

W.S. 1,001

ORIGINAL

BUREAU OF MILITARY HISTORY 1913-21
BURO STAIRS MILITARY HISTORY
NO. W.S. 1001

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BUREAU OF MILITARY HISTORY, 1913-21

STATEMENT BY WITNESS.

DOCUMENT NO. W.S. 1,001

Witness

Thomas Lavin,
The Post Office,
Ballytore,
Co. Kildare.

Identity.

O/C. Ballyfarnon Coy. Irish Volunteers,
Co. Roscommon.

Vice-Comd't. 4th Battalion North
Roscommon Brigade.
Subject.

Ballyfarnon Company Irish Volunteers,
Co. Roscommon, 1917-1921.

Conditions, if any, Stipulated by Witness.

Nil

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STATEMENT BY Mr. T. LAVIN,

The Post Office, Ballytore, Co. Kildare.

In February, 1917, the Irish Volunteers were being organised in Ballyfarnon by ^{Co. ROSCOMMON} Andy Lavin who came from Creevagh and who was a relation of mine. I joined the Volunteers there at this time. We had about seventeen members all told. Joe Cunnane was appointed as Company Captain and Charles Flynn as Adjutant. This was during the Plunkett election but some time before polling day. We had no arms except a few shotguns.

Joe Cunnane, the Captain of the Company, did all the instruction at our parades which were held in secret. Cunnane had no previous military experience. During the election - up to and including polling day - we were all working hard to secure Count Plunkett's election - canvassing - collecting funds - meetings and so forth and on polling day convincing the people to go to the polling station and vote Plunkett. The weather was very bad at the time and there was a very heavy fall of snow.

After the election, at which Count Plunkett was returned at the head of the poll, we continued to meet and drill and train ourselves as best we could. Our numbers had now increased slightly. We only took in carefully selected men to our ranks, men whom we believed could be relied upon and who had a good national outlook.

Sinn Féin had now been organised in the area as a distinct organisation from the Volunteers and was interested in the securing of land for the people to cultivate. The Great War was at this time at its height and the production of food was all important. No land was available for this purpose except that which belonged to the

large estates owned by the aristocracy and they were not willing to give it. The Arigna Sinn Féin Club was interested in land belonging to Lord Kingston and decided to take possession of it on a certain date. The Ballyfarmon Company of Volunteers were mobilised - about twelve men turning up - and proceeded to the Kingston lands armed only with sticks. Father Meehan, who was the Catholic Curate in Keadue, made us throw away the sticks. When we got to the lands we found a lot of other people there and also a large force of R.I.C. and military. George Plunkett, who had come to the area organising for Sinn Féin, was there and seemed to be in charge on our side. When we went on to the land the police started to eject us and a general melee took place. The soldiers took up firing positions but did not fire. There were various scuffles with the Police who were under the command of District Inspector Carney and who used their batons freely. The Police were not able to put the people off the land and sent for reinforcements and when they arrived they made another baton charge and during this they arrested George Plunkett. We were ~~not~~ withdrawn and the Police and Military were left the victors and still in possession of the land.

The Sinn Féin Club did not succeed in acquiring the land and a strong guard of Police and Military were put on it. Plunkett was in jail for some time after this.

During the Conscription crisis in 1918, membership of our Company only increased slightly as we were still taking in only selected men. In consequence we had not the big decrease in numbers that other areas suffered when the crisis was over. During the crisis several large anti-conscription meetings were held in the area and the Volunteers marched to these meetings and drilled openly and, of course, were closely watched by the R.I.C. who, however, did not interfere with us. There were no special plans that I am aware of

to meet the threat of Conscription except that all our members were instructed to resist by every means in their power being taken or arrested and if so taken to still refuse to drill or do anything for the British. The Cumann na mBan, who had a small local organisation, started making First Aid dressings, bandages etc.

After this crisis was over our membership remained as before and we had no falling off as happened in other areas. We still had no arms and no proper military organisation. Battalions were not yet organised and there were only small Companies or Units in areas without cohesion but which were always willing to assist each other. A General Election was held throughout the country in December, 1918 at which Sinn Féin candidates had a sweeping victory and the old Irish Parliamentary Party practically ceased to exist. In the North Roscommon area this was a very quiet election as Count Plunkett was returned unopposed.

Early in January, 1919 the first Dáil met as the Parliament of the Irish Republic and the Volunteers were now required to take an Oath of Allegiance to the Republic. Some of our men did not subscribe to this Oath - they did not attend at the parade that was held for the purpose of administering the Oath. By refraining from taking the Oath they severed their connection with the Volunteers. From now on the Volunteers became the recognised Army of the Republic - "the I.R.A.". Seven or eight of our men had not taken the Oath as required and this reduced our strength to about fifteen.

The Dáil now floated a Loan and the Volunteers were active in collecting subscriptions for this in the area. Nearly every person in the area subscribed sums of either ten shillings or one pound. Andy Lavin was the chief collecting agent in the area and he received all monies that were collected. Every subscriber received a receipt for the amount he gave.

Late in 1919 a Battalion organisation was set up in the area. Thomas Moran - a brother-~~in-law~~ of Paddy Moran who was hanged in Mountjoy on the 21st March, 1921 - was, I think, appointed Battalion O.C. The Companies comprising the Battalion were Arigna, Ballyfarnon, Crossna and Keadue. Arigna was the strongest Company having about forty men and Jim Brady was Company Captain there. Joe Cunnane was Captain of Ballyfarnon, Jimmy Brien Captain of Crossna and Paddy Deignan Captain of Keadue. There were still no arms of any importance in the Battalion except a number of shotguns. A number of these shotguns were given to the Volunteers by people who did not want to have them in their possession on account of the troubled times. There were no Service Rifles but we had a few revolvers - very old pattern and only a few rounds of ammunition for them.

A Brigade had been organised in North Roscommon at this time and James Ryan of Strokestown was the Brigade O.C. I do not remember who the rest of the Brigade staff were but I think Martin Killilia of Doon was the Quartermaster.. The R.I.C. were now more or less boycotted. They were not allowed into football matches, sports, concerts and so forth as heretofore, and the people shunned them as much as possible and did not associate with them or speak to them.

Early in 1920 the R.I.C., consequent on attacks being made on their barracks in different parts of the country, evacuated their small outlying posts and brought their men to larger stations, usually in the towns. Ballyfarnon, in our Battalion area, was evacuated and we burned it down on Easter Saturday night. The Sergeant's wife was still living in it up to this, but we removed her to a house that was vacant in the town, together with all her furniture, before we burned the barracks. We sprinkled the place with paraffin and set it alight.

There was no mishap of any sort during this operation. In a day or so afterwards we read in the press about the destruction of all the barracks throughout the country and it was very heartening to see how the Volunteers throughout the country had worked as one unit - obeying what was a general order, on that night.

The withdrawal of the R.I.C. meant serious work for the Volunteers who had now to police the country and even the towns, as the people or nearly all of them no longer recognised the R.I.C. as a legitimate Police Force. The Sinn Féin Courts were now in operation and the people were taking their troubles to them and the British Courts were practically deserted. Where any attempts were made to use the English Courts we promptly stopped the people from going there. We were fortunate in our area that the people were so law abiding and even members of the Tramp or Tinker class, who often gave a bit of trouble, also became very quiet. They knew what to expect when arrested by the R.I.C. but what happened when arrested by the I.R.A. was an unexplored region to them and they were not taking any chances. We had no arrests to make in the area and there were no Income Tax offices to be raided either.

During the general raid for arms by the I.R.A. which was ordered by G.H.Q. we did not experience any trouble. There was not a lot to collect in our areas - just a few shotguns and some cartridges and a few small type revolvers of different calibres and hardly any ammunition for them. The guns were stored in big box shore at Alderford being put in a large wooden box before being placed in the shore, and were looked after by the local Volunteers.

After the general raid for arms the three brothers Cunnane were arrested and interned in Mountjoy prison and Joseph Noone was now appointed Captain of Ballyfarnon Company. Shortly after Noone was appointed he was also arrested.

Sean Connolly, who was from Longford and who was organising for G.H.Q., now came to the area and he appointed me in charge of the Company (Ballyfarnon). Tom Lynam was the 1st Lieutenant and Jim Mullaney the 2nd Lieutenant. The Company at this time was about fourteen strong. We still had no arms other than shotguns. Training was continued in secret. When Connolly arrived he brought with him three Service rifles (Lee Enfields) which we had the use of for a week. Parades were held every night that week to get as much instruction on the rifle as we possibly could. When Connolly left at the end of the week or so, he took the rifles away with him. Tom Moran was still the Battalion O/C. and Jimmie O'Brien either Adjutant or Quartermaster. Regular Battalion Council meetings were being held every fortnight or so. Meetings were usually held at Crossna or Ballyfarnon - more usually at Crossna as this was easier to get to from the Arigna side.

Tom Moran was now arrested and O'Brien became Battalion O.C. I was appointed Vice-O.C. of the Battalion and Tom Lynam Captain of Ballyfarnon Company. The Battalion strength was only about forty-two men most of whom were in the Arigna area. Lord French who was Lord Lieutenant of Ireland for the British at this time had a residence in Drumdoe on the shores of Lough ~~Kesh~~^{ARROW}. We were ordered to block all the roads leading to Drumdoe House. We cut trees in plenty - felling them across the roads and where no trees were available we cut trenches across the roads and put down a very extensive blockade. We subsequently learned that Lord French was coming to take up residence in Drumdoe House and this was an attempt to block him from getting there. Despite our road blocking he got there somehow. A large detachment of military were drafted into Drumdoe - about five hundred men and heavy guards were mounted on the place. The military were accommodated in huts especially erected for them. The surrounding

roads were continually patrolled by military parties, even the by-roads and lanes. Parties of military were to be found at all crossroads near the house and all persons were held up and even the fields were scoured by patrols. Even when Lord French was not in residence, there was a strong guard maintained on the place. Sometime in 1921 the same operation of road blocking by us was repeated in the area.

Some changes had now taken place in the Brigade staff. The O.C., Ryan, was replaced by Mick Dockery and Sean Glancy was now Brigade Adjutant. Pat Mulloley of Kiltristan took over the duties of Brigade Quartermaster from Martin Killilea who now became Vice-O.C., Brigade. By now I was 'on the run' avoiding arrest as they were looking for me. Sometime in the autumn of 1920 we took the mails from Ballyfarnon. We also took the mail from the car at Ballyfermoy. The mail was from Carrick-on-Shannon to Ballyfarnon. We examined the mail on the side of Ballyfermoy Hill spending the rest of the day at Moffat's house. That evening we again raided the mail car and took the current sack of mail from it giving the driver back the bag we had taken that morning. The only interesting thing we found in the mail was a communication to a shop boy in Ballyfarnon who had made an application to join the R.I.C., and forwarding him the necessary documents. Before we had time to take any action in the matter the police came out to Ballyfarnon and took this man away. They knew he was in danger once they had been informed that we seized the mail. When the trouble was over in this country this man volunteered for service in Palestine and was killed there.

Meetings of the Brigade Council at which all Battalion Commandants and Vice Commandants were required to attend were generally held in the Hillstreet area. Business at such meetings

was usually of a more or less routine nature - submission and discussion of reports on training, Intelligence and what operations there were. The big bogey all the time was arms! Arms! when were we going to get them and there were always promises forthcoming but no arms. On the night that Paddy Moran - a brother of our first Battalion O.C. - was hanged in Mountjoy we sniped Keadue R.I.C. Barracks which held a garrison of Tans and R.I.C. about twelve strong. I took charge of six men and went into Keadue hoping to contact a patrol from the barracks. We had one rifle - a sporting repeater type - and the remainder had shotguns. No patrol came out of the barracks although we were informed in Keadue that they had been out before our arrival, so we took up positions and fired a few shots at the barracks. The garrison replied with all they had got and sent up numerous verey lights. Reinforcements came from Carrick-on-Shannon, police and military, but we had cleared off before they arrived.. We had gained one little bit of useful information - that Carrick-on-Shannon was the reinforcing centre for Keadue. We had no casualties and I don't believe the garrison had any either.

At the next Brigade meeting I kicked up a row and insisted that something would have to be done to avenge Moran's hanging. I was promised that something would be done. At a Brigade Council meeting held previously the Brigade O.C., Dockery, stated that he would give fifty pounds to the first battalion that would bring off a successful ambush in the Brigade area. Martin Fallon went that night and collected a few men and went into Tarmonbarry and shot two R.I.C. men and I understood qualified for the fifty pounds so we had no further interest in it.

So far the Brigade had done nothing to avenge the hanging of Paddy Moran and the shooting of Terry McGlynn who was also from this area. Tom Moran was still in gaol. At a Battalion Council meeting we decided to act for ourselves with what arms we had got -

the shotguns. At this time a military patrol was in the habit of proceeding from Drumshanbo to Drumkeeran via Arigna and we decided to ambush the patrol. As this was Leitrim Brigade territory we made arrangements with them to do this job at Tarmon. We mobilised fourteen Volunteers armed with shotguns and buckshot and I took charge of this party. We had no hand grenades or other weapons. This was at night time and we calculated we would reach the ambush position by daylight as the patrol was expected in the early morning time. When we were ready to start we received information that the patrol was not going out now. We decided that we would not demobilise without doing something and I decided on a hurried plan to bring out a patrol of R.I.C. and Tans from Keadue. Paddy McGloughlin, Jim and Tom Lynam and I would proceed to Ballyfarnon and raid the Post Office there. Meanwhile the remainder of our party would proceed to Kilronan, which is on the Ballyfarnon Keadue Road, and occupy an ambush position there where we would join them after raiding the Post Office. The Postmaster in Ballyfarnon, who was Grand Master of the Orange Order in Connaught, was hostile to us and we believed he would 'phone the police in Keadue informing them of the raid. This would be his normal duty. We anticipated that the police in Keadue would send out a patrol to investigate the raid.

While en route to Ballyfarnon Post Office we were unexpectedly joined by the Brigade O.C. Dockery, and I told him of my plans and he agreed. Dockery accompanied us to Ballyfarnon where we raided the Post Office from which we took five pounds. Incidentally, this money was returned to the Post Office by envelope dropped into the Letter Box with instructions that it was to be acknowledged in the "Roscommon Herald", which the Postmaster did.

We now made all haste to Kilronan to join the main body and Dockery came with us. We expected that if a party of R.I.C. or Tans did come from Keadue that they would come on cycles and in extended order in file. So we placed our men accordingly in extended order behind the fence on either side of the road. I issued strict instructions that no one was to fire until I did and that would be the signal for general attack.

The position taken up was a good one, ~~com~~ fully covering the road and giving good observation towards Keadue and also giving us a good line of retreat to the mountains at our rear.

We had raided the Post Office at 3 a.m. on the morning of the 21st March, 1921 and were in the ambush position at daylight. I took up a position about centre of the ambush position where I could best judge the time to open fire while Dockery placed himself at the head of the position.

At about a quarter to eleven in the forenoon we could see a patrol of R.I.C. men approaching from Keadue in a very extended formation as anticipated, or even more so. They were on cycles alright and in single file and their strength was six. When they had got into our position and, as far as I could judge, the leading policeman had reached the head of our ambush position I fired the signal shot and then the rest of our men opened up and a general battle started. The police jumped or fell from their cycles. Two of them drew their revolvers and started firing from them, but were immediately shot dead. One policeman succeeded in throwing a grenade, but he threw it so far over the heads of our men that it was ineffective. One Constable - Constable Frizelle, who was the last man of the patrol, was so far behind in the line that he did not come into the ambush position and he succeeded in turning around on the road and making his escape. The police now put their hands up and started shouting "Don't Fire", and surrendered. We now came out on to the road and took their arms from them which consisted of three rifles, five revolvers, some grenades and a small amount of ammunition for the rifles and revolvers. None of our men had been hit. The police had two men dead and I think one wounded.

Having collected the arms and the cycles belonging to the police our men immediately made across country taking the cycles with them for the mountain. We could not afford to delay any time in the area to

attend to the dead or wounded men, particularly so as Constable Frizelle had escaped and enemy forces in strength would soon be on the scene. The Brigade O.C. took one of the rifles. He was anxious to get back to the southern end of the Brigade area where another ambush had been planned for in a few days time at Scramogue. I accompanied the O.C. to get him out of the area as I knew it intimately and he did not, while the remainder of our party made for the mountains. I took the O.C. to Crossna where I parted with him and made my way to Cootehall.

Our main body got to the mountains without trouble where they dumped and secured their arms and then dispersed. There was intense enemy activity after the ambush and the whole area around was thoroughly searched and combed by them but they did not succeed in capturing even one of our men.

The Keadue Company of the Battalion had at this time become inactive and had nearly faded out. This to a great extent was due to the fact that the Company Captain there was in bad health and was not able for the job. I decided to get things going again in that area and I got some of the Company together and ordered them to hold up and take the mails from the mail car which plied between Keadue and Carrick. I had no particular object in raiding the mails thus, other than to test out the Keadue men to see if they would do the job and to revive the activities of the Company. They took the mails alright and brought them to me but there was nothing of any value in them.

We now decided to ambush some of the enemy patrols that were operating from Drumdoe House and had them watched and timed to get our required data on their mode of operation. We had got some grenades - G.H.Q. type, I think, from the Boyle Battalion. I was at Kilmactranny and was preparing material for this operation.

I was in the act of priming one of the grenades by inserting and screwing home the igniter set when it exploded in my hand. Fortunately I was on my own at the time in a field. I was knocked unconscious and woke up in Sligo hospital. I understand some of the local people found me and put me in a trap drawn by a horse and took me all the way to Sligo - a considerable journey. My right hand was blown off by the explosion. Had the grenade segregated, as it was supposed to do, I should have been killed.

Shortly after reaching the hospital the police came and informed me that I was under arrest and put a strong guard on me. The guard was a mixed one of R.I.C., Tans and Auxies. I understand that the Sligo Brigade and some of our Brigade including Sean Glancy, the Brigade Adjutant, were planning to rescue me but had to call it off as there was no hope of a success. After being ten days in Sligo hospital I was removed by Military Motor Ambulance to George V. Hospital in Dublin, now St. Bricin's Military Hospital. In this hospital I found my friend Cannon from Arigna. He had been shot in the leg while trying to make an escape when they raided his house for him.

When I was pretty fit again I was removed from the hospital to Mountjoy gaol where I was charged with the murder of the Constables at Keadue - levying war against His Majesty the King of England and several other such charges. I was never tried on these charges. I remained in Mountjoy throughout the period of the Truce. My father died in November 1921 but they would not release me for his funeral, yet a fortnight afterwards they gave me ten days parole. Garrett Reel, who came from Kerry and who was also a prisoner in Mountjoy at this time, was looking for parole as his mother was dying. The prison authorities informed me that if I did

not keep my parole Reel would not get his. I spent the ten days at home and then reported back at the end of the ten days. The Truce was on at this time. I was released on the General Release of prisoners just before Christmas, 1921.

I joined the I.R.B. in Strokestown early on in the troubled days of 1918-1921. I was taken into the organisation by Pat Madden, and that was all I heard of it afterwards. I do not know if there was anyone else from around our area in the I.R.B.

The only munitions of war that we attempted to make in our area was the filling of cartridges with buckshot which was supplied to us by the Brigade and the making of some bombs of the cart axle type.

There were Intelligence sections organised in the Battalion and in the Companies but they were not really of any outstanding value. In fact all Volunteers were Intelligence agents as things went. The only Post Office in the area that would be of any value to us was Keadue but this was managed by an ex-Head Constable of the R.I.C. who was hostile to us.

There were no spies or informers executed in the area and we had no reason to believe there were any. The people were nearly all behind us in every way possible and I don't believe that any of them were informing on us. The police got very little information about us. They, of course, recognised those of us who took part in the Keadue ambush.

Signed: _____

(T. Lavin)

Date: _____

2.9.54

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Witness: _____

Matthew Barry, Comd't.

BUREAU OF MILITARY HISTORY 1913-21

BURO STAIRE MILITAIRA 1913-21

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