

ORIGINAL

BUREAU OF MILITARY HISTORY 1913-21
BURO STAIRÉ MILEATA 1913-21
No. W.S. 1,049

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BUREAU OF MILITARY HISTORY, 1913-21

STATEMENT BY WITNESS.

DOCUMENT NO. W.S. 1,049

Witness

Patrick O'Neill,
Clahane,
Castlegregory,
Co. Kerry.

Identity.

Captain Clahane Company
4th Battalion No. 1 Kerry Brigade, 1917 - .

Subject.

National activities, Clahane, Co. Kerry,
1915-1923.

Conditions, if any, Stipulated by Witness.

Nil

File No S. 2360 .

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ORIGINAL

STATEMENT OF PATRICK O'NEILL

Clahane, Co. Kerry.

BUREAU OF MILITARY HISTORY 1913-21 BURO STAIRE MILEATA 1913-21
NO. W.S. 1049

I joined the Castlegregory Company of the Irish Volunteers about six months before the Rising. Tadhg Brosnan of Castle-gregory was in charge. Ernest Blythe, who was living in the Lispole area, arranged to come to Clahane where I lived to form a company there, but he did not come. Just before Easter Week 1916, I was told to be ready to march to Tralee with the Dingle Company who were to call to Clahane on the way to Tralee but they took another road and, although I stayed up all night, I was not called.

On the reorganisation of the Volunteers, I rejoined and, in 1917, a company was formed to cover the Clahane area. The Company area was from Kilcummin (Castlegregory) in the east to Brandon in the west. In 1918 the company was split and made into two companies - Ballyduff and Clahane.

During 1918 and 1919 we were drilling and training. We were attached to the 4th Battalion, Kerry No. 1 Brigade. I was arrested in 1919 and charged with illegal drilling. I was tried but we had gone on hunger strike after arrest and I cannot remember anything about being sentenced. I was released under the 'Cat and Mouse' Act. At this time I was captain of the Clahane Company.

Before my arrest our company had paraded outside the church after Mass each Sunday and we were under observation by the R.I.C. During this period the R.I.C. occupied a barracks at Clahane and the coastguards held a station at Brandon. The R.I.C. barracks was a two-storey building fortified with steel shutters and British army sappers had been brought to place mines at the approached to the barracks. There were twelve mines laid and were wired for electric detonators.

The Coast Station was a two storey building manned by seven men.

The first attack we had on British forces was at Kilmore Cross on the Tralee to Dingle Road (via Connor Pass). It was usual for a party of R.I.C. to travel from Dingle to Clahane and Brandon carrying supplies to the garrisons. The garrisons were being boycotted by the local people and traders had been warned not to supply them.

My connection with the attack started with Paddy Brosnan ^{TADHG} O/C. 4th Battalion, and Michael Duhig of Castlegregory, called for me and I went with them to select a position for the attack on the R.I.C. party. We selected a position where the road from Brandon enters the Tralee-Dingle (via Connor's Pass) road forming a T junction. We picked a party for the attack, consisting of Tadhg Brosnan (in charge), myself, Jeremiah Dowd, Paddy Fitzgerald, Patrick Brick (O/C. Ballyduff Company), Batt Hennessy, Michael O'Connor, Pat O'Donnell (Stradbally), Jerh. Dowling, Pat O'Sullivan, John Twohey, Michael Duhig and Michael Flaherty (scout).

The plan was to allow the R.I.C. party, which consisted of one tender containing five men and the driver, to proceed down to Brandon and then barricade the road (Tralee-Dingle) on both sides of the junction because the tender could turn east or west when it entered the main road. We assembled our party at James Callaghan's house above Kilmore Cross and waited for three days for the R.I.C. party to pass on to Brandon. On the third day (13th July 1920) the tender passed and we commandeered a mowing machine which a farmer was taking to Dingle for repairs, and a common cart on which the machine was being carried; these we placed on the road to the west of the ambush position. We built a wall of stones across the road to the east of the position. We then took up position. Tadhg Brosnan with a party took up position opposite and covering the road entering the Tralee-Dingle road, and parties were placed on both sides of the turn. I was armed with a

revolver and was in position with Tadhg Brosnan who was also armed with a revolver. The remainder of the arms consisted of three rifles, some carbines and shotguns. Tadhg Brosnan gave orders that we were to hold our fire until he fired the first shot. When the tender drove into our position Tadhg fired and we all opened up. The R.I.C. Inspector in charge of the party jumped out of the tender and ran back the Brandon Road. Fire was opened on him and he stopped and surrendered; the remainder of the party then gave in.

Two R.I.C. men had been killed by our first volley and one slightly wounded. We disarmed the R.I.C. and two motor cyclists (civilians) who had been held up by our scout (Michael Flaherty) came forward. One of them, who appeared to have some medical knowledge, asked if he could do anything for the R.I.C. men who had been hit. We took the two bodies out of the tender and laid them on the side of the road. One of our men, whom we thought could drive the tender, got into the driver's seat, but he could not manage to start it, and Tadhg Brosnan then ordered the R.I.C. driver to get in and drive. Our driver sat beside the R.I.C. driver and some of our men got into the tender and it was driven to Stradbally. On the way our driver had been watching the R.I.C. man driving and when the lorry got to Stradbally he was able to take over. The R.I.C. driver was sent into Courtney's publichouse at Stradbally and the tender was taken to the Maherees where it was dismantled and the parts brought to Leary's Island in the Maherees.

On the job we captured some Mills bombs, four rifles, two shotguns, one revolver and a supply of ammunition for all the arms.

The man we got to drive the tender was Patrick Sullivan (blacksmith) and it may be of interest to state that when the priest spoke of the attack after Mass on the following

Sunday he said that the men who attacked the R.I.C. were strangers in the district. The car the attackers drove away was a very complicated piece of machinery and no local man could have driven it. Patrick Sullivan, the driver, was often called upon to drive the priests car and the priest would appear to have had a poor opinion of his driving.

At this period I was not actually on the run, but I did not sleep at home. I went home after the ambush.

A day or two after the ambush the R.I.C. evacuated the barracks at Clahane. They left at about midday under military escort. They left on a Friday and on the next day we broke into the barracks and after one of our men (John Brick) had traced and disconnected the wires we lifted the mines which the R.I.C. had left behind. We buried the mines in the local graveyard. The British military came back to lift the mines but found them gone.

About two weeks after the Kilmore ambush preparations were made to disarm the coastguards at Brandon and burn the station. Tadhg Brosnan took charge. The plan was to surround the station and call on the coastguards to surrender. This was done, but the officer in charge of the coastguards refused to surrender until we put five or six shots through his house. He then came out with his hands up and surrendered with the remainder of his men.

We captured one revolver, some rockets, Verey lights, a rocket gun, two telescopes and other stuff. We burned the station and the fire lasted two days.

The next activity our unit was engaged in was the Annascaul ambush which took place on 18th August 1920. About two weeks before the ambush I went with Tadhg Brosnan to select a position and organise the ambush. The objective was a lorry of British troops which travelled from Tralee to Dingle via Annascaul and returned by the same route. We selected a position on the main

Tralee-Dingle road on the Dingle side of Annascaul. The party was selected from the 4th and 5th Battalions, Kerry No. 1. It was decided to use one of the mines taken at Clahane, but we had no experience of the mines and we sent to Tralee for a man named Patrick Kelly, who was an electrician. On the day selected the lorry of British troops passed through Annascaul and went on to Dingle. We had arranged with our men in Dingle to 'phone Annascaul Station on the railway 'phone and to inform us when the lorry was leaving Dingle. We had control of the railway telephone at Annascaul, the stationmaster at Annascaul - Robert Knightly - was one of our men.

When we received word that the lorry had left Dingle we went into position. A party, of which I was one, took up position inside the fence on the north side of the Tralee-Dingle road. Most of the men lining the fence were armed with shotguns. A few had revolvers. Six riflemen were posted about 50 yards back from the road overlooking our position. I was with Tadhg Brosnan and Timothy Rohan along with Paddy Kelly, who was to explode the mine which had been sunk in the road. Scouts were placed on the high ground on the Dingle side of our position to signal the approach of the lorry.

We got warning that the lorry was coming and Paddy Kelly waited until the front of the lorry was over the mine before he pressed the switch. There was a loud explosion and the front of the lorry lifted and the lorry then lay in towards the fence where we were in position. We were unable to use our arms as the lorry was too close over us and the riflemen could not fire without hitting us. Tadhg Brosnan gave us orders to retreat back and his order appears to be misunderstood because the whole party retreated and the firing petered out. Tadhg Brosnan called us together and told us that the lorry must be taken at all costs. He divided us into two sections, giving five men to Michael Duhig with orders to move to the Dingle side of the

position and then move on towards the lorry from that direction. Tadhg himself, with the remainder of the party, moved towards Annascaul and turned in to get at the lorry from that side. We were advancing on the lorry firing as we went, and when about 20 yards from the lorry, the British party put up a white flag. Tadhg called me and took my rifle and, giving me his Colt revolver, told me to go forward and take the surrender.

Armed with the revolver, I advanced down the field and jumped the fence on to the road; Tadhg's party covered me. When I got on to the road a British officer with a rifle and bayonet on which a white cloth was tied came towards me. He said: "Are you the officer in charge?" I told him I was not in charge but I was taking the surrender. He said: "I never expected this, what are you going to do with us?" I told him to get his men out as quickly as possible. He said he had two men wounded. I told him his wounded would be taken care of. He got the men out and I ordered them to ground arms and advance towards me with their hands up. I allowed them to pass me and fell in behind. The British officer was in front of me and I kept him covered. I marched the prisoners towards Annascaul. Tadhg Brosnan came out on the road; he was accompanied by John Kennedy (Johnny Ex) of Annascaul. Johnny Ex had served in the British army in the 1914/18 War. He was a great soldier. I regret to say that he died within the past few weeks. We marched the prisoners into the village of Annascaul while another party set the lorry alight. It was too badly damaged to drive away. A third party had taken the wounded British soldiers to a doctor. The prisoners were searched and any ammunition found on them was taken. In all we captured 13 rifles and bayonets, one revolver and a crosscut.

Two priests who were home on holidays at the time - Frs. John O'Connor and Spillane - Fr. O'Connor had given us conditional absolution before the ambush - had witnessed the

ambush, and when it was over they invited the crowd of us to dinner. We went to dinner at Fr. O'Connor's house at Derrygorman. We remained around Annascaul that night awaiting any attempt at reprisals, but although the British came out from Tralee there were no reprisals. Two days afterwards, however, the British came out from Dingle and shot a man named Patrick Kennedy, who had been on the ambush. The rifles captured at Annascaul were divided between the 4th and 5th Battalions.

The day following the ambush I crossed the mountains from Annascaul to my own area - Clahane. The party from the 4th Battalion, who had been on the ambush, came with me. I remained in my own area for some time on the instructions of Tadhg Brosnan, Battalion O/C., I was instructed to get every man in the area trained.

We had no targets in our area. The coastguards were gone from Brandon and the R.I.C. were gone from Clahane. Our only chance was to try to entice some of the Tans out of Dingle. Our officers decided to try a ruse and, about 20th February, a letter which had been prepared by Michael O'Donnell of Castlegregory was sent to the Tans in Dingle. The letter was supposed to have been written by some lady complaining of the Sinn Féiners using the schoolhouse at Ballyduff for Sinn Féin Courts and giving the information ^{that} a Court would be held at a certain hour on 26th February 1921.

We prepared to ambush any party the Tans would send out from Dingle to Ballyduff. Any party coming would have to come across Connor Pass. The top of the Pass was blocked with rocks and a bridge had been knocked. We selected a spot about half way up the pass in very wild country where there were plenty of boulders strewn around for cover and waited to see if the Tans would take the bait. They took the bait and a lorry carrying about 12 Tans came to the top of the pass. They came

prepared for the road block, because they brought 12 bicycles in the lorry and when the lorry was halted, they took to the bicycles. They came in twos in extended formation, ~~as~~ as the road has many bends we could not put in the attack as arranged and we let them pass on to Ballyduff.

The Tans visited Ballyduff and when they discovered the hoax they went on to Castlegregory raiding as they went. We had a feed and prepared to get the Tans on the way back. We took up new positions, moving nearer the road as it was beginning to get dark. The Tans came on in a bunch, talking and noisy. They appeared to have been drinking. When they came into our position we opened fire, the light was now bad. When we fired the Tans dropped their bicycles and .4. rifles and jumped over the wall on the cliff side of the pass. How they were not killed I cannot understand because the road across the Pass is cut into the side of a steep hill. The Tans got away across country and didn't stop until they got to Mullough Bheile.

There was a fair in Dingle on the same day and we had sent one of our men (Patrick Walsh) to the Dingle side of the Pass to warn people to keep off the Connor Pass road and go home by another route. The route we advised people to take went by Mullough Bheile and when the Tans got there they found a lot of men on their way home from the fair. The Tans commandeered some of these men to guide them over the mountains back to Dingle.

About 19th March 1921, Tadhg Brosnan sent for me to go to Lispole where an ambush was being prepared. I travelled to Lispole and reported to Tadhg; Paddy Cahill, O/C. No. 1 Brigade, was in charge of the whole operation. I remained with Tadhg Brosnan and we lay in wait at Lispole on 20th and 21st March moving back to billets each night. We went into position for the third time on the morning of 22nd March 1921. I was posted behind a low wall on the old road which runs behind the old school and overlooks the main Dingle-Tralee road. The command

post was at the wall where I was posted. We expected the British to drive into the ambush position from the Dingle side where the leading car was to be stopped by a blast from a punt gun which had been placed in position near the old school. When the British party were approaching our position the scouts who had been posted on high ground on the Dingle side signalled the approach and then withdrew. They did not continue to keep the British under observation.

The British party, which consisted of two cars of Tans, stopped about half a mile from our position and, leaving the cars, moved into the country on both sides of the road. Our men were occupying the old school, a house on the opposite side of the road, and another party were in a field near the railway viaduct. The first warning we got of anything being wrong was a burst of fire over our position. The British had gained high ground behind and above us and at the same time another British party had gone up a boreen which took them behind the party near the railway viaduct and facing our position. They appeared to be making to surround us. Tadhg Brosnan told me to take twelve men and take up position facing away from the road and hold the Tans attempting to come down off the high ground to the back of the school. We lay in our new position and after about 20 minutes the Tans came on to the rear of the school. The firing was heavy. The Tans had a machine gun in action from the far side of the main road. Thomas Ashe, who had been wounded, was beside me. Tadhg Brosnan was the other side of Thomas Ashe when a Tan came down behind us and as I looked over my shoulder I saw the Tan aiming at Tadhg. I fired at the Tan and Gregory Ashe, who was nearby, fired at the same time. The Tan fell head over heels and his rifle fell beside me. Just then I heard Tadhg Brosnan shouting order for our men to surround the Tans from the left. We all opened rapid fire and the Tans, who had been advancing on us,

bringing about seven of our men whom they had taken prisoner, two of whom were wounded, left the prisoners and ran in disorder for their cars and didn't stop till they got there; the fight was over;

Our men who had been posted in the school had been pinned inside all through the fight and we called them out. We were joined by the party who had been posted in the house (Kane's) on the opposite side of the road. We moved out of the position taking our wounded on a common cart. The wounded were taken to Counduff. Their names were: Thomas Ashe (died that night), Thomas Hawley and James Daly.

After the Lispole fight I returned to my own area at Clahane.

About 24th April 1921, Tadhg Brosnan, Battalion O/C. 4th Battalion, sent me word to proceed to the village of Camp to meet some other men and to travel to Keel on the River Maine. When we got to Keel we rested and went to Aughills where we met the members of Kerry No. 1 Brigade Column under Paddy Cahill. The whole party borrowed two boats at Aughills and rowed across Castlemaine Bay to Dooks where we landed and proceeded up the shore gaining the Killorglin-Glenbeigh road near Glenbeigh. We were picked up by scouts and guided to Glenbeigh Railway Station. The job we found was to take place at Glenbeigh station. British troops were stationed in Glenbeigh and it was usual for a party of troops to travel by train from Glenbeigh to Tralee to draw rations. The action of the British had been noted and their procedure was to march from their barracks entering the station by the main entrance and proceed up the platform as far as the waiting room, where they would halt and leave their rifles against the wall while awaiting the arrival of the train.

There were about 20 in our whole party and the plan was to surround the soldiers when they were waiting the train.

Two of our men had been sent to the station further up the line (Mountain Stage) to delay the train and ensure that the soldiers would be kept waiting. Michael Duhig and I were posted just outside the wall surrounding the station premises. The remainder of our party were on the station. They took cover. About five minutes before the train was timed to arrive, the British military party marched into the station through the main gate. They carried their rifles at the slope. One of them carried a Lewis gun. They marched two-deep with an officer in front. They were whistling. When they got to within about ten yards of the waiting room they appeared to sense that something was wrong and the whole body halted. Tadhg Brosnan also sensed something wrong and he rushed out on the platform with his revolver drawn and called on the British soldiers to put up their hands. Tadhg was alone in front of about 14 soldiers and he advanced on them shouting "Hands up". They did not put up their hands, but instead started moving slowly towards a small wicket gate which led from the platform down to a river. They made no attempt to use their arms.

When I saw the soldiers moving I told Michael Duhig, who was with me, that we'd better open fire to help Tadhg Brosnan. Michael Duhig's rifle jammed and myself and some other one of our men who was on the far side of Ml. Duhig fired over the heads of the soldiers. We could not fire low in case we hit Tadhg Brosnan, who was now very near the soldiers. When our shots rang out the soldiers broke and made a mad rush for the wicket gate. They dropped the Lewis gun and six rifles on the platform. Our party spread out to try and stop the soldiers getting away, but they were too quick for us as they got down to the river and made back for their barracks. While this was taking place the train arrived and, after collecting the arms dropped by the soldiers, we commandeered the train and travelled about three miles to Dooks where we left the train and returned

to the boats. We rowed across the bay to our starting point and I returned to our own area.

This was the last action I was in before the truce. I was captain of Clahane Company all during the period and I remained in that rank right up to the end of the civil war and after.

When the Truce came I attended a training camp and on the outbreak of the civil war I was called in to the republican forces in Ballymullen Barracks, Tralee. After a short time there we were formed into a column under Tadhg Brosnan and went to Cork Military Barracks and from there we moved to Buttevant. The first job we got there was to escort about 100 Free State soldiers who were prisoners from Buttevant to Cork Barracks. I was then ordered out to Garrouse Bridge near Charleville to take charge of a column of Cork and Kerry men. The day before I arrived there had been an engagement with Free State forces who tried to force the bridge with an armoured car and Michael Duhig, who was then in charge, had been slightly wounded. He was gone when I arrived. We occupied a small house near the bridge and, the second morning after I arrived, my scouts reported that Free State troops were moving across the fields.

They took over a house about 300 yards from us and we opened fire on them. The firing lasted all day and a lot of ammunition was expended. I sent for supplies to Charleville and Sean Moylan came out. He gave orders to save ammunition.

About a week afterwards I received orders from Humphrey Murphy to return to Kerry as Free State forces had landed at Fenit. I returned to Kerry bringing my column with me. We travelled as far as Scartaglin by lorry and then marched to Curraheen, west of Tralee. We stayed in Curraheen for some time and I was then sent to Dingle to take charge and prepare to resist a landing of Free State troops. After about three weeks I was ordered back to my own area (Clahane) to organise

resistance to the Free State.

We formed a column in the area. Every man in the area who was known to be against the Free State was on the run. We had a few scraps with the Free State forces before we were ordered to 'Cease fire' and dump our arms.

Signed: Patrick O'Neill
(Patrick O'Neill)

Date: 15th Dec. 1954

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Witness: James J. O'Connor.

(James J. O'Connor)

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