

W.S. 905

ORIGINAL

BUREAU OF MILITARY HISTORY 1913-21
BURO STAIRE MILEATA 1913-21
No. W.S. 905

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BUREAU OF MILITARY HISTORY, 1913-21.

STATEMENT BY WITNESS.

DOCUMENT NO. W.S. 905

Witness

Jim Hunt (Ex-Comd't),
Gurteen,
Ballymote,
Co. Sligo.

Identity.

Member of Irish Volunteers,
Gurteen, Co. Sligo, 1916 - ;
O/C. Gurteen Battalion 1920-1921.

Subject.

Activities of Gurteen Battalion (Co. Sligo)
1916-1921.

Conditions, if any, Stipulated by Witness.

Nil

File No. S.1929

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Statement by Mr. Jim Hunt,
Gurteen,
Co. Sligo.

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About the year 1914 I joined the Royal Irish Constabulary and remained with them until after the Rising of 1916. When the Rising took place and after the execution of the leaders a revolution in the ideas of the Irish people took place and I resigned from the police force. About the end of the year 1916 I joined the Irish Volunteers.

Owen Tansey was associated with Alec McCabe in the organisation of the Volunteers in our area. Tansey died during the flu' epidemic of 1918. On Tansey's death I was appointed O/C of the Gurteen Battalion. Our first work in the Battalion was the job of getting Company organisations going in the various localities surrounding Gurteen.

In 1919 the organisation of the Battalion area into Companies was well advanced and was officially recognised after the visit of a G.H.Q. officer named Mahon from Offaly. At this time the Battalion staff was as follows:-

Jim Hunt	...	...	O/C
James Dwyer	...	...	Vice O/C
Thomas O'Donnell	..	..	Adjutant
Joe Finnegan	...	...	Quartermaster

The Battalion at this time comprised five Companies: Gurteen, Cloonloo, Kilaraght, Monasteraden, Towinadden and, later on, Edmondstown.

During the year 1919 the Volunteer activities were confined to drilling and training. Paddy Hegarty came into Gurteen Battalion area to organise the Dáil loan. The R.I.C. made a few attempts to arrest

Hegarty while he was in Sligo area. One attempt was made on him in Ballymote and the police had him in custody when Josie Hannon, who was a Battalion officer in the Third Battalion, Hannon's sister and some others, rescued him. Following his escape from the police he came to Cloonloo on the following Sunday to address a meeting. The local Volunteers met him there and provided a bodyguard for his protection. The police were on the scene but did not attempt to rearrest him. One of his helpers at this meeting was Dr. Dominic Doyle, who was later a Major in the Army Medical Corps up to his death a few years ago. From Cloonloo Hegarty proceeded to Kilaraght Church to address a meeting after Mass. Dominick O'Grady was the driver of the car used by Hegarty and, whilst they were at Kilaraght, I joined them. From Kilaraght we proceeded to Breedogue in Co. Roscommon where Hegarty addressed another meeting. On our return journey, about 30 R.I.C. under Head Constable Sullivan of Boyle, had thrown a cordon across the road to intercept us. O'Grady slowed down the car until the police opened their ranks in anticipation of our stopping the car. I was sitting with O'Grady and I shouted for him to drive on. He put on speed and the police opened fire with rifles on the car. About 200 yards further on we passed through another party of R.I.C. who had taken cover along the fences, and they opened fire on us. We were now going at a most unusual speed for a motor car at this period. About half a mile further on we met 2 other R.I.C. who attempted to stop us by holding bikes in front of the car. During all this excitement Hegarty was the only person in the car who had arms and he blazed away with his revolver at the police at the various points they tried to stop us, with unknown effect. Dr. Doyle sustained a few slight flesh wounds. The car itself was riddled with bullets.

Subsequently I rowed Hegarty across Lough Gara into the Monasteraden area. After this I came home for a change of clothes and on the following morning I was arrested and later sentenced to 3 months for aiding and abetting a fugitive from justice. After my trial I was sent to Sligo Prison to serve my sentence. There I met General Seán MacEoin and Alec McCabe who were also serving sentences at the time. I was released from Sligo about February, 1920.

In the spring of 1920 Major Percival, a land-owner on a large scale, had a place named Temple House, Ballymote. Frank Carty got information that there were arms and military equipment in the mansion. He organised a raid for these arms. I was called on to take part in this raid. It turned out that some leakage of information must have got abroad as some of Major Percival's staff, including the gamekeeper, were expecting the raid and had made preparations to defend the house. Frank Carty's plan was to lay a number of Volunteers in ambush positions around the house during the night and when the inmates started to move about in the morning, to rush the house. This plan proved very effective, as the inmates were expecting a raid during the night. We were able to capture the people in the house and carried out a systematic raid all over the place. A number of revolvers, one Peter-the-Painter and some shotguns were captured. This was Carty's own operation. The whole thing was planned by him and proved most successful. He called in assistance from other Battalions: Michael J. Marron and I took part from Ballymote and Gurteen Battalions. Carty was arrested a few days later and from then on commenced for Carty a series of the most exciting adventures, such as his rescue from Sligo Jail: an escape from Derry Prison: his recapture in Glasgow and

his attempted rescue from a prison van in the streets of Glasgow.

About February or March 1920 I was arrested and charged for collecting money without a military permit. The Volunteers had struck a rate of 6d. in the £ for an Arms Fund and I, with a number of others, was engaged in collecting this money. At the time of my arrest the following were also arrested: Seán Goulding, Jim Toweey and Anthony Giblin. We were all sentenced to three months' imprisonment and we served this term in Sligo Jail.

From early in 1920 to July 1920 there was little activity in my area except drilling and training. Sinn Féin courts were established. Thomas O'Donnell took a big part in the organisation and the control of the Sinn Féin courts. He was a teacher in Rockwell and was a personal friend of Eamonn De Valera. In 1919 and 1920 O'Donnell was teaching in Ballaghaderreen.

About July 1920 Michael J. Marron, Commandant of Ballymote Battalion, and myself visited a number of Companies in Tubbercurry area to reorganise them. On one occasion, when returning from Tubbercurry, we both stayed in Marron's house, Mount Irwin. We were fully armed and had grenades with us. We were sleeping in an upstairs room. At daylight the house was surrounded by police. We got up and dressed; took our guns and grenades and came downstairs. By the time we got downstairs the police were hammering on the front door to gain admittance. We got into a workshop off the kitchen and from the workshop Marron had made up a concealed door into a barn. The barn had doors front and back. Some of the R.I.C. by this time had forced the kitchen door. We looked out of the front door of

the barn and saw six R. I. C. on the road. We then looked out from the back door and saw some men posted outside. As we were discussing our position and deciding what we should do, one of the R. I. C. appeared at the front door armed with a rifle. Marron immediately fired at this man and the policeman dropped his rifle as he was, apparently, wounded. When this shot was fired the police on both sides of the barn took cover at the gable ends and commenced firing in the direction of the front door of the barn. Marron then threw a grenade in the direction of one of the gables. He pulled the pin out of another grenade and held it in his hand, waiting for a target. At this time I looked out at the back and seeing that the two or three police who had been there had also taken cover, I shouted to Marron that we should make a sprint of 40 or 50 yards from the back door to the cover of a wall. We took the risk and succeeded. We replied to the police fire from this position - this had the effect of silencing their fire and keeping them under cover. We then made good our escape.

When at some distance from the house, we noticed the police leaving the vicinity. We then returned to the house to remove a dump which was concealed at the back of the place. We realised that the police would likely return in considerable force and make a thorough search of the house and its surroundings. We had to get the help of some local Volunteers - Pat Hunt and Johnnie Cauley, and we were all engaged in carrying the stuff away when we saw three lorryloads of military about a half-mile away heading in our direction. We then changed our direction to take the shortest route across a nearby hill. At one stage, in our effort to reach this hill, we were moving across a road on which the military were travelling about 300 yards distance

from us. As soon as we saw the military we opened fire on them from our position on one side of the road. The military took cover and made no serious effort after our fire to intercept us or even to fire as we retreated. I got the impression from this incident that the military were not very keen on helping out the R.I.C. against the I.R.A. We got safely away and, as a matter of fact, we saved all the stuff in the dump. The stuff we had dumped was mostly shotguns and perhaps a few military rifles and some ammunition.

One rather interesting incident in connection with our "get-away" from Marrons was the fact that in the excitement of rushing from the backdoor Marron pushed the bomb from which he had withdrawn the pin into his waistcoat pocket. About 20 minutes later I saw the bomb in the waistcoat pocket and noticed that the spring was pushing against the side of his pocket, and that at any moment it might have slipped sufficiently to release the striker, with consequences more easily imagined than described.

The Ratra Ambush:

That the Ratra Ambush ever occurred is, to some extent, due to accident. Commandant M.J. Marron and myself found ourselves in Ballaghaderreen about the last week in August, 1920, and we learned in the town that a number of Ballaghaderreen policemen would travel to Frenchpark on the day that Frenchpark Petty Sessions Court was held, to give evidence against some Ballaghaderreen publicans who had committed breaches of the licensing laws. The Frenchpark Court was being held on the 1st September.

This information gave us advanced warning of an

opportunity to capture some much needed arms. Both Marron and I collected all the information possible about the movements of the police in Ballaghaderreen and later, in Gurteen, selected the men who would take part in the operation. The plan of attack which was perfected and rehearsed was that an attacking party of about 25 to 27, armed with whatever arms was then available, would lie in wait for the police party whom, we estimated, would number 10 to 12 fully armed men and, on the blowing of a signal whistle, all our party would jump from the cover of our place of concealment along the road and, by taking advantage of the element of surprise, we hoped to disarm the police before they could make any effective resistance. At our final briefing and going over our plans on the eve of the attack, everyone of us believed that we could succeed in our objective without bloodshed.

On the night of August 31st 1920 the 25 men selected for the attack met in a sympathiser's house in the half-parish of Kilaraght. Those men were from Gurteen, Cloonloo, Monasteraden and Kilaraght. After partaking of some refreshment to while away the suspense of waiting, all indulged in ^{the} singing of patriotic songs and the lilting of traditional airs. In the early hours of the morning of 1st September we moved from the house of our generous host and started to march on our journey of about 8 miles to Ratra. We adopted a circuitous route in order to avoid as much as possible main roads on our approach to the place of ambush. By 6 a.m. we had taken up positions.

The main body of the attackers were placed along the main Ballaghaderreen-Frenchpark road behind the road fence, on the South side of the road and secure from view by a whitethorn hedge. This position was about 300

yards on the Frenchpark side of a bye-road leading to Tibohine Church. At this bye-road Captain Tom McDonagh and Joseph Finnigan were placed. Finnigan was equipped with powerful field glasses with which he had a clear view of the road leading from Ballaghaderreen for about 500 yards. Finnigan's orders were to report as soon as possible to the main body the number of police approaching. Captain McDonagh's orders were to cycle, on sight of the police, in the direction of Tibohine Church on the bye-road and, after a few minutes, to return to the main road when the police patrol had passed, to prevent the escape of any police from the ambush position back to Ballaghaderreen. Jimmy Dwyer was placed about 50 yards on the Frenchpark side of the main body with strict orders not to allow any police to pass his position. I took up my position behind the fence on the North side of the road and opposite the position of the main body of attackers. As the officer in charge of operations, I considered this the best point to see what was happening and to control the operation.

We took up positions about 6 a.m. and we waited patiently from up to about 10 a.m., at which time Joe Finnigan cycled in from his post of observation with the report that 5 armed police were approaching on cycles in single file-about 50 yards separating each of the first three and the last two cycling together about 100 yards to the rear. Finnigan then passes on to near Dwyer, hands him his bicycle and climbs on to the south side of the fence to reinforce Dwyer. This formation of approaching police was so unexpected and unprovided for that I was placed in a quandary. My main body of men occupied a position of only 50 yards along the road. The space covered by the police was over 200 yards. If I took my men into the open to cover the police flank, I

would destroy the surprise element of our plans and endanger the men. I had to decide quickly what to do: various ideas and plans flashed through my mind. The one that seemed best was to allow the police to pass through and to attack them on their return journey from Frenchpark. There was the possibility that they might adopt a closer formation on their return journey and, anyhow, we would be better prepared for a repetition of their greatly extended formation.

I decided to let them pass and await their return. The first policeman passed through the main position and approaches where Dwyer and Finnigan were posted. Dwyer, although he had heard no signal whistle, but mindful of his orders not to allow any police to pass him, called on the policeman to halt and fired at the back wheel of the bicycle. The policeman fell off and, feigning death, lay prone on the side of the road. By this time the second policeman was now directly opposite Dwyer's and Finnigan's position. Finnigan ordered this man "Hands Up". The policeman dismounted 3 yards from Finnigan and took his single-barrelled shotgun from his bicycle. Finnigan again shouted "Put up your hands", but the policeman would not surrender. He raised his shotgun and both Finnigan's shot and the policeman's rang out together. The policeman fell, seriously wounded. By now - a matter of seconds - the third policeman was opposite the position occupied by the main body. He jumped from his bike and surrendered. The two policemen bringing up the rear had ample warning of the danger they were approaching and they took cover behind some bushes on the side of the road at a slight bend about 200 yards from our main body. In this position they had cover from view and were out of range of our shotguns and revolvers. Both were armed with up-to-date service

rifles and they opened a heavy fire on our positions. Our position at this point was one of extreme danger as, soon, the noise of gunshot fire would undoubtedly bring strong reinforcements from Ballaghaderreen. I was having a close view of the road to Ballaghaderreen from the cover of a hedge nearby when I saw Captain T. McDonagh on his way back from Tibohine Church and hearing the noise of the firing, he was going at top speed. A man in a neighbouring house shouted a warning. He saluted the man giving the warning with a wave of his hand and sped on. His one idea was to help in the relief of his comrades, now in grave danger. He was armed with a revolver. He jumped from his bike as he nears where the two policemen are firing. As he came near, he opened fire on them, killing one. He then attacked the other policeman. I clearly saw him manoeuvring for position and I saw both men firing at each other: McDonagh fell. The policeman then vacated his position and cleared off towards Ballaghaderreen.

When we examined Captain McDonagh's body we found that he was dead: when we examined his revolver we were amazed to find that there was only one exploded cartridge case in McDonagh's revolver. All the other cases were marked with the striker - some more than once - which proved that poor McDonagh's death was mainly due to faulty ammunition. This was a deadly risk that active I.R.A. had to take. The supply of ammunition being so meagre at this time, anything in the shape of ammunition was pressed into service and chances taken with it.

Around the end of December 1920 or January 1921 plans were made to hold up a train at Kilfree Junction. I took charge of this operation. I mobilised about 30 men. We sent a man to Boyle Station to board the train and travel on it to Kilfree Junction: this man was to

give a pre-arranged signal when the train was approaching the Junction, if military or police were on the train. The rest of the men and I waited at Kilfree Junction. On this occasion we got the signal and immediately became alerted and got into the positions we had previously selected near the station platform. As soon as the train drew into the Junction, we rushed the compartment in which D. I. Matthews and 2 other R. I. C. constables were travelling and disarmed them. We captured 3 revolvers and some ammunition: no resistance was offered. A week after this attack M. J. Marron, Joe Finnigan and I proceeded to Ballymote Station and we there boarded a goods train travelling in the direction of Kilfree Junction. We waited at the Junction for about 30 minutes for a later passenger train. On this train there was a full Company of the Bedford Regiment, then stationed in Boyle. We could not cope with a situation such as the number of soldiers on the train, so we waited on the platform until the train was moving off: then we opened up fire on the carriages containing the military: some of them were wounded.

In February 1921 plans were made that a combined force of the I.R.A. from both the Sligo and East Mayo Brigades would enter the town of Ballaghaderreen and that we should place a large mine, which had been prepared at Keash Hill, Co. Sligo, against a wall in a barrack at a point where a centre wall supported two floors. A large number of Volunteers were to take up positions around the barracks and three Volunteers took charge of the mine which they conveyed on a cart to the barbed wire defences of the barracks. The idea behind the plans for this attack was that the cart containing the bomb was to be placed against the barbed wire defences and when the cart was put as close as was possible to the barracks it was to be heeled up in such a manner as

to place the bomb against the barrack wall. Curfew was imposed on the town from 10 o'clock at this period. At 10 o'clock a curfew patrol came out on the streets and the local residents disappeared. This patrol, when at a point near where the I.R.A. men in charge of the cart were hidden, must have heard some noise of whispering, for the police opened fire in the direction of the men, but they immediately evacuated the position, leaving the cart and mine behind. The police continued their fire for some time and, as the I.R.A. surrounding the barracks awaited the explosion, they realised that something had happened and they withdrew. The police captured the mine and took it a distance of some miles to a bog. They dug a big hole, put the mine into it and exploded it. This was a terrific explosion, for it broke the windows of houses some 10 miles away.

A man named Harrington, who had served in the British Navy, lived at Clogher. This man had been a noted athlete: he had won the 10-Mile Cross-Country Championship of England. He had a law case in the Sinn Féin courts with some local Volunteers and after the case was tried he believed he had not got justice. As a reprisal he apparently decided to supply the British authorities with information about local Volunteers. The man was seen visiting Ballaghaderreen R. I. C. Barracks. The I. R. A. considered the situation and decided this man should be banished from the country. Seven men and I went to this man's house one night. The entrance door of his 2-roomed house was on the latch when we arrived: we pushed the door in. There was light in the house and Harrington made a movement to draw the revolver in his pocket. Teddy McGowan and Patrick Coleman rushed him before he had time to use his revolver. The revolver was stamped R. I. C., which provided strong evidence that

Harrington was a police spy. Later, when we investigated his house, we found that he had prepared a tunnel as an exit from the house and that on the sides of the tunnel he had prepared little shelves on which ammunition was placed. The man had made splendid preparations to put up a fight if we attempted to force admission to his house and, had the door been barred; he would probably have inflicted casualties on us and would have escaped from the house.

Harrington was disarmed and the original intention of some of his captors was to execute him. He was told he would be executed and, at this stage, he did not know whether I was in the party. He enquired whether I was in the party and, if so, that he would ask me for a fair trial. I then went to him and told him to meet me at a certain house the following night. In the meantime he was to be kept under observation by the I. R. A. He made no suspicious moves the next day and came to the house named. I told him he would have to leave the country. Next day he left: he had our guarantee that he would not be molested during his journey.

He returned to the area some years afterwards and made a claim for loss of cattle and other properties. He succeeded in his claim by getting court awards.

In March 1921 plans were made for an attack on Collooney Barracks. Liam Pilkington, who was then Brigade O/C, was in charge of this operation. The plan was to place a large mine at the entrance to the barrack and, when the mine exploded, to rush the barracks. Men were placed at the back door by Harry Brehony, Collooney. A number of men were placed at a point

convenient to the barracks to rush the barrack door when the mine was exploded. The mine was touched off by an electric exploder. The explosion burst in the front door porch and also burst out the back door. The storming party rushed the front of the barracks and when inside the porch they were brought to a halt by a cloud of dust from the walls of the barrack, caused by the explosion, which made it impossible to enter. After the explosion there was a time lapse on the police side and, if conditions at the entrance to the barrack had been right, the overpowering of the garrison would probably have been an easy job. When the police pulled themselves together they started to send up Véry lights and opened fire from the top windows. The I. R. A. surrounding the barrack returned fire for some time. No roads were blocked for this operation, and about 15 minutes after the explosion, reinforcements of military and tans arrived and we were forced to withdraw.

In May 1921 we waited for a few days at Mullaghroe Railway crossing for a military car which used to travel from Tubbercurry to Boyle. We held up the train from Ballaghaderreen to Kilfree and then came off it at Kilfree station where we met the Dublin/Sligo train on which we found 2 soldiers, one of them armed. We disarmed this man. We then got on to the engine of a train going to Ballaghaderreen and one of our men was an engine driver named McGeough from Tuam. He took charge of the engine when we approached Ballaghaderreen and stopped it on the railway bridge which was situated about 30 yards from the R. I. C. barracks. From our position on the bridge we opened fire on the barracks. 2 R. I. C. men, who were on the streets when we commenced shooting, disappeared and took up positions from which they replied to our fire.

This exchange of rifle fire lasted for about 10 minutes. We then drove the engine backwards in the direction of Kilfree. When we were about 300 yards from Ballaghaderreen we saw 6 R.I.C. men coming from Frenchpark towards Ballaghaderreen. We moved the train up again to our original position on the bridge and opened fire on these police. By this time the R.I.C. at the barracks had manned loopholes on the upstairs portion of the barrack and opened heavy fire on us. In addition to using rifles, the police used rifle grenades. McGeough and Harrington got slight wounds although the cover of the engine was fairly good. When we tried to retreat McGeough failed to start the engine: it then appeared that we had run out of steam and we made an attempt to get up steam by shovelling coal into the furnace, without result. We then abandoned the engine which had served as an armoured car and retreated along a half-mile of low-lying land without any cover, under continuous fire from the police. We succeeded in getting safely to the mountains towards evening. The roads during our retreat were chock full of military scouting parties, searching for us. When we got to the mountains we decided to get back to Mullaghroe and on our way there, when passing Peter Finn's publichouse at Monasteraden, we went in for a drink. Five minutes after our entry a large number of police and Tans surrounded the place. When they were coming we rushed to the back: a man named Harrington, who was with me, escaped towards the bog. I headed for the house and after half an hours running, pursued by the Tans, I was able to keep them at a safe distance. I was in perfect physical condition at the time and was a good long distance runner. After this race was on for some time I noticed that there was one man keeping very close to me. I was able to keep him at a safe distance by firing an odd shot whenever he came near me.

He was an Englishman named Little. He was in good physical condition and, as it turned out, he was a better runner than I was. We outstripped all the rest of his comrades and during the race, and up to the time I ran out of ammunition, I kept a certain distance in front. He continued firing when I had nothing to reply with and I had to surrender. When his companions arrived after my surrender some of the Tans made an effort to shoot me and commenced to belabour me with their rifle butts. Little then drew his gun and came to my protection: but for him, I would not have survived.

I was taken prisoner into Ballaghaderreen and from there to Boyle Military Barracks. I was there taken before Colonel Sharp, a fine, hardy man. I had, six months previously, issued a challenge to this Colonel to meet me with an equal number of his men - anything up to 100 - we to be similarly armed as was his party. My challenge was addressed from I. R. A. Headquarters, Gurteen. As soon as I was brought before him as a prisoner he produced my challenge from his pocket and enquired whether the writing was mine. I said yes and he said "Why did you challenge me?" I said "I thought you would be man enough to take me up". "So I would", he said, "but we could not depend upon you. You only shoot from behind hedges. Why don't you wear uniform?" I then replied "I am here now and I shall fight you or any other man in your barracks." This challenge was issued as a bluff, which seemed to ease him off.

As Christmas, 1921, approached, I was a prisoner in Mountjoy Prison and Colonel Sharp was then stationed in Westport. I got a Christmas card from him and I immediately procured a card to reply to his Christmas greeting: on my card the Sinn Féin colours predominated.

This Colonel Sharp was in charge of E Company, Castlereagh Force, and in my estimation was a good, straight man and a soldier, who would not tolerate dirty tactics.

I was courtmartialled in June 1921. The British military did their best to have me identified as having participated in the Ratra Ambush. In this ambush I saved the life of an R.I.C. man. He begged me to do so, for his mother's sake. This man was brought forward as a witness but he failed to identify me, probably due to his gratitude.

I was released in February, 1922.

Signature

Jim Hunt
Ex-Comd't. 4th Batt

Date

1st December 1953

(Jim Hunt)

Ex-Comd't. 4th Batt.

1st December 1953.

Witness

P. J. Tansey

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