

ORIGINAL

BUREAU OF MILITARY HISTORY 1913-21
BUREAU STAIRS MILEATA 1913-21
No. W.S. 761

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BUREAU OF MILITARY HISTORY, 1913-21.

STATEMENT BY WITNESS

DOCUMENT NO. **W.S.** 761

Witness

Christopher Joseph William O'Keeffe,
The Sycamores,
Newmarket,
Co. Cork.

Identity.

Member of Newmarket Company (Co. Cork)
Irish Volunteers, 1917 - ;

Q.M. same Company, 1918 - .

Subject.

National activities, Newmarket, Co. Cork,
1915-1921.

Conditions, if any, Stipulated by Witness.

Nil

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STATEMENT

BY

CHRISTOPHER JOSEPH WILLIAM (BILL) O'KEEFFE,
THE SYCAMORES, NEWMARKET, CO. CORK.

I was born in Newmarket in 1901. My parents were farmers. I attended the local school.

1915.

When I was only a young lad, I can recollect a Captain McCarthy from Dublin visiting Newmarket in 1915. He was attired in Volunteer uniform and addressed a public meeting there, seeking support for the Volunteer Movement. The old Nationalist element appeared to be hostile towards him, and an old-timer J.P. named Mike Barry made an attempt to assault him. He was prevented, however, by a number of young men. The vast majority of the young men present at this meeting indicated by their applause that their sympathies were with Captain McCarthy.

I tried to join the Volunteers about this period but, on account of my youth, Captain McCarthy sent me home.

1916.

Some time prior to the Rising in 1916 there were some manoeuvres held by the Volunteers at Barleyhill Bridge, about two miles from Newmarket. I think Seán Moylan was in charge. A lot of young lads, including myself, followed the parade out from the town and remained interested and enthusiastic spectators of the training and evolutions. I cannot remember the number of Volunteers present but, if

I remember rightly, every one of them was armed with a National Volunteer rifle or a shotgun.

1917.

I joined the Newmarket Company in 1917. The Company O.C. was Seán Moylan. I think the strength was then only about a dozen.

Drills were held on two nights a week and were mostly along the country roads. We had no Volunteer hall, but Michael McAuliffe (now of the Dairy Disposals Board) gave us the occasional use of the top portion of a premises which he owned in the town.

Training was carried out by Seán Moylan.

Late in 1917 we made a raid on the house of the local Protestant Minister, who was known to be strongly pro-British. We secured an old type pistol in the raid. This created a lot of local excitement and the R.I.C. interrogated a number of men but no arrests were made.

1918.

The Battalion organisation was introduced in 1917. The first O.C. was Seán Moylan and the Vice O.C. was Patrick Murphy (killed later). The Adjutant was Mick Madden, (R.I.P.) and I think the Battalion Quartermaster was Charles O'Reilly.

Our Company O.C. was Davy Duggan, who was later replaced by Eugene O'Sullivan, and later by Jerh. Sheahan.

Under the original organisation when Cork had only one Brigade, our Battalion was known as the 19th, then later it became the 6th Battalion, Cork No. 2 Brigade, but in the reorganisation in 1921 it was changed to the 4th Battalion, Cork No. 4 Brigade.

Our Battalion area comprised the following centres: Newmarket, Knocknagree, Umerboy, Kiskeam, Taur, Ballydesmond, Meelin, Tullylease, Freemount and Rockchapel. Taking Meelin as the centre it would extend roughly six or seven miles in every direction.

On an average the strength of our Companies would be approximately fifty or sixty. As far as arms were concerned, we had about a dozen shotguns and four or five revolvers in the Newmarket Company, and the other Companies were more or less similarly equipped. Generally, the supply of arms was poor.

On St. Patrick's night, 1918, Seán Moylan and a few others held up two R.I.C. men armed with rifles. They captured one rifle but the other R.I.C. man took to his heels and got away. I do not remember if they fired after him. Later the same night Seán Moylan and the others returned to the local hall where a dance was in progress. The R.I.C. searched the dance hall subsequently that night and three men were arrested: Bill Moylan, Bob Kenny and a lad named Cronin. Bill Moylan was the only one of the three who had participated in the capture. They spent about five weeks in prison, when they were released on account of insufficient evidence. The captured R.I.C. man spent two months in hospital and the one who got away resigned from the Force.

Some time later in this year the Kiskeam Volunteers, numbering thirty or forty, led by Paddy Dennehy and armed with shotguns, forks, etc., marched into Newmarket with the intention of demonstrating against Conscription. Seán Moylan reasoned with them and, after some difficulty, got them to return home. At this particular time a garrison of approximately twenty R.I.C. held the barracks.

During 1918 we had a Conscription crisis when a comparatively large number joined up in all the Company areas. Most of those, however, became very lukewarm Volunteers when the crisis passed and gradually faded out of the movement.

In 1918 there was a very big bank robbery in the Battalion area. Some members of the bank staff were proceeding from Millstreet to Knocknagree for a Fair Day in the latter place. Those members of the bank staff were held up by three or four men and, while I cannot remember the exact amount, it has been reported that some thousands of pounds were taken. As this robbery was being put down to the I.R.A., Liam Lynch, with the full co-operation of the whole Brigade area, succeeded in capturing the robbers and practically all the money stolen was recovered.

The robbers were deported but one of them eventually came back with the avowed intention of shooting Moylan and it was stated that Moylan had a very narrow escape one night from this fellow. This robber was, however, captured later and, following a trial, was executed.

There was another robbery about this time in Rockchapel. Two men (O'Connor and Curtin) held up the postman and robbed

all the old age pension money which the postman was due to deliver. As this robbery was also being put down to the I.R.A. the whole Battalion was mobilised and on that same night the culprits were caught and the money recovered. The prisoners were held for some time in different parts of our area but were allowed to return to their homes eventually. It was strongly rumoured at the time that the postman had connived with the others in this robbery.

In 1918, also, a number of our men were active in the collection of Dáil Bonds. Three of them were arrested - Charles O'Reilly, Vice Commandant; Tommy Cronin and Patrick O'Connor, and were given a period of imprisonment in Cork Jail.

During the General Election in 1918 the Volunteers proved very active and played a prominent part in the general activities, and Charles O'Reilly and some others from the Battalion were sent to North Donegal for Election duty.

During 1918 we captured a quantity of gelignite and other explosives from O'Connell's store in Newmarket. Seán Moylan was in charge of the raid. The O'Connell family were very sympathetic, however, and poor Mrs. O'Connell, who died later, remarked "'Twas all for a good cause". There was great police activity following this raid and they interrogated numerous people and searched far and wide. It was dumped in Charles Flynn's of Duarigle and never got by the enemy.

The general raids for shot-guns occurred during this year also and those obtained in our area, together with some other arms we held locally, were dumped in my farm. I was the Company

Quartermaster. I built three dumps on the lands and although the police and military raided and searched on numerous occasions they never succeeded in discovering them. My method of dumping was as follows: I got strong wooden boxes made by a local carpenter named McCarthy, who had his workshop opposite the military barracks. These boxes were collected openly and McCarthy did not know our intended use of them.

The dimensions of the boxes were 6 feet long by 2 feet wide and 2 feet high. The boxes were then placed in a hole dug under an overhanging bank of a stream and these holes were lined with cement before the boxes were inserted. It proved a very thorough and satisfactory job and although these dumps were frequently inspected we took special precautions to avoid making any direct tracks in their vicinity.

About the end of this year Seán Moylan read the Proclamation in Newmarket. This was the Proclamation which was to be universally read throughout the whole country. It was not the 1916 Proclamation and, as far as my memory goes, it was one affirming our intention to continue the fight until freedom was achieved, or something on those lines. Seán was arrested and sentenced to a term of imprisonment, and while in prison about a year later he feigned insanity to such an extent that the military authorities had him transferred to a Mental Hospital, from where he escaped after a short period.

After coming out he was engaged whole time organising the Companies. He deliberately wore his parabellum all the time to raise the morale of the Volunteers. He was determined not to be arrested again.

1919.

Early in 1919 some land disputes occurred in the area and there was also an epidemic of petty robberies. Obviously, some evilly disposed persons were taking advantage of the troubled conditions throughout the country to "feather their nests", so to speak. A lot of this trouble was attributed to the I.R.A., which allegation had no foundation whatever. Of course, enemies of the Volunteers played their part in the spreading of such rumours. Seán Moylan, O.C., and other Officers in the Battalion were getting fed up with all this talk, so he mobilised the Battalion for one Sunday morning in the vicinity of the Parish Church in Kiskeam. When the congregation came out from Mass he held them up and addressed the comparatively large crowd thus assembled. He told them of the various disorders in the district and remarked that some persons were trying to connect the Volunteers with them and which he emphatically denied. He assured the people that from thence onwards the Volunteers would ensure that law and order would prevail and that those found guilty of crimes would be severely punished. He sought the co-operation of all decent citizens in helping the Volunteers to put down all crime and to bring to the notice of the Volunteers any irregularities occurring.

On that day we raided a number of houses which were under suspicion and recovered some of the stolen property. I got a .32 revolver in one of the houses visited.

During 1919 it was strongly rumoured that a military garrison was due to occupy Newmarket. So it was decided to destroy the Courthouse, which was a very likely place for occupation. The Courthouse was the upstairs portion of a two-storey building and the lower part of the premises was a very large egg store. Under charge of Seán Moylan, and with Bill Moylan and D. McAuliffe, our Company, a lot of whom were armed, assembled at the premises one night. We removed a huge quantity of egg cases, timber and other stores and successfully destroyed the whole building, including all the Court records.

During this operation we had a party of armed men, under Paddy McCarthy, covering off the R.I.C. Barracks adjacent to the Courthouse. They made no attempt whatever to interfere with us, for they realised it would have been futile to do so. While the burning was in progress the local District Inspector, R.I.C. (named Dignan) entered the R.I.C. Barracks: he was not molested, however. He did not stir out again that night.

Later in the year a party of about thirty military arrived in the town unannounced and proceeded to take over the Dispensary building as a garrison post. The District Nurse and her husband, who lived in the building, were put out bag and baggage and no provision was made for their accommodation. Charlie O'Reilly, the Vice O.C., came along to me to see what could be done towards getting accommodation and I knew there was a small house vacant in the town owned by a man named Brown.

We went to Brown and he refused to give it, making some silly excuse. I said nothing further to him but got a donkey and cart and removed the personal effects of the nurse and her husband, and, on arrival at the vacant house, Charlie Reilly and myself forced the front door and installed the pair in the house. The forcing of the door was done opposite the military and R.I.C. but they took no action.

About 11 p.m. on the night of June 11th, 1919, a young lad named J. Danagher of Broadford, who was badly injured and burned in the destruction of Drumcollogher barracks, was brought to the house of P.D. Casey, then Sub. Creamery Manager in Newmarket. He was suffering severely and got immediate medical and spiritual attention but passed away the following day. His remains were later taken by the Volunteers for temporary burial in Rockchapel. Previous to the removal of the remains, Rev. Fr. Wall, Seán Moylan, Ml. B. McAuliffe and the immediate relatives attended at the wake and everything was carried out without a hitch as the local Volunteers left nothing undone to ensure that all arrangements worked perfectly. Subsequently, an attempt was made by the Black and Tans to burn out the Creamery that night. They broke in one of the windows and sprinkled the inside with either petrol or paraffin and the blaze started with full fury. The Manager at that time - the late Mr. T. Hurley - came on the scene and tried to extinguish the flames with the aid of extinguishers. He was fired on by the Tans and had to retire home. The blaze apparently was seen from the military barracks and they sent out a party and put out the fire with the aid of water from the nearby mill-stream. At this time the fire had almost

exhausted itself as only the walls remained but, despite this, the military took full credit for putting it out and bulletins to this effect were issued over a wide area.

With the exception of Newmarket R.I.C. barracks, which remained occupied all the time and was the headquarters of the district, all other barracks in the area - five of them - were evacuated and on their evacuation were immediately destroyed. Two Volunteers from Glaskakinleen got badly injured by a petrol explosion at one of them. About this time, Seán Moylan, Paddy Clancy, Bill Moylan, Davy McAuliffe and myself, acting on orders from General Headquarters, cut the telephone wires to the R.I.C. barracks at Newmarket. We cut them ten yards from the door and the wire actually, in falling, hit the barrack door. We were hoping that some of the R.I.C. would show themselves as shortly before that we had got some parabellums and were anxious to use them. Luckily for themselves they did not come out.

1920.

Some time early in 1920 Captain White and a party of military came to my own home. Captain White smashed in the door and wanted to interrogate me over some incident or other. He wore a glass eye and was quite funny looking, so much so that I could do nothing but laugh in his face and he became real vexed and brought me to the barracks. I was held only a short time. It may seem only a small matter but the reason, I think, for my early release - and some others around the same period - was due to the fact that on our arrest the local school children went on strike and completely ostracised the

children of the R.I.C. and, as a result, the R.I.C. made representations to the military on our behalf in order to bring more harmonious relations amongst the children. This was what we heard at the time and I am convinced there was something in the yarn.

In preparation for the attack on Rathmore R.I.C. barracks in Kerry area, we cut trenches throughout all our Battalion area in order to prevent enemy reinforcements having an easy passage. This attack proved unsuccessful. Seán Moylan and a few others from the Battalion took part in the attack. About this time we experimented in making a mine from the box of a cartwheel. Con Moylan was the man behind the idea. Both ends of the box were fitted with pieces of sheet iron and the centre filled with powder and a detonator inserted. This did not prove a success as it exploded prematurely - luckily no one was injured.

Sometime following the unsuccessful attack on Rathmore barracks it was decided to have another go at it and for this purpose some old cannons were taken from Muckcross, Co. Kerry, and eventually brought via Rathmore to Kiskeam. Con Moylan experimented with the making of shells for them. We tried a few of the shells and they made a fairly good dent on a ruined house. The main test was carried out later, at which Liam Lynch, Ernie O'Malley, Seán Moylan, Denis Galvin and others were present. When the first shell was fired it only made a very slight impression on an old wall. Ernie O'Malley requested Con Moylan to put more powder into the shell. Con did as requested but when the shell was fired the gun burst. This was the occasion on which Seán Moylan lost a

finger and you should have heard his string of tough language against O'Malley and Lynch, etc., on them and their experiments. I accompanied Seán to Dr. Verling, who dressed the wound.

Some time later than this Seán Moylan had a very narrow escape from arrest and possible death penalty. He was at home in Newmarket one night and was in uniform and armed. On the same night his sisters and some other ladies were having a meeting of the Cumann na mBan in the house. Suddenly, the ladies saw soldiers at the window of the house with every indication of an intended raid. The ladies realised immediately Seán's predicament, went out to the front door and started making up to and funning with the soldiers and invited them into the house for tea and a bit of a party. Whoever was in charge of the raiding party, seeing how hospitably the troops were being received, abandoned the raid and returned the troops to barracks.

During 1917 we had a training camp under Brigade control at Derrygallon and attended mostly by Company Captains and some selected men. Those of us, including myself, living within reasonable distance of the camp, were permitted to go home every night. Seán O'Sullivan, Cork, was in charge of the camp and Seán Moylan and others visited it occasionally. Seán Breen was there, as far as I can recollect. The Course continued for about nine days and the training comprised musketry, fields of fire, fire control and some field training, including use of ground and cover. Seán O'Sullivan was also in charge of the training.

One of my worst experiences of the whole trouble occurred about December, 1920. The enemy had posted up a number of proclamations outside the barracks, in the post office and some other prominent places. I forget the nature of these proclamations. We decided, however, to remove them, and a number of others and myself tore all of them down, including those posted outside the barracks. Later the military arrested Mick Brennan and myself and then our trouble started. They brought us to the barracks and, immediately inside, they gave us an unmerciful hammering, beating us senseless, and when we showed any signs of recovery, they beat us again. The Gestapo or Bolshies of later years, of whom we heard so much, had nothing on this crowd as regards inflicting punishment. Before finally throwing us in the cells on that night we got several more beatings. The following morning we were taken out under a strong armed guard and provided with brushes, paste and fresh notices and told to post them up. We refused and were returned to barracks and we received another severe hammering. Later same day they brought us out again with brushes, paint, etc., and gave us another order to post them up and threatened us with our lives. We still refused and were again returned to barracks. After another hiding they put us up against the barrack wall with six armed soldiers in front of us, to whom the order to fire was given. The firing party, however, must have been instructed to fire over our heads. They carried on again with their beatings and an old Sergeant Major called "Jock" came in and forcibly stopped some of the troops. Following this there was a noticeable change of tactics. We were brought before an Officer who

offered us large sums of money to give information against our comrades and, on our indignant refusal, they stripped us naked and put us in a compound for nearly one and a half hours until we were almost frozen stiff. Several times we were brought before an officer who had revolvers and bombs on the table in front of him and threatened us with all sorts of dire penalties and also threatened to burn down my property. During part of this period a party of Black and Tans visited the barracks and we were certain they were going to play their part in further punishments; however, this was not so, and I can remember well one Tan who sat down alongside me whispered "Stick it out - they won't shoot". After four days of hammerings they released us and shook hands with us on our departure.

After the Truce many of those who beat us up, or witnessed the beatings, came along and requested our photographs and autographs for, as they remarked, "the gallant stand we made". Poor Mick Brennan never got over the effects of the ill-treatment and died later as a result. I happened to be much younger and hardier and absorbed the punishment better.

BRIGADE COLUMN.

I joined the Brigade Column in December, 1920, which was then located in the vicinity of Freemount and Tullylease. There were approximately sixty to eighty in the Column, which was then under the command of Paddy O'Brien, Liscarroll.

I remained in the Brigade Column until about March, 1921, when the Battalion Columns were formed and I then became a member of our own Unit Column.

AMBUSHES.

During my period with the Columns I participated in a number of ambushes which were carried out, including Ballydrochane, Meelin, Clonbannin, Rathcoole, Rathmore, Abbeyfeale and some smaller ones. I do not, however, wish to go into details of these ambushes, and I hold very strong views in this respect. I was only a "small boy" as far as these ambushes were concerned and only carried out to the best of my ability any orders received from the Column or Section Leaders. I, naturally, had no say in the planning of these ambushes or their carrying out. Paddy O'Brien of Liscarroll, the Column Leader, will be able to give very complete details of these ambushes.

I fully realise that the historian of the future, in recounting the details of our military history, will require full details of all ambushes, and the more statements available of a particular ambush the better all-round picture he will be able to get of the operation. However, despite all this, nearly all ambushes have already been written about, talked over or thrashed out on many occasions; therefore, it is my considered opinion that Seán Moylan and Paddy O'Brien will be able to give all the details required. While expressing these views, I would like to make it clear, however, that should a number of the participants of any ambush be brought together I would have no hesitation in taking part in a full discussion of the details.

TRIBUTES.

Before concluding my statement, I would like to pay a well-merited tribute to all these people - toom numerous to mention - in the towns, villages and countryside, who gave us food, shelter, funds and physical and moral support, very many of them at the risk of their lives, freedom, ill-treatment or destruction of their home and property. A large number of them had not a lot of the world's goods but still and all they were willing to sacrifice everything they had in support of those members of the flying columns or men "on the run".

There were three really outstanding houses in the Battalion area which were the hubs of all Volunteer activities of the Unit and often of the Brigade in which plans were hatched, meetings held and extensively used as despatch centres, etc.: these were "Corney" Lenihan's of Drominarrigle, Johnny Jones of Ballydesmond and Jack Duane's of Freemount, Daniel Galvin's, Glaskakinleen and Patrick Neylon's, Kiskeam.

Another tribute must be paid to those of our priests who gave us their full moral support. I would like to make special mention of the following: Rev. Father Roche, Meelin, (now P.P. Newmarket), also Rev. Frs. Leonard and Roynane of Freemount and Tullylease, respectively (since dead).

Tributes must also be paid to the members of the Cumann na mBan and, in particular, I would like to make special mention of the following members: Mamie Moylan, Gret Moylan and Hannah Moylan, Hannah Mary Kenneally and Baby O'Mahoney, all of whom rendered splendid service to the movement. Last, but not least, I wish to say a special

word of praise for a member of the Newmarket Post Office Staff - a Miss Nellie O'Neill - who, during those eventful years, at great risk to herself, kept us fully informed of all enemy information and activity which passed through the Post Office. With her connivance, also, the mails were raided on a number of occasions.

SIGNATURE: C. J. Wm. O'Keefe

C. J. Wm. O'Keefe

DATE: 3/12/52

3/12/52.

WITNESSED BY:

Thomas Halpin
LIEUT. COLONEL.
(Thomas Halpin)

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