

ORIGINAL

BUREAU OF MILITARY HISTORY 1913-21

BURO STAIRÉ MILEATA 1913-21

No. W.S. 1042

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BUREAU OF MILITARY HISTORY, 1913-21.

STATEMENT BY WITNESS.

DOCUMENT NO. W.S. 1,042

Witness

John Joe Neylon (Tosser),  
Ballinacarra,  
Kilfenora,  
Co. Clare.

Identity.

Member of I.R.B. Ennistymon, Co. Clare, 1911 - ;  
Captain Ennistymon Coy. 4th Batt. Mid-Clare  
Brigade.

Subject.

Fourth Battalion, Mid-Clare Brigade,  
1917-1921.

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No. W.S. 1042

STATEMENT MADE BY JOHN JOE NEILAN (TOSSER)

Ballinacarra, Kilfenora, Co. Clare, formerly O/C.  
Ennistymon Company, 4th Battalion, Mid Clare Brigade,  
and a member of Mid-Clare Flying Column.

I was born in 1895 in Emlagh, Kilfenora, Co. Clare, and in my family I was eighth in a total of fifteen.

I was brought up on a substantial farm of about 70 acres of good arable land, and went to school at Croveigh, the local national school, where I remained until I had completed two years in the 6th standard.

In 1911, when I was 16 years of age, I went to Ennistymon to serve my time at the hardware business with my uncle, Jack Roughan, and worked with him until I was obliged to go on the run in 1919.

My father was, I understand, an active moonlighter. He was a native of Toonagh, near Ennis, and was a silent type of man who never spoke about his younger days in the land trouble. However, from what I heard later on, he was actually concerned in the shooting of one of the Kelly family of Ballinruan who were notorious land grabbers and had managed to get possession of a particular farm in a manner that aroused considerable indignation among the people. Following that shooting incident they threw up the farm which caused the agitation, and from that time onwards they grabbed no more land.

I was enrolled in the I.R.B. by Tomas O'Loughlin, a native of Carrow area in North Clare and who was residing in Ennistymon at the time. He was a strange kind of man; he detested English rule in this country and was not very popular with the clergy, but at the same time, I always knew him to be at Mass every morning in those days and he never touched intoxicating liquor. He became very friendly with Martin Devitt, afterwards killed during the Black and Tan struggle, and myself. He was very secretive about his affairs and a favourite saying of his was: "if you want to rob a bird's nest you'd want to go out into

the middle of a field as the walls have ears". For that reason on the night on which he swore myself and Martin Devitt into the I.R.B., he brought us into the centre of the Square in Ennistymon and there administered the oath. There were no others present. After that, though we met O'Loughlin regularly he did not call us to any meetings, but spoke about dethroning English rule in the country and instructed us to try and get our hands on as many guns as possible so that they would be available later on when men would rise in armed insurrection.

After becoming members of the I.R.B., Devitt became a bigger noise in it than I and he formed a centre in Cloonagh, outside Ennistymon. Devitt had not much faith in townsmen and always maintained that one country fellow was as good as half a dozen townsmen. He did not take very many into the centre and of those who were accepted I can only now remember his own brother, Paddy, and "Autie" Rynne. Seamus Connolly, at whose house we held our meetings, could have been a member before the centre was established in Cloonagh, but at any rate, he was also one of us. These meetings were held fairly often sometimes twice a week and sometimes only once a month. We used to get papers from Dublin like the 'United Irishman' and the few copies which came along would afterwards be quietly circulated around the houses in the parish.

During the period between 1911 and the end of 1913 the centre collected a number of guns. For this job I was more favourably situated than any of the rest. My employer sold guns and ammunition and in those days there were no restrictions on the sale of firearms. I was able to 'pinch' altogether six .45 revolvers - British Bulldog 5 chamber type - and thousands of rounds of .45 revolver ammunition. I gave two revolvers to Martin Devitt and one to Seamus Conneally with some ammunition. We occasionally went to isolated places on a Sunday to have practice in the use of the revolver. I would say that by

the end of 1913, when the first Volunteer company was formed in Ennistymon, the members of the Cloonagh I.R.B. Centre were all familiar with the use of the revolver and could fire fairly accurately with it.

The Irish Volunteers were established in the Ennistymon area about the end of 1913. Though the first public meeting at which the unit was officially started took place in the Town Hall, myself and about a dozen others, mostly I.R.B. men, met one night a week or so earlier in a carpenter's workshop in the town and discussed the idea of following the lead given to the country by the people in Dublin who had launched the Irish Volunteer movement. At that meeting it was agreed to call a public meeting in the Town Hall and to invite the most prominent persons in the town to come on the platform. The public meeting was a great success and about 150 members were enrolled that night. A committee was formed to control the unit and we also secured the services of two or three ex-British soldiers to act as instructors. These instructors were very competent men and after a couple of months it was remarkable what progress they had made in training the unit. Drilling took place twice weekly in the Town Hall at first and later on in Droney's field outside the town. As far as I can remember, we had no real rifles to train with, but we used a number of timber guns and these gave the members a pretty good idea of musketry exercise apart from loading the rifle. Some of the Volunteers who showed promise as instructors were also given practice in the handling of small squads and this proved very useful to us later on when, following the Redmondite split, the Irish Volunteers lost the services of the ex-British army instructors.

In September 1914, as a result of the difference between John Redmond and the Irish Volunteer Executive, only about 20 of the Ennistymon Company remained loyal to the Executive.

Under the direction of Martin Devitt and Seamus Conneally, that minority formed a separate company of Irish Volunteers and became known as the Cloonagh Company. "Autie" Rynne was chosen as captain because he was a man who had a splendid word of command and was one of those who had been given special training as an instructor in Ennistymon. We continued to train on the lines taught to us by the ex-British army instructors and also used special training manuals which were obtained from G.H.Q. in Dublin.

Some time in 1915 Ernest Blythe came into the area as an organiser. He remained around for a few weeks, addressed us on a number of occasions, inspected the company at drill and took us on a number of route marches. Throughout that year, too, with two or three miniature rifles, all the company were given a good deal of practice at shooting. Targets had been set up in a remote part of the parish at Ardmore where there was a farm on which the house was unoccupied. This house became subsequently known as "Liberty Hall" as it was here that, in the years that followed, meetings of all kinds were held from company to brigade council meetings. Target practice took place every Sunday and every man got then an opportunity of firing four or five shots with the .22 rifle. Ammunition for this type of rifle was cheap at the time and was very easily obtained by me through my place of employment. As far as I can now recollect, each member of the company had become fairly useful at shooting by the Spring of 1916.

I had no advance notice that a Rising was contemplated and I don't believe that any member of the company had been told that it was in the offing. Of course, at each of our Sunday parades, Martin Devitt spoke of the coming fight and regularly warned the men on parade to be ready at a moment's notice to go into action. At the usual parade on Easter Sunday 1916, the company was not dismissed after target practice as was hitherto

the practice, but we were all held together until near midnight. Devitt, I think, had received an order of some kind but he did not mention anything about it, not even to me, and I was his bosom pal as well as his comrade in the I.R.B. Some time around midnight we were dismissed. There were between 25 & 30 men present. I cannot now remember distinctly the names of these men, but I am definite that Tom Shalloo, Peter O'Loughlin, Autie Rynne, Andy O'Donoghue and Seamus Conneally were there.

On Easter Monday night we were again ordered to mobilise. All the men who were present on the previous night again reported. We were instructed to break up into sections and to go through the countryside collecting arms from the local farmers. In all, about 50 shotguns were collected along with some cartridges. The guns were divided out when we reassembled at "Liberty Hall" in the small hours of the morning, some men taking two guns. Each man got orders to bring whatever stuff had been given to him to his own home and to be ready to report for action at a moment's notice. We were then dismissed.

By the way, all these shotguns were handed over very freely and only in one instance was there any opposition experienced. In that case, the house owner was a bit of a crank and young lads engaged in horse play frequently threw stones at his door or kicked it at night time. He thought the Volunteers were at the same game on the night in question and he fired a shot through the door. No one was hurt and when the enraged house owner realised his mistake he was most apologetic and gave over his gun at once. We did not mobilise again during the remainder of Easter Week.

After the Rising in Easter 1916, no member of the Cloonagh Company was arrested. It continued to grow in strength. While there were no public parades, we held mobilisations regularly each week and as well increased our strength considerably. Individuals came into our ranks from as far as 10 miles from Cloonagh. By the time the prisoners arrested after the Rising

were released from English prisons in July 1917, there were about 150 men on the rolls.

About this time it was decided to break up the Cloonagh Company area into a number of companies and, in order to carry out this, Martin Devitt, myself and Seamus Conneally travelled throughout the county from Inagh to the Galway border and established new companies of Irish Volunteers in Inagh, Glendine, Miltown-Malbay, Lahinch, Ennistymon, Moy, Lavoreen, Liscannor and Ballyvaughan. The area was formed into a battalion and I became captain of the Ennistymon company. The other officers of that company were Seamus McMahon - 1st Lieutenant; Mike Healy - 2nd Lieutenant; William McCarthy - adjutant, and Ralph Morgan - quartermaster. In the yard of my uncle's hardware shop he had converted a shed into a kind of garage and on the floor made a pit for the repair of cars, which became the dump for the arms in the area. The idea of the garage was not a success, but the pit was used up to the time I had "to go on my keeping" to avoid arrest by the R.I.C. and though the premises were often raided the dump was never suspected. It was about 20 feet long, 4 feet deep and 3 feet wide. It was covered over with wooden planks and had a couple of steps leading to the bottom from the floor of the shed.

After the establishment of the Irish Volunteers in Ennistymon in or about July 1917, the strength of the company was between 70 and 80 and until the Truce this strength was maintained. Drilling began immediately and generally took place in Droney's field. Two of the local police came out there one Sunday soon after the recommencement of public drilling. I had an idea that they came along to see who was giving orders and conducting the drilling, and decided to give them a bit of a job to find out. Calling together the company officers, I arranged with them that as soon as the company had formed up in two ranks that it would then break up into a number of sections. The first section moved off in one direction; the

second in another direction and so on until finally there were only ten men left with myself. The police still remained with us. I broke the remaining 10 men into two groups of five and sent five away. The police still remained. The five men whom I had left then split into two groups of two and three and they moved off. As they did so, I walked off the parade ground myself and went across country over Healy's mountain and kept on walking until after several hours I landed back into Ennistymon town with the two police still on my tracks. After that I do not remember ever seeing the police bothering about us while the company drilled, or at least if they did, no one ever was arrested for illegal drilling.

A few weeks after the reorganisation of the Ennistymon Company - about 29.7.1917 - we captured our first rifle. A soldier home on leave from the British army brought with him his rifle, bayonet and full equipment. Like lots of other Irishmen who were then fighting for England in the first World War, he had no love for John Bull, and it was obvious from remarks which he passed in the 'pubs' after coming home that he was only too anxious to part with his gun. I knew he would have handed the gun over voluntarily, but in order to avoid getting him into trouble with his authorities, myself and a couple of Volunteers 'raided' his home one night while he was out and took the rifle, 10 or 12 rounds of ammunition, the bayonet and equipment. There was a lot of fuss made over the raid by himself and his people, but no one was arrested over the affair. I hid the captured articles in the dump in my uncle's yard.

I should have mentioned that previous to this and as early as March 1917 the first policeman to be shot in Ireland since the rebellion was fired at and wounded in Ennistymon. He was a Constable Johns who was engaged on detective work and kept a close watch on all trains arriving in the town. Ever since the Rising he had a particular set on Miss <sup>McBorner's</sup> ~~McNamara's~~ hotel



where Tomás O'Loughlin stayed and had raided the place on a number of occasions. Martin Devitt and myself decided to give him a fright in the hope that it would cause him to be less officious. We arranged to waylay him as he was returning to the town after the arrival of the night train which came in from Ennis at 7.20, and to give him a "good hiding" with blackthorn walking sticks which I took out of my uncle's shop. Ralph Morgan, later on company quartermaster, was asked to come with us. He was sincere, but I'm afraid a bit too gentle for jobs of that kind. The three of us went along the road towards the station and took up a position in the shelter of a hedge waiting for Johns to come along. Morgan had become very uneasy and after a few minutes waiting he suggested that we should postpone the attack until the following night, and we readily agreed.

Next day I went across the road from my own place to where Devitt worked and suggested to him that we should give Johns 'a touch of lead' instead of the blackthorn sticks and that we should leave Morgan out of the affair altogether. He approved of the idea and during the day I arranged to get a single-barreled shotgun out of my uncle's shop along with a couple of cartridges and around 7 o'clock that night we had taken up a position along the Wood Road leading from the railway station to the town. This was our first attempt at shooting a policeman and I'm afraid the occasion affected my aim a bit. Johns came along from the station and, when he was about 20 yards away I fired. The shot lifted him like a wounded rabbit, but, although it did not kill him, it put him out of action for a good while and he gave no more trouble after that.

We hid the gun and got back to town where we went into Hogan's pub which at that time was very much frequented by the R.I.C. There was a few of them inside and we were all "up in a heap" over what was after happening to poor Constable Johns. Apart from Ralph Morgan, who probably had a pretty good idea

as to who were on this job, only one other man knew who took part in the attack. He was a pal of Devitt and myself - Jack Walsh, a Kerryman - who worked as a clerk in the local branch of the National Bank. He was in Hogan's pub by arrangement when we came in there after the shooting and helped very much in pulling the wool over the eyes of the police by pretending to have great sympathy for Johns. Three local men were arrested but were released after a couple of weeks as no evidence could be got against them.

The Ennistymon company carried on drilling throughout 1918, meeting at least twice a week, usually on Sunday and on Wednesday night in Droney's field. In February of that year - on a Sunday, about 24th - in company with Mick and Jack Maguire and Tom and Mickey Kelliher, Martin Devitt and myself attacked two R.I.C. men armed with carbines at a place called Larry's Wood, Lavoreen, 3 miles south of Ennistymon. The police were guarding a family called Marrinan, Derrymore, Ennistymon, who had got into trouble locally over a land dispute and, on the morning in question, were travelling on bikes after three of the Marrinan family coming home from 8.30 Mass in Ennistymon. Devitt and I were armed with two revolvers, guns which I had taken out of my uncle's shop away back in 1911 and 1912. The others, strange to say, had only cobblers' knives. We wanted them to cut the straps which kept the carbines slung across the policemen's backs. We took up position on the side of the road, actually sitting on the fence, and as soon as the police came along Devitt gave the order 'Hands up'. They did not comply, but, instead, threw down their bikes, which at that stage they were pushing beside them, and attempted to unslung their carbines. We then opened fire and knocked out both of them. Altogether they received seven bullets between them and later died from their wounds. We took the carbines and left one of them with the Lavoreen area and hid the other in Devitt's

place in Cahersheskin until we got a chance later on to take it away to my dump in Ennistymon.

We were not masked on that occasion and, though we may have been known to the Marrinan family, the R.I.C. must not have got any information from them as to the identity of the attackers as none of us were arrested. After the shooting we made off through the county and all the party got home without bringing any suspicion on themselves. In addition to the two carbines, we also got 40 rounds of ammunition. The two policemen who were shot were Constables Sullivan and Dennehy.

In July 1919, Martin Devitt, who was then Vice O/C. of the Mid-Clare Brigade, decided to attack Connolly R.I.C. Bks. I was given the job of taking some home-made bombs from Cloonagh to Connolly village. On my way from Ennistymon to Cloonagh, I fell off my bike and was very badly injured. As a result, I had to remain in bed for about a fortnight, and the attack on the barracks took place without the bombs being available. It was not successful.

The next operation in which I became involved was at a place called "81 Cross" at Ballyvanneen, Islandbaun, three miles south east of Ennistymon on the road to Lavoreen. It occurred on August Monday of 1919. It was a Bank Holiday and Martin Devitt was home for the day from his place of employment, Griffin's of Ennis, where he had some time previously taken up employment as a draper's assistant. The two of us were standing at the corner of the Square in Ennistymon when two R.I.C. men came cycling into the town. We recognised them as being belonging to one of the outside stations and knew that they would be going home later on in the evening. Both men were armed with revolvers. Devitt suggested that this was an easy chance of getting two guns and I agreed. He had a bike and, as I was without one at the time, I borrowed one from Seamus Barry, a Volunteer, who was belonging to the Cloonagh district. Devitt

and myself then cycled out to Seamus Conneally's place and told Seamus what we had in mind. He agreed to go with us and was also able to provide for the job a police carbine, a Martini-Henry rifle and a Webley revolver. However, he had only 6 rounds of .303 ammunition and, as this did not fit the revolver, Devitt said he would use the empty revolver. He gave the Martini rifle and one round of ammunition to Conneally and gave me the carbine with 5 rounds of ammunition. The three of us cycled on to 'Eighty One Cross' and there waited the return of the two policemen. It was arranged that Devitt and Conneally would take on one policeman and that I would deal with the other one.

It was approaching dusk when the policemen came along. They were cycling abreast and when they were a few yards from the "Cross" Devitt gave the order "Hands up". At this stage we were facing the police in the middle of the road. Instead of putting up their hands the police pulled their guns and opened fire. The sergeant (O'Riordan) hit Devitt in the first few shots, wounding him through the breast. Devitt disappeared over the fence. Conneally fired one shot and then dropped his rifle and made off. I began firing as soon as the police did and shot the two of them - the constable died almost immediately while the sergeant lived for a few hours. In all 17 shots were fired in this engagement; the police fired 11 and we fired 6. There was only one round in the two revolvers which we collected from the police after I had shot the two of them.

Seeing none of my comrades around I cycled back to Conneally's house. There I found Seamus Conneally in a bad way. He was most depressed, particularly as he thought Devitt was killed. We were talking outside his house which is situated on the side of a hill about 200 yards from the main road when we heard a good deal of clattering. The next thing we found Devitt coming along with his own bike, the two policemen's bikes

and the rifle which Cónneally had thrown away..Another Volunteer, Sean Flaherty of Cloonagh, who had heard the shooting, had joined us at Conneally's and, though Devitt was not in too bad a condition, he had a flesh wound in the breast. Flaherty and myself decided to go into Ennistymon for Dr. Tom Curran, who came out immediately. While we were away, Devitt had been taken to "Priest" Rynne's in Cloonagh and there he was attended by Dr. Curran. Later that night he was removed in a motor car which came from Kilfenora to Con Kearney's of Caherhem, where he remained for a few weeks until he got all right.

I should have mentioned earlier about another rifle which was acquired by the Ennistymon Company some time in 1918. This was a short Lee Enfield service rifle which one of the oldest Volunteers in the company, Michael (Miko) Nestor, got from a British soldier, Denis Molloy, also home on leave from the army. Nestor arranged all this himself, but gave the gun over to me.

During 1919 small quantities of .303 ammunition were also got from British Tommies stationed at Lahinch and the Ennistymon Workhouse. Though I have no clear recollection of ever having got a big quantity together, still every round which was so obtained was highly appreciated. One man, who was particularly active in collecting ammunition in this period, was Patrick Lehane (Pake) of Lahinch, who was afterwards killed in the reprisals which followed the Rineen ambush in August 1920.

In some parts of Co. Clare trouble arose over the appointment of certain persons to posts of importance in the Volunteer movement and an attempt was made to set up what became known as the "Independent Brigade" in a few districts within the Mid-Clare Brigade area. I do not know very much about this business as it did not affect the 4th and 5th Battalions, and was practically confined to the 1st, 2nd and 3rd Battalions. However as a result of this division in the ranks, trouble did develop around the Kilmaley district south of Inagh and between the

village of Connolly and the town of Ennis. At a Brigade Council meeting it was decided that these trouble makers should be firmly dealt with and that guns which they held should be seized. The job was entrusted to Martin Devitt who took about 30 men from the 4th and 5th Battalion areas into the Kilmaley district about the beginning of February 1920. I was a member of this party. We seized 5 or 6 shotguns and, as far as I remember, arrested one or two of the ringleaders and warned a number of others about their future conduct. Altogether we spent the best part of a week on the operation and, as we had to cover a distance of 15 or 16 miles in order to get back home, a number of traps and outside cars were commandeered to do the journey.

On our return, as we were at Crow's Bridge about 3 miles from Inagh, some of the men had dismounted from the vehicles as they were climbing a rather steep hill. A few of the leading cars were moving unattended when suddenly a motor car or van swept around a turn from the Inagh direction. The men in the front of the column were taken unawares as the motor vehicle suddenly pulled up and they ran for cover behind the road fences. Actually they had not time to take their guns from the traps and outside cars. Two or three of the occupants of the motor came out to examine the first trap or outside car and were doing so when fire was opened by Devitt and a couple of others whom he had led to the top of a small hillock. The intruders fired a few shots and then, as the motor began to reverse towards Inagh, the men who had alighted got in and they cleared off as quickly as they came. Nobody was injured on either side. Afterwards it was learned that the motor was being used to drive the O/C. of the British military in Co. Clare on an inspection tour.

The earlier part of 1920 was quiet in the Ennistymon area. I was on the run at this time and had to be cautious about my movements in the town. I think it was early in June of that

year that I made a visit there in the daytime, calling to the house of a friend of mine called Minnie Healy. As I was standing at the door I saw two soldiers on sentry duty at Ennistymon bridge near Blake's corner. They were armed with two rifles. I thought this was a grand chance of seizing the rifles. I made up my mind at once and decided that if one of the soldiers could be got away for a drink it would be easy for a couple of men to attack the other soldier and capture the guns. Seamus Conneally accidentally came along at the time and I suggested that he should invite one of the soldiers into Nicholas Griffy's pub near the bridge. He did so and one of the soldiers went with him. I had already made contact with two of the local Volunteers, Michael (Miko) Nestor and Sean Healy; told them of my plans and asked them to disarm the lone sentry while his comrade was inside in the pub. Both men instantly agreed and the soldier was no sooner inside the pub with Conneally than they rushed the man who was on sentry duty. Nestor seized one rifle and got away with it, but Healy failed to get the other one. I'm afraid he got the 'wind up' and lost his head. The soldier in the pub, on hearing the commotion outside, came running out. He grabbed the gun which Healy should have got and fired a number of shots. Both of the attackers escaped unhurt and Nestor managed to hide the rifle which he had taken in Nurse McElwee's yard. That night he and I retrieved the rifle, hiding it out in Healy's Mountain outside the town and remained the night there in an old hut.

About the end of February 1920 the Vice O/C. of the Mid Clare Brigade, Martin Devitt, had been killed in an engagement with the R.I.C. at Fermoy, and Ignatius O'Neill, O/C. of the 4th Battalion, was badly wounded while going to his rescue. I was not in this scrap, but I took over charge of the 4th Bn. after O'Neill being wounded. On hearing of Devitt's death I went to Ennis to report the matter to the Brigade O/C.,

Frank Barrett. As I was returning from Ennis I met a large party of I.R.A. men in Inagh who had assembled to attend Devitt's funeral. I did not attend the funeral, but remained around Inagh that night. I was very tired and, besides, did not agree with the idea of burying him in a clamp of turf and without christian burial. Devitt's death was really a bad blow to the I.R.A. in Mid Clare, and his loss, which was a big one to me personally, was very much felt in the later fighting against the British. He was utterly fearless, strictly honest and very resourceful, and was held in higher regard by the rank and file of the organisation than any other officer in the Mid-Clare Brigade. I never met another man during that period who was quicker to perceive an opportunity to hit the enemy and more ready to avail of it. He always chose the most dangerous part of an operation for himself. He was buried, temporarily of course, in a bog in the Cloonagh district, and the discovery of his body three weeks later by the R.I.C. gave them great cause for jubilation which they made very evident. How the police got information as to the place of his burial is still a mystery to me, but though I made a very close investigation of this at the time, I am satisfied that it was loose talk among the Volunteers themselves that ultimately enabled police to discover the body.

After Devitt's death, activities slackened for a period. For some months prior to this the police started to move from place to place in tenders and, as well, had withdrawn from all the smaller stations in the country to big concentrations in larger towns. Also, they had been reinforced by the Black and Tans equipped with more effective weapons like the machine gun. Of course, side by side with all this, the military forces in the area were also increased. The R.I.C. no longer sent out small patrols of two or three men on foot. Along with the loss of Devitt, the wounding of Ignatius O'Neill,



another fearless and resourceful leader, added to our worries in the area. Other parts of Ireland had succeeded in bringing off successful captures of lorries and police barracks and, in North West Clare, we began to feel that we were not pulling our weight in the fight.

The organisation of the I.R.A. in the area was in excellent shape and there was no lack of willingness on the part of hundreds of men to use arms against the British forces. This was evident from the numerous reports regarding the movements of the British troops which came before the Council meetings of the 4th Battalion that were held every Sunday in the Lehane's house in Lahinch. These reports, always submitted verbally, were made by the officers of the different companies and in many instances were based on the observations of individual Volunteers who furnished the particulars to the company officers. The Volunteers who had made these observations did so generally in the hope that they would be asked to participate in any attack which might arise in consequence of the information supplied by them.

About the beginning of September 1920, at one of these Battalion Council meetings, the officers representing the Lahinch and Milltown companies brought news of a police tender which travelled every Wednesday between Ennistymon and Milltown. It was stated on that occasion that the tender contained about 7 or 8 men and that it carried stores and, as well, brought the pay to the R.I.C. and Black and Tans stationed in Milltown. The meeting were unanimous in deciding that the lorry should be attacked. This was agreed to as was also the site of the attack and also that each company should be asked to supply 7 men who would form the attacking party and act as scouts. The site selected for the ambush, Rineen, was not the best attacking position along the road from Ennistymon to Milltown. There was a much more suitable position nearer to Lahinch, but it had

been noticed by the Volunteers residing in the vicinity that enemy parties travelling on lorries usually alighted before they approached that position, leaving only the driver on the vehicle, while the remainder of the troops either marched to the other side in extended formation or actually left the road and flanked the position which they expected might be occupied by the I.R.A. It was also decided at the Battalion Council meeting that the attack should be confined entirely to men from our own battalion and that Ignatius O'Neill, who had not recovered from the wounds received earlier in the year when Martin Devitt was killed, should be told nothing about the intended ambush.

Subsequent to the Battalion Council meeting, there were some further discussions between myself and some of the battalion staff and a few of the company officers, at which arrangements were made regarding the collection and allocation of arms and ammunition and the place at which contingents from the different companies would mobilise prior to the attack. On the night previous to the attack, I paraded the Ennistymon company and called for Volunteers to take part in it without disclosing any details of what was about to come off. Nearly every man present - and there was a parade of about 70 strong the same night - volunteered. I had to select only seven and that was a difficult job indeed. When I had made my selection I instructed these men to report at Lehane's of Lahinch that night and went off myself on a bike to see Ignatius O'Neill, with whom I had some other business to discuss. He was then lying low over in the Lisdoonvarna area. O'Neill met me with a violent reception. He was raging mad because he had heard from some source that we had decided to bring off the ambush without asking him to take part. He described the battalion officers as a "shower of b.....s", and accused me of being a "double-crosser". In order to placate him I said "All right

the ambush is coming off and you'll have to take charge". Although he did not want to be in charge I insisted that he should and outlined to him what our plans were and told him of the arrangements which had been made. As far as I can remember, he made no change in them. We arrived at Lahinch about 3 or 4 o'clock in the morning and there found between 60 and 65 men assembled. All the companies - 8 in number - had supplied the seven men as they were asked to do and, in addition, there were the officers of the battalion staff. We moved off ~~the~~ to Rineen and arrived there about 6 o'clock. Before posting the men to the different positions, O'Neill explained to them what each section had to do. All told, I would say that the total number of men under arms was between 45 and 50. Of these 10 had rifles and the remainder had shotguns. The rest were used as scouts.

Four men with rifles were posted in groups of two on the north side of the road to deal with any of the occupants of the tender who might escape into the fields on that side, while the main position was on the opposite side of the road along a bohereen which ran diagonally across portion of the slope of Dromin Hill from the main road to road to the railway gates on the brow on the south west corner of that hill. The entrance to the main position at the public road was camouflaged with ferns and bushes to prevent the police from observing the men lying along the laneway. The men here were placed a few feet apart, the nearest to the main road being about 20 yards from the entrance to the bohereen. I think I should say too that most of the party had not been previously involved in a military operation requiring the use of firearms. On the right of the position and extending towards Lahinch and Ennistymon for about a mile, a number of scouts were posted along positions in the high ground overlooking the main road to report the approach of the lorry. I had a rifle and the job allocated to me was to

fire the first or warning shot as soon as the tender reached a fixed point on the road, which happened to be 7 or 8 yards on the Lahinch side of Gorman's Lane. A couple of the riflemen were also detailed to knock out the driver of the lorry. The O/C. of the party, Ignatius O'Neill, took up his position near me.

About noon, word was received from the scouts that the three lorries were coming from the Ennistymon side. O'Neill had a quick consultation with myself and a few of the officers beside him. He had expected only one lorry and the plans had been made accordingly. His force was mainly composed of raw material and the ground did not lend itself to quick deployment. In the circumstances he decided, in view of the scouts' message, to withhold fire. When only one lorry passed he realised a mistake had been made by some of the scouts. He at once sent a man on a bike into Milltown-Malbay to pick up whatever news he could regarding the lorry, and to keep a special watch to see if arrangements were being made by the enemy in Milltown to send out forces to surround our position. There was just a remote chance that the occupants of the lorry might have seen some of us or noticed that the appearance of the position had been altered by overdoing the camouflaging.

The scout, whose name I am not able to remember, came back about 2 o'clock in the evening and reported that the lorry was outside the R.I.C. barracks in Milltown; that it was facing in the direction of Ennistymon; that he did not think we had been noticed, and that it looked as if it would be soon returning. In the space of five minutes or so we heard the noise of the lorry coming towards us. In the meantime, O'Neill made a few positional changes bringing myself and the riflemen who were detailed to get the driver to more suitable positions. When the lorry reached the chosen point I fired the warning shot and immediately all the party opened up. The attack was

over in a matter of seconds. There was no reply from the lorry and our fellows rushed towards it to find five dead policemen lying inside. One of the police managed to get off the lorry and had gone about 300 yards towards Milltown when he was seen and shot by Donal Lehane of Lahinch in a field near O'Connor's house and at spot about 100 yards from the main road.

All the guns and ammunition carried by the police were collected - 6 Lee Enfield service rifles, one .45 revolver and about 3,000 rounds of .303 ammunition. The lorry was also burned.

Some of the party werestill on the road around the lorry and others were making their way up the side of Rineen Hill when word was received that lorries of British troops were coming towards us from Ennistymon. Orders were given to all to disperse as quickly as possible, the big majority made off towards the top of the hill, while a few went in the opposite direction towards the sea. The latter got away without any trouble, but those who had already been making their way over the hill, as well as the party who were starting to do so all came under heavy fire, rifle and machine gun, from the newly-arrived troops.

The brow of Rineen hill ends a steep slope on the south side of the main road and for a distance of nearly a mile is from 150 to 200 feet above the road level. At the top the land towards the south drops gradually into a dip for a distance of over half a mile and then rises at Ballyraskin nearly a mile away to about the level of the hill-top. It is country which provides very little cover for a party in retreat from experienced and trained soldiers equipped with machine guns. As the big majority of our men had only shotguns, they were of no use in meeting the British forces who, in a short time, had reached the hill-top a quarter or a mile or so further east of the scene of the ambush. There was only one course open to us

and that was to use the riflemen to fight a rearguard action while the others with the shotguns were making their way to cover and safety on the Ballyvaskin side. Unfortunately, only a few of the riflemen were then available for this purpose. They included O'Neill himself, Michael Dwyer, Patrick Lehane and myself. The other men with rifles had gone off in different ways and it was not possible to collect them. The four of us took up positions in the field adjacent to Honan's house and engaged the military who were using a machine gun behind a stone wall at the corner of a field about 300 yards almost due east. O'Neill was wounded in the thigh early at this stage of the fighting and as we retreated he had to be removed. This was done by Michael Dwyer who carried him on his back. Gradually we made our way towards Ballyvaskin taking advantage of whatever bit of cover was available, sometimes a fold in the ground, sometimes a haycock, a drain or a bit of a stone fence until, ultimately, the whole party got into the Ballyvaskin country and dispersed to their homes or wherever they decided to go for the night. I went off towards Liscannor where I slept the night in the house of the local sub-postmaster, Peter Thynne.

There was a good deal of discussion afterwards as to how the British military in Ennistymon came so quickly on the scene after the attack on the police lorry. I did discover that loose talk of a Volunteer named Michael Vaughan, who then worked in Ennistymon, reached the ears of the R.I.C. in the town. As the R.I.C. lorry was leaving Ennistymon for Milltown-Malbay on the day on which it was attacked, he passed the remark in Roughan's shop where he was employed "they are going now, but will they ever come back". However, I do not believe that it was this information which enabled the military to catch us unawares after the fighting at Rineen was over, I feel certain that this occurred due to a mere coincidence.

The Resident Magistrate for the area, Captain Lindrum, was due in Ennistymon from West Clare that day. His wife had made a telephone call from her home to the R.I.C. barracks inquiring if her husband had arrived. This was a practice of hers at the time. It so happened that on the day in question Captain Lindrum was intercepted and captured by the Volunteers belonging to the West Clare Brigade. As he had not arrived in Ennistymon when his wife 'phoned the R.I.C. got in touch with the military there and it was decided to send out a search party. As the search party was coming from Ennistymon towards Rineen they heard the shooting and were looking out for trouble. Approaching Rineen Hill they saw some of our men going across the brow and they at once dismounted from the lorries and engaged us.

With regard to the actual casualties which were inflicted on the British forces in the fighting at Rineen, I can only say with certainty that there were six R.I.C. men killed. Some soldiers may have been hit in the subsequent skirmishing but I do not believe that more than two or three were killed or wounded. They were under good cover all the time while we were retreating over open country, and once we got into the Ballyvaskin district they broke off the engagement, without attempting to leave their positions on the ridge of Rineen Hill.

The reprisals which followed this attack were probably the most brutal of any that took place in any rural part of the country during this period. However, full details of these were published in the daily newspapers at the time and I have no information to give concerning them other than what has already appeared in the press reports which, in general, were fairly accurate, as far as I know.

About a month after Rineen, the Mid-Clare Brigade captured and destroyed Ruan R.I.C. Barracks and disarmed the garrison of 14 Tans and R.I.C. men, taking 14 or 15 rifles, 15 revolvers, a large quantity of ammunition .303 and .45, and about 2 dozen

Mills bombs. I travelled to this operation from Lahinch in a motor car owned by Mick Delahunty, Lisdoonvarna, in the company of the Vice Brigade O/C., Peadar O'Loughlin, Ignatius O'Neill, Frank Molyneaux and Delahunty. We were obliged to make a wide detour through the country in order to get to our destination, but the barracks was just after being captured when we arrived. The police were prisoners on the street outside the burning barracks as we got into the village. O'Neill on seeing them could not resist the temptation to give them a small dose of their own medicine, so he gave them orders to fall-in. After some reluctance they formed up in two ranks and he drilled them up and down the village street for about ten minutes. A local poet composed a ballad about the incident which until the Truce was all the rage in Co. Clare. The only verse which I remember runs:-

"Ignatius blew his whistle and he blew it loud and shrill  
You'd love to see those peelers and they all lined up  
for drill.  
To obey a rebel captain the peelers they said 'No',  
But Ignatius said he'd send them 'where the Blarney  
Roses grow'".

The next military operation in which I was engaged after Ruan Barracks was in Monreal, about midway between Ennistymon and Inagh; the ambush positions were roughly 300 yards from the crossroad which runs over Monananagh Bridge, and the attack took place on 18th December 1920.

About a week before this ambush occurred, selected men from all over the Mid-Clare Brigade area were mobilised in the townlands of Tullaha and Lickeen outside Kilfenora and created into a brigade column under the leadership of Joe Barrett. For the formation of this brigade column each battalion in the brigade was asked supply 7 or 8 men. The 1st, 2nd and 3rd Battalions did not furnish the required quota with the result that, of the total, about 45 came from the 4th, 5th and 6th Battalions. I don't wish to flatter myself



when I say that the men who were there represented the cream of the brigade. Most of them had fought in previous fights against the British forces.

As a result of experience gained from the Rineen ambush the Brigade Staff decided that the column should be given special training in extended order drill and advancing and retreating by alternate sections. Three or four days were spent on this type of training and it proved very valuable in the ambush which ensued. Altogether I would say that the column comprised about 60 men, half of whom had rifles and the remainder had shotguns. There were also at our disposal about two dozen Mills bombs which had been captured from the R.I.C. at Ruan Barracks and other places.

Personally I took a poor view of the ambush position and made this known to the column commander, Joe Barrett, and to the Vice Brigade O/C. Peadar O'Loughlin, who was also with us, as soon as they consulted me about it. In the interests of truth, I think I should say that in discussions which took place in McCormack's house in Tullaha on the day before the ambush between the prominent men of the column I heard Ignatius O'Neill say that if an attack was not made immediately on a convoy which had been travelling between Ennistymon and Ennis, he would start a column of his own. O'Neill then held no rank at all, but he was recognised throughout Clare as one of its most daring Volunteers and he was highly popular among the men who wished to inflict the maximum damage on the British forces. He always regarded the Barrets, Joe and Frank, the Brigade O/C., as men who wanted to be officers without having to do any fighting, though in fairness to the two men in question, I must say that they had a very high opinion of O'Neill's soldierly qualities and overlooked his shortcomings.

Apart altogether from O'Neill's persuasion, I would like to stress again that the Brigade Column which had been assembled

included practically the flower of Mid-Clare. Men had come together many of whom had never met before and who were known to one another only by their reputations. There was really a desperate wish among them to do something big, as big as what had been done in other counties, such as Ballinallee or Kilmichael. As well, the column included most of the battalion officers in the brigade.

Taking all the circumstances into consideration, I felt - and I still feel - that the column commander was too much influenced by the pressure which had been brought to bear on him and that in selecting the Monreal position, he was a bit forced in his decision. Unquestionably it was all right, if only one or two lorries of the enemy forces had to be dealt with and if nothing did happen to interfere with plans to deal with such a force. On the other hand, if anything went wrong and even if only one lorry with 12 or 13 soldiers or Tans did not come right into the trap, the attacking force in view of the positions which had been selected for them would be in a bad predicament.

It is hard to describe the positions of our column at the Monreal ambush. The column was divided into two sections and, as far as I remember, each section was further divided into two sub-sections. One section occupied a position on the east side of the road and the other section was placed on the south side. There was a bend on the road coming from Ennistymon and a vehicle rounding it came immediately under the range of the guns of the men on the west side of the road, but, owing to a high stone wall which ran for several hundred yards from the road, the men on the east side of the road had no view of the vehicle until it travelled 70 or 80 yards beyond the bend. The ground on the west side slopes gradually from the road for a distance of about 250 yards to the Inagh river and, except for natural folds in the ground, a few rocks and some short stretches of low stone

walls, none more than 2 feet high, provides no shelter from view or fire until the country across the river is reached. An enemy holding positions along the road has thus a big advantage over opponents using the terrain between the road and the river. On the east side of the road the land rises and at a distance of 70 yards is 30 or 40 feet higher than the road. Beyond this the country stretches into a plain in the direction of Cloonagh intersected by stone fences. Immediately behind the position occupied by our men is a field about 250 yards long and about 200 yards wide, bounded on the north side by the high stone wall to which I have already referred. Part of this stone wall forms the side of a shelter for cattle and sheep. This shelter is oblong shaped. The front wall runs parallel to the road for about 60 yards and the back wall is 20 yards or so behind. The four walls are built of stone and are about 7 feet high.

One of the sections occupied this position. It consisted altogether of twelve men armed with rifles and a few others with shotguns. On their flanks were scouts to the north and some others at points towards the south. Loopholes were made along the front wall and a gap was cleared on the north side to provide a way of escape in case of emergency.

On the west side of the road the section was divided as follows:- About 12 men were placed behind a lone stone wall 30 yards from the road and almost parallel with it. Ten or twelve yards to the right and slightly nearer the road the column commander, Joe Barratt, John Minihan, Jimmy Lafferty, Paddy O'Loughlin and myself occupied a position in a fold in the ground. To the south west of us and towards Monanagh Bridge two or three men were posted for protective purposes and, as events turned out it was providential for men on the west side of the road that these two men were so placed. To the best of my recollection all of the men on that side were armed with rifles.

Before going on to describe the actual fighting at Monreal I think I should mention two other objections which I had to that position. It was too near Ennistymon. More suitable positions were available further along the road to Ennis. Secondly, on the evening before the ambush I went with the officers of the column to view the position. As we were on the ground some lorries of British troops came along from Ennis en route to Ennistymon. As they were coming near Monreal one of our party accidentally discharged a revolver shot, the report from which caused the lorries to halt and the occupants to dismount and take up defensive positions. As they were subjected to no further fire they soon remounted the lorries and drove off to Ennistymon without having seen us. I still have a feeling that this incident caused the British forces to be more cautious than usual when they were approaching Monreal next morning. Finally, I should like to say that our plans were made to deal with not more than two lorries and that actually we expected only one lorry on the morning of the attack. Instead, we were confronted with three lorries and, in view of the ground selected, there was little hope of coping successfully with such a force.

On the morning of 18th December the column was roused early and moved off from Tullaha about 5 o'clock. Monreal was reached about 2 hours before daybreak and from daylight onwards the men were at their posts. It was very cold weather and there was a heavy frost. Shortly after 9 o'clock the scouts reported that three lorries were coming from Ennistymon and that each lorry was about 400 yards apart. That meant that only one lorry would be really under effective fire at the time. It is probable that they would have been allowed through without being attacked, but as the leading lorry was approaching the bend of the road one of the men beside me, Jimmy Lafferty, accidentally discharged a shot. I know that this was heard by

the British troops as I was told so afterwards by the driver of the leading lorry, an Englishman named Bobby Roberts, and also that it caused them to be at the ready. The lorries did not halt at the sound of the shot and, as soon as the first lorry came around the bend, it was raked by fire from our side of the road. Most of the occupants were knocked out of action but the driver was uninjured and he drove the vehicle as far as the Monananagh crossroads where he halted and two soldiers with a machine gun got out. The second lorry came under the position of the men in the cattle shelter and some of its passengers were also knocked out, but the majority of them were able to fight and, using bombs and machine guns, soon made it very hot for our men on both sides of the road. The third lorry did not enter the ambush position at all, but pulled up about 200 yards on the Ennistymon side of it. The troops and police in it divided forces, some of them moving into the fields on the east and others on the west of the road. They thus threatened the rear of both sections of our column. Ignatius O'Neill gave his men orders to withdraw, while Joe Barrett also gave our section orders to do likewise, remaining behind himself with 3 or 4 men to cover the retreat of the rest of the section towards the river. This withdrawal was made difficult because of the absence of cover and in the operation three of our men were wounded. However, all the party managed to get across to the far bank. Over there, there was a check of the men and it was learned that two men - Jack Hassett and Jimmy Kierse, who had been posted on our flank covering the road down to Monananagh Bridge were missing. Volunteers were asked for to go in search of them and, while all present offered to do so, a party of about half a dozen were picked for the job. They located the missing men up to their hips in water under the bridge. The British troops also knew they were there and were closing in on them at the time our search party located them. There was a

heavy exchange of shots resulting in the military and police being driven back to the main road and in the rescue of the two trapped Volunteers. Both of them were in a distressed condition when rescued, particularly Hassett, who had been wounded in both legs. They had been driven from their position by concentrated machine gunfire and bombs of a number of the military and police who were trying to force their way across the bridge in the hope of being able to cut off our retreat across the river. These two men put up a most stubborn fight and held their ground long enough to save the rest of us.

The British made no attempt to engage us after they had been driven back from the bridge, although by that time several lorries of reinforcements had arrived from Ennis and Ennistymon. I am not able to give any details of their casualties, but I'm certain that most of the troops in the first lorry were knocked out. In the entire engagement, which lasted a couple of hours, I fired altogether only five shots, but each was at a definite target. Our losses were four men wounded - Sean McNamara, Jack Hassett, Bill McNamara and Bill Carroll. We lost one rifle which was abandoned by Paddy O'Loughlin. None of the Mills bombs which we had were used in the fight. They were under the control of Paddy Powell, alias Cahill, a native of Birr. He was a deserter from the British army who joined the Mid-Clare Brigade.

After the Monreal engagement I was not involved in any further military action. I was arrested on 7.2.1921. On that day, accompanied by Tom McDonagh and Joe Murphy, both local Volunteers, I seized the rate books from a rate collector named Jim Hynes, Derry, Ennistymon, and also the sum of £207.7.4. rates which he had collected. We made the seizure in Kilshanny and were taking the books and money to my own home on an outside car owned by Murphy, when a Crossley tender of Tans and R.I.C. ran into us at Noughaval, Kilfenora. We were held up and

searched. On the same day a number of similar seizures were made, on official orders, by units of the I.R.A. in different parts of North Clare, so the authorities were presumably on the lookout for the culprits. At anyrate they found the rate books and the money in my possession. I gave them a false name 'John Joe Roughan' - Roughan was my mother's surname - but I was recognised by an R.I.C. man named Sullivan whom we had been trying to get some time previously. The three of us were arrested and brought to Ennistymon R.I.C. barracks where we got the usual mal-treatment, myself in particular getting special attention. Next day we were taken to Ennis and there interrogated by British military intelligence officers who used the fist, the boot and the revolver butt in trying to get me to admit being involved in nearly every incident and shooting that had occurred in Clare since the trouble started, and also to disclose the whereabouts of wanted leaders and dumps. They made a real mess of my face and head. I still possess a collar which I wore on that occasion. It was originally white, but was dyed red by the blood which flowed from my wounds. The interrogation got them nowhere as far as I was concerned.

We were removed from Ennis to Limerick military barracks. On 11th March 1921, we were tried by a military court and charged with the robbery of the rate moneys and the rate books. I refused to recognise the court and accepted full responsibility for the charge. I was sentenced to 7 years' imprisonment. The other two prisoners did recognise the court and were defended by Mr. Michael Comyn, K.C. They were discharged. I served my imprisonment in Cork and Kilkenny and later on Spike Island where I was confined at the time of my release in December 1921.

Signed: John J. Neylan

(John J. Neylan)

Date: 11-12-1954Witness: Denis Griffin

(Denis Griffin)

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