

W.S. 904

ORIGINAL

BUREAU OF MILITARY HISTORY 1913-21

BURU STAIRE MILEATA 1913-21

No. W.S. 904

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BUREAU OF MILITARY HISTORY, 1913-21.

STATEMENT BY WITNESS.

DOCUMENT NO. W.S. 904

Witness

John Austin,
Ashbourne,
Co. Meath.

Identity.

Eye-witness of Battle of Ashbourne,
28th April, 1916.

Subject.

Battle of Ashbourne,
28th April, 1916.

Conditions, if any, Stipulated by Witness.

Nil

File No. S.2190

Form B.S.M. 2

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STATEMENT BY MR. JOHN AUSTIN,
Ashbourne, Co. Meath.

The Battle of Ashbourne - 28th April, 1916.

I have lived at my present abode all my life. Prior to 1916 the R.I.C. Barracks of Ashbourne was situated about one hundred and sixty yards on the south-east side of the Cross of the Rath, which is about half a mile north of the village of Ashbourne, ~~and~~ which is on the main road from Dublin to Slane. The Barracks, which was a detached building, was on the east side of the road and about twenty yards in from the footpath. The building was a two-storey one, with gable ends on which there were no windows. It had a front door and also a back door. There were windows on the front and back. The Sergeant's married quarters were portion of the building with a separate porch entrance constructed of wood and iron at the rear. Between the Barracks and the road and footpath, there was a high bank of earth with thorn hedge, and a similar type of fence existed on the other side of the road. Behind the Barracks and on the north and south ends there were a number of small fields which were skirted by dykes and hedges and banks which would provide good approaches and cover for an attacking party. The normal strength of the police in this station was a Sergeant and four men. The Barracks was destroyed early in 1920 when the police evacuated it, and a modern bungalow now stands on the site. My house is about one hundred and twenty yards on the south side of the Barracks and on the same side of the road.

At this time I worked in the Post Office in the village and delivered all telegrams and messages, and it was I who delivered any messages that came through to the police. When the Rebellion started in Dublin on Easter Monday, no attempt was made by the police to barricade or fortify the barracks. On Thursday evening of Easter Week a message came by telephone from Navan to the effect that a party of the rebels were marching from Ardee to Slane. This I afterwards learned was wrong, as this had happened on the previous Sunday. Another message was received from Garristown that the rebels were in Garristown and were going to camp at Boranstown which lies a few miles north-east of Ashbourne. The police at Ashbourne now phoned their Headquarters that the rebels were in Boranstown.

On Friday morning some extra police arrived from Navan, Dunboyne and Slane to reinforce the garrison. At about 10.30 a.m. on that day I was standing at the Barracks, talking to the police and, on looking up towards the Cross of the Rath, I saw some of the rebels arriving there on bicycles, with guns on their shoulders. I said to Constable Tully, who was in the Barracks, that the rebels were coming. The police came out and put a barricade across the main road. This consisted of a ladder resting on two boxes. This would not stop anything except a motor car or a cyclist. Constable Roche, who had come from Dunboyne, came out of the Barracks and proceeded towards the Cross where the rebels were, and started cutting the pole carrying the telephone wires with a saw. This was a junction pole and was situated at the crossroads. The rebels told him to stop and he then took his rifle from his shoulder, fired a shot in the air and made off towards

Ratoath. He got under the bed in Byrne's house in Cookstown, some distance over the road. Some of the rebels followed him and fired at him. They pulled him from under the bed and made him a prisoner.

A few minutes later Tom Ashe came walking down the road and went to the Barracks, and asked the police to surrender. I knew Ashe from seeing him in charge of the Lusk Pipers Band formerly. The police refused to surrender. Ashe went back to his men, got them under cover, and the battle began in earnest. Sergeant Toomey was in charge of the Barracks at the time.

I now went towards Ashbourne and had only gone a few hundred yards when the first volleys were fired. Some of the rebels got on to the footpath along the road, behind the fence in front of the Barracks and behind the fence on the opposite side of the road, while some others were on the north side of the Barracks. Some were behind a wall which was on the south-west side of the crossroads. Another party went up the road to Hamilton Hill and took up positions there: it was here that Volunteer Crinnigan was killed. Hamilton Hill is the elevated portion of the main road, just a couple of hundred yards north of the Cross of the Rath. Crinnigan tried to cross the road and one of the policemen shot him. Another man named Rafferty from Lusk was also shot and died subsequently.

During the time the fight was in progress, I was on Lime-kiln Hill, a small elevation near the village, and from which you had a good view of the road where the fighting was taking place. Matt Gargan, George Stafford and Charley Brindley were also on this hill. Brindley and Gargan had field-glasses. We could see the police

reinforcements arriving, the police getting out of their cars and taking cover on the sides of the road. The leading cars drove almost up to the crossroads before stopping, and they were only a very short distance from where the rebels were behind the wall at the crossroads. Stray bullets were reaching the hill on which we were, and one of them nearly got me. We could see the police jumping up and running to new positions along the road.

When the firing died down and it was apparent that the battle was over, I went back to the scene. Someone - I can't now remember who it was - asked me to take the dead men off the road. I got a horse and cart and proceeded up the road. Tom Ashe and his men were at the crossroads. They were very excited after their victory and were cheering, as men would after a football match. I told Ashe what I was going to do, and he told me to go ahead. Two of the policemen who had not been wounded helped me to collect the dead policemen into the cart. I had eight dead men in the cart when I had finished. Included in this number were Sergeant Shanagher from Navan and Sergeant Young. Two of the dead men were civilians whom I believe were drivers of cars. The bodies of the County Inspector of Police and the District Inspector had been taken away before I got on the scene, and the wounded men were also taken away.

The police had twenty-seven casualties all told. Sergeant Shanagher had been stationed in Ashbourne some years previous to this, and a right bad one he was. He would know the country around Ashbourne well and, as such, he was in one of the leading cars. He was shot right between the eyes as he left the car and slumped into a

small depression on the side of the road. The road that evening was a terrible sight with blood and bandages strewn on it.

Inspector McCormack of the R.I.C. wanted me to travel with my load of dead men to Slane. I refused to do this. He said he would give me a strong escort, and I said, "If we met the rebels on the way, what use would your escort be, and where would I be?" We put the dead men in the wash-house at the end of the Barracks, and the following day coffins arrived for them and they were taken away in a lorry. Tom Ashe and his men had left by this time and returned to their camp at Borranstown.

When things had quietened down, the surviving police came down to the village and bought themselves some drink and food. They had money, as the rebels had not interfered with any of their personal belongings. They were very shaken and were shivering. One of them remarked to me that the rebels were great men, and I replied, "If you had won, I know what you would do". The surviving police stayed in the Barracks that night, and the following day they were all taken to Navan. An inquest was held at Ashbourne and, although I was notified for the jury, I was not called. The rebels took their two men that were killed and wounded away with them that evening.

SIGNED: John Austin
(John Austin)
DATE: 23-11-53
23.11.53.

WITNESS: Matthew Barry Comd't.
(Matthew Barry Comd't.)

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