we had to call off our men and abandon the attack.

We raided about a dozen Unionist houses later that same night in which we captured five or six shotguns and about three revolvers. Towards morning we arrived at a Unionist's house named Crawford outside Drum, Co. Monaghan. Timmoney gave orders for three young fellows to go up to Crawford's door and force an entrance if and when the order to open the door was refused. Crawford refused to open the door and Peter O'Reilly and myself went to the young fellows' assistance at the door. O'Reilly broke the door in with an axe. The door fell back into the hallway in an awkward position. I got the barrel of my rifle to the door and pushed it into proper position against the door jamb. Shooting was now taking place and Crawford was firing out at us through a window on the right-hand side of the hallway. When I pushed the door back O'Reilly pushed past me and turned to enter a room off the hallway. As he was stepping towards this room he received the discharge of a shotgun in the breast at a few feet range. He fell into my arms exclaiming "My God, I am shot". I carried O'Reilly out and I handed him over to the three young fellows at the door. I got back to a little gate pier opposite Crawford's door and I opened fire on the front windows of the house, firing at each window in rotation. Crawford maintained a vigorous fire on my position. With a seriously wounded man on our hands it was decided to call off the attack.

We found that O'Reilly was in a very serious condition so we sent two of our men to go - one for the priest and the other for the doctor. We then procured a garden gate and using it as a stretcher we carried O'Reilly away, in the direction from which we were expecting the priest and doctor to come. After we carried O'Reilly some distance along this road we met the

priest, Father Quigley, and the doctor - Doctor Canning - coming together in one motor car. The priest went over to O'Reilly who was then dead, and gave him the rites of the Church, and the doctor had a look at him.

This tragic affair which happened so quickly, cutting off a fine young life in prime of its manhood and snatching from us a dear comrade and friend, shocked us all that even at the present day the survivors of this shooting have not been able to forget. I for one will never forget poor Peter O'Reilly's end. May God have mercy on his soul R. I. P.

After the priest's ministrations to O'Reilly on the roadside we took his body to Edrgull Churchyard. We opened a grave for him and Fr. Quigley who accompanied us, gave our fellow comrade the last rites of Holy Church and blessed his grave. When the burial of O'Reilly was over we dumped our arms which we recovered in four or five days' time when the excitement caused by the night's raiding had subsided.

After this general raid for arms all the Unionists in our area and the surrounding districts went into both Ballybay and Cootehill looking for police or military protection for their houses and persons. This protection could not be afforded them. Anyhow it was refused. There was practically no police or military activity following those raids.

The "B" Special Constabulary.

In the autumn of 1920, a large number of young Unionists in Rockcorry and neighbouring districts were recruited into the "B" Specials. Those men were well armed and when their organisation was completed they

went out regularly on patrol on the various roads. I was held up by those men on two occasions. I would like to mention a few of the Rockcorry "B" men who were particularly active against the I.R.A.: Hugh Duffy, Jack Francey, Bob Harrison and a man named Harpur. Those men held up my brother Ned one night. Ned dared them to search him and they did not do it. Duffy later on gave information to the Tans which resulted in several I.R.A. men's arrests. An order was given for Duffy's liquidation which was carried out about June 1921.

The Flying Column.

At the suggestion of Owen O'Duffy our Battalion formed a Flying Column about November 1920. Some men from the Carrickmacross Battalion joined up with the Column. Paddy Brennan of the Carrickmacross Battalion was put in charge of the Column. With Brennan, the following Carrickmacross men joined: Jemie Kelly, Thomas Darcy and Bob Hamill. From Ballybay Battalion were: James Timmoney, John McCabe and Ned McGahey, Rockcorry Company; Paddy McPhillips, John Sullivan and Terence McGee, Latton Company; Paddy McQuillan and my brother Owen McGahey from Ballintra Company; Paddy Daly, Loughelish Company; Paddy McDermott, Joe Duffy and John McEntee, Tullycorbett Company; Packey Coyle and Antony Daly, Ballybay Company.

After the Column was formed they met as a Column for the first time near Corduff and they moved down to Rockcorry and were billeted out amongst five neighbouring houses. My house was Column Headquarters. Whilst the Column were staying in Rockcorry we mounted a guard for them each night to prevent surprise by

British forces. One night Jemie Kelly, Bob Hamill and myself were on guard on a nearby road. A patrol of "B" Specials came along. Hugh Duffy was apparently an advanced guard for this patrol. It was a fairly dark night and Duffy nearly got past where we were standing before we noticed him. We ordered him to halt and he immediately opened fire on us. We replied vigorously to his fire. I can't understand since how Duffy missed Bob Hamill on whom he first opened fire, nor can I explain how he escaped from us returning fire. Duffy zig-zagged back towards the main patrol of "B" men. The patrol made no effort later to approach our position.

A few days after this incident the R. I. C. conveyed a patient from Co. Cavan to the Monaghan Mental Hospital situated in Monaghan town. The Column got information that the police car had passed through towards Monaghan, and they made preparations to hold the car up on its return journey. The car, however, did not return on the road it was expected to travel on. A commercial traveller who represented a Belfast firm came along on a motor bike whilst the Column were waiting for the R. I. C. car and he was held up, questioned about his work. His motor bike was taken from him and he was warned against working for Belfast firms again and he was sent off walking.

The Column left Rockcorry area the next day and went to Tullycorbett area. Brennan, who had charge of the Column up to this time was dismissed from his post, and Terence McGee, the Battalion O/C. took charge of the Column, Brennan going home. It would appear that Brennan did not get on well with the Column men.

When McGee took charge of the Column it was moved into Ballintra area to a place named Carrickanair. It was from this place that the Ballybay ambush was planned and carried out.

Ballybay Ambush.

This operation took place on the night of the 1st January, 1921. I acted as an outpost with others on the Cootehill-Ballybay road. The full Column took part in this operation. The operation consisted in the attack on a patrol of four or five Black and Tans in Main Street. During the exchange of fire with the Tans one Tan was killed. A man in civilian clothes who later transpired was a "B" Special/named Summerville/when he saw some of the Column awaiting on the street, made an effort to rush in the direction of the Police Barracks. He was called on to halt but would not halt. He was fired on and shot dead. There were three other Black and Tans wounded.

After this fight the Column returned immediately to Carrickanair, but the next morning they moved to a place named Garrybawn in Latton area.

McQuillan, The Spy.

I don't know much about the Column activities whilst they were in Garrybawn area. During the time they were in Garrybawn a member of the Column named McQuillan came to his home from the Column on a Saturday night. My brother, Frank McGahey, and John McGuinness and a few more I.R.A. men, when they heard that McQuillan was at his home, went to him and asked him to return to the Column at once. McQuillan

refused to go back until Monday morning although the men who were urging him to return, volunteered to escort him to the Column. On Monday morning McQuillan left his home apparently to rejoin the Column. Near his house the Carrickatee road and the Shra road run parallel a few fields distant but within easy view of each other. McQuillan started off up the Shra road and at the same time a force of Black and Tans on cycles were on the Carrickatee road. McQuillan left the Shra road, crossed the fields to the Carrickatee road and walked headlong into the party of Tans. He was arrested and taken to Ballybay.

On Monday night McQuillan led the military out to Garrybawn area to raid where the Column were billeted. The military travelled towards Garrybawn on the Ballybay-Shercock road. Near Garrybawn a patrol of two I.R.A. men were posted as a guard to give warning to the Column of the approach of enemy forces. Those guards, James Caragher and Charlie McCabe were on guard about 200 perches from where the Column were billeted across the country in the fields. When the guards noticed the approach of the military in four or five motor tenders, they started off at a fast speed across the fields in the direction of the Column's billets. The military had to make a considerable detour by road to reach where the Column were. Nevertheless the speed of the motor tenders more than compensated for the shorter distance the two I.R.A. had to travel so that their utmost speed was required if they should get to their destination in time. They encountered a large flax dam which they attempted to jump. Only McCabe succeeded in getting across. He was the first to reach the Column and warn them of their

peril. Most of the Column were asleep in one house and the outhouses attached. They were only barely able to get away before the military arrived. In fact, the military were so close when the last of the Column were leaving the premises that they saw them and called on them to halt. I understand that my brother, Ned McGahey, fired on the military when they approached. John McEntee and Packey Coyle were with the Column in this incident and should be asked to describe. I am only working from what I heard from those present. After this narrow escape and the unfortunate knowledge that the British got one of the Column men to give information against them, the Column was disbanded and was not reformed again as a full-time Column during the Tan War.

Execution of Larmer.

In connection with the execution of Larmer who was a local Volunteer, captured by enemy forces and who gave information to the enemy about his Volunteer comrades after his capture, I am not as conversant as a few others to give full details as to what happened in this unfortunate boy's case after his capture by the British, or of his escape from them, his confession to his Company Officer of the disclosures he made to the British after his capture by them.

Just previous to his courtmartial by the I. R. A. I got to know about it and I also got to know that even then an intention to find him guilty existed. As I had strong feeling on the advisability of the extreme penalty being applied in this case, I went to a house where I knew I could contact General Owen O'Duffy whom I met when I arrived there. I made a strong plea to O'Duffy

in Larmer's defence, pointing out many extenuating circumstances which should be considered. I got a feeling that my pleadings were having the desired effect on O'Duffy when Dan Hogan arrived on the scene and intervened in a manner most aggressive towards myself. I have felt since that only for Hogan's untimely arrival I could have succeeded in influencing O'Duffy to spare Larmer's life. I failed.

I wish now to emphasise my belief that Larmer should not have been executed. Larmer was an intelligent country boy who unfortunately for everybody concerned was timid and easily scared. He was both conscientious and deeply religious. His only fault was his weakness in yielding to threats under torture by the Tans. He returned to his comrades after his release or escape from the Military Barracks in Belfast, and made a full confession of his guilt and gave an explanation of how the British extracted the information from him.

I was fully convinced at the time of his courtmartial that he did not merit execution and from what I have since heard I am convinced that his execution was much too drastic punishment in his case. I feel, however, that had he been otherwise punished for his criminal weakness his life since would be to him a living hell. I feel that his memory deserves this vindication from me.

Arrests and Courtmartials.

My brothers, Owen and Ned McGahey, and Paddy McDermott were arrested about ten days after the Column became disbanded, 15th-16th January, 1921. They were taken to Belfast Military Barracks where they were kept prisoners.

Packey Coyle and Anthony Daly were arrested on the 13th June, 1921. Coyle and Daly were taken to Castleblayney, then to Dundalk Military Barracks and from there to Belfast Prison.

After Coyle and Daly arrived in Belfast Prison my brothers, Owen and Ned, Paddy McDermott and another man, James Keenan, Doochamlet, were courtmartialled and charged with the murder of a Constable Maloney and another man who were shot dead in the Ballybay ambush. Keenan was arrested on the information of a Unionist named Parks. All were found guilty and sentenced to death. The intervention of the Truce saved their lives.

After the arrest of the two McGahey's and McDermott, the remaining men "on the run" in the Battalion formed a Column which was to be called together as the occasion demanded. This Column went into Doochamlet to hold up a mail train on three occasions. On the first occasion the train ignored the signal to stop and passed through. On the next occasion the Column waited for the train to arrive but for some reason it did not travel that day. On the third occasion the train was two hours late. On this occasion we had made preparations for stopping the train by removing one of the rails of the permanent way. We placed fog signals in front of the removed rail as a warning to the engine driver. When the train did not arrive within reasonable time we decided that the train was unlikely to run that day so we replaced the rail and removed the fog signals and evacuated the position. When we were some distance from the railway line the train passed through.

From January onwards we trenched the roads regularly. The police and military were kept busy in

filling in the trenches and removing road blockades which we erected.

Some time in early May 1921, I accompanied by eight other men moved into the town of Ballybay to ambush a police patrol which was usually to be found on the streets up to a late hour each evening. On this occasion the patrols went into the Barracks early. Our plans to attack them thus fell through.

Belfast Boycott.

The campaign to stop the sale of Belfast products in our Battalion area was carried out in a vigorous and intensive manner by the I.R.A. This campaign commenced in the early months of the winter of 1920-1921, as a reprisal for the pogrom which the Unionists of Belfast with the consent of the British military and police authorities, carried out against the Nationalist population of that city. A survey was made in the Battalion area of all shops receiving supplies of Belfast goods for sale. Such goods as bakers' bread, flour, cattle feeding stuffs, seeds and fertilizers were specially looked for. Shopkeepers stocking Belfast goods were warned to cease trading with Belfast. Regular inspections of shops were carried out and special Intelligence Officers were appointed for this particular work. Any shopkeeper who persisted in dealing in Belfast goods was boycotted and the people were warned against buying in boycotted shops. Any goods which were traced back to boycotted houses were seized from purchasers and destroyed. In this way the boycott campaign became more effective as the country people feared to visit shops on which the boycott ban was placed. A bread-cart belonging to Inglis, Belfast, was

intercepted and burned in Tullycorbett area. After this operation no further attempt was made to distribute Belfast bread up to the boycott was called off in 1922.

The Clarke Family, Ballybay.

A Unionist family named Clarke had a blacksmith's business in the town of Ballybay. This family were most friendly with the Black and Tans. Tans frequently visited their house and business place. At a Battalion meeting the question of those people's friendship with the Tans was discussed and it was decided after mature consideration that the Clarkes' association with the Tans was a matter of extreme danger to all local I.R.A. men. Orders were issued at this meeting that the Clarke residence and house property should be destroyed.

In May, 1921, a number of officers and men of the I.R.A. called at Clarkes' premises at about 2 a.m. one morning, broke in the windows and threw in incendiary bombs which set fire to the place and soon burned the premises out. The Clarkes immediately cleared out of Ballybay and went to Belfast to live.

Another activity which we systematically carried out was to go into a particular townland on certain days and stop and question all people passing on the roads as to their business. No person was otherwise interfered with. We informed all persons stopped that we were the I.R.A. Those hold-ups took place at least once every fortnight. This was a most effective means of showing that the I.R.A. were a live and active force. In mixed districts with a "B" Special organisation the presence of I.R.A. men stopping people in broad daylight had a disconcerting and a demoralising effect on the local "B" men, and it kept the Nationalist population in such areas who were not republican from taking any chances to fraternise or curry favour from local Unionists.

I was arrested in the big round-up of the 13th June, 1921, in which a large area in Co. Monaghan was systematically combed by British military and police forces for men "on the run". I was captured in the house of James Gibson, Carrickanair. There were about fifteen other members of the local I.R.A. captured in the same round-up. In all in our Battalion area there must have been one hundred men captured in this, the most extensive, round-up carried out in the country in 1921.

All our local prisoners when captured were taken into Castleblayney and detained in Hope Castle which was then used as a headquarters for the local auxiliary detachment. During the first three days as prisoners three of our men were released and the remaining twelve were removed to Dundalk Military Barracks. I remained in Dundalk with some other prisoners up to the morning of the 11th July, 1921, (day of the Truce) when I was removed to Belfast, and we were put into cells in Victoria Military Barracks. I remained in those cells for a few days. I was next removed to Crumlin Road Prison and after about two days I was again returned to Victoria Barracks where I met McQuillan, the informer. I was out for exercise with him for at least two days. During those meetings at exercise he made excuses for his treachery and he gave me details about his leading out the military to Garrybawn in their attempt to capture the Column.

I remained in Victoria Barracks for about 16 days, and then was taken to Dundalk Military Barracks. From Dundalk I was sent to Ballykinlar on the 5th September, where I remained an internee there until my release on the 6th December, 1921.

WITNESS

John McGahey
17/10/52

SIGNED

DATE

John McGahey
17.10.'52.

(John McGahey)
17.10.'52.