

W.S. 1,136.

ORIGINAL

BUREAU OF MILITARY HISTORY 1913-21
BUREAU STAIRS MILITARY 1913-21
No. W.S. 1,136

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BUREAU OF MILITARY HISTORY, 1913-21.
STATEMENT BY WITNESS.

DOCUMENT NO. W.S. 1,136

Witness
John Ryan (Bishop),
Clonconry,
Broadford,
Co. Clare.

Identity.

Commandant 3rd Battalion
East Clare Brigade.

Subject.

Activities of 3rd Battalion
East Clare Brigade, 1917-21.

Conditions, if any, Stipulated by Witness.

Nil

File No. S.2434

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STATEMENT BY JOHN RYAN (BISHOP)

Clonconry, Broadford, Co. Clare.

(formerly O/C., 3rd Battalion, East Clare Brigade)

I was born on 3rd August 1889 on the farm which I own at present.

My connection with the movement for Irish freedom began in July 1917, when a company of Irish Volunteers was formed in the area by John Hayes, Leitrim, Broadford. A few nights afterwards, Tom McGrath, later Vice O/C. of the East Clare Brigade, came into the district and swore in the company and also supervised the election of officers. The company became known as the Kilbane Company and the first officers were:- Captain, John Hayes; 1st Lieutenant, Eddie Larkin; 2nd Lieutenant, Paddy Corcoran. The strength of the company at the start was about 25 men.

Immediately after being formed, the company started to drill openly, usually meeting in a field owned by Eddie Hayes, Kilbane. No arrests were made for drilling which, at that time, was declared to be illegal by the British Government. We generally met twice a week, once on a week-night and nearly always on Sundays and the drilling then consisted entirely of foot and company drill.

As the year 1917 wore to a close the threat of conscription arose and with this the strength of the Kilbane Company began to increase and, by January or February 1918, it had risen to about 65. Most of the men who joined up about this time continued to remain in the Volunteers until the Truce in July 1921. Orders were given to each man to equip himself with a pike. The pikeheads were made for us by Paddy Hogan, blacksmith, Kilbane, who also fitted them to shafts. These weapons were never used, not even for exercise.

Coincidental with the conscription threat, the Volunteers in East Clare, received orders to participate in an agitation for the division of ranches. In pursuance of this order, there was a mobilisation of Volunteers in Broadford early in February 1918, comprising men from all the surrounding companies. In all, I would say that there were between 200 and 250 men present on that occasion. The Volunteers were divided into a couple of parties, one going to Ballyquin, Kilbane, where they entered the lands of a man called Arthurs and drove off his cattle to O'Brien's Bridge, while the other party proceeded to Goan's land near Broadford and drove his cattle to Castleconnell. Parties of R.I.C. accompanied the Volunteers in each case, but made no attempt to interfere. The Volunteers were equipped with hurleys or sticks, but there were no disorderly scenes of any kind during or after these drives. A month or so later in a night swoop by the R.I.C. a number of arrests were made and I was one of those rounded up. There were ten or twelve others arrested with me. We were brought before a Special Court in Broadford and charged with illegal assembly, forcible entry of lands and some other things which I cannot now remember. Each man was sentenced to three months' hard labour and also to a suspensory term of a further three months in default of entering into an undertaking for good behaviour for two years. After doing three months in Limerick Jail we were released.

On my return home I found the district subjected to various kinds of military restrictions. Clare had been declared a "special military area" and soldiers were stationed in every town and village. Violet Hill House, Broadford, was taken over by about 50 men who remained in occupation for about a year. During that time fairs and markets were prohibited, special permits had to be obtained from the R.I.C. by people who wished to go into an outside R.I.C. sub-district for any purpose,

even to Mass; barricades erected on the roads close to military posts were manned by soldiers who refused permission to pass to anyone not in possession of a permit. Of course, all forms of national activity were entirely taboo, being caught with a hurley was nearly as bad as being found carrying a gun. Nevertheless, drilling went on as before except that it had to be done outside of the eyes of the R.I.C. and military. Our company varied its place of mobilisation and generally met on the hills throughout the parish, scouts being posted on points of vantage to warn us of any approach by the police or soldiers. On no occasion that I can remember was the drilling prevented or interrupted. The people were solidly behind us, apart from a few who were kept in the dark about our movements or who did not regard it their business to spy on our activities.

I should like to say, too, that after my release from jail I at once resumed my association with the Kilbane Company and that I then learned that the Volunteers had received orders to abstain in future from any kind of agrarian trouble. These orders were faithfully observed in the area.

We had no firearms in the Kilbane Company until towards the end of 1918. Around that time it was decided to collect whatever shotguns were in the locality. These were held by local farmers who mostly used them for the extermination of vermin on their lands. Except in one instance, the shotguns were handed to us willingly. The exception, Tim Ryan, Glenview Broadford, did not agree with us politically, but a "cuff on the ear" cured his opposition that night and he gave the gun to Eddie Larkin and myself who, wearing masks, were the only two men that went into the house.

Apart from doing a good deal of extended order drill and skirmishing exercises, the pattern of Volunteer activities in our area did not vary much in the years 1918 and 1919, until

in August of the latter year, when we had our first taste of the use of firearms against the R.I.C. On the night of 9th August 1919, a party of about a dozen men under Eddie Larkin, who was then adjutant of the 3rd Battalion, occupied positions in the grounds of Broadford Chapel and fired at the R.I.C. barracks 20 yards away. We were armed with shotguns and revolvers and kept up the fire for about 10 minutes. There was obviously no intention of capturing the building that night and I believe the sole purpose of the attack was to "harass the enemy", which subsequently became a sort of recreation for the I.R.A. as the "Tan War" rose in intensity. On that night I can remember the names of most of the men comprising the attacking party along with Eddie Larkin and myself. They included Paddy Larkin, Ned Corcoran, John Hayes, James Connell, James Murnane, Jack Walsh and my brothers Paddy and Jim. There were no casualties on our side nor among the R.I.C. who kept firing from the barracks for a couple of hours after we had retired. I do not think that anyone was arrested over this incident.

We were not involved in any further armed activity in the Broadford Battalion area until the following June. On the 2nd of that month the same party of I.R.A. men occupied practically the same positions with similar equipment and again opened fire on the barracks. The attack lasted half an hour or so, only an odd shot being discharged by us during that period. Again it was not our purpose to capture the building. The operation had been ordered as a feint to attract reinforcements from coming to the relief of the R.I.C. in Sixmilebridge about 10 miles distant as the crow flies. There was another sham attack the same night on Feakle R.I.C. Barracks. Owing to some accident the assault on Sixmilebridge had to be abandoned. I heard afterwards that, due to the men who were preparing gelignite having been sickened by the fumes given off by this explosive, the

Brigade O/C. decided not to go ahead with his plans.

On 28th September 1920, during the course of a raid by the R.I.C. and Black and Tans, the O/C. of our battalion, John O'Brien, and his brother Jeremiah were arrested. On the next day the Brigade O/C. (Michael Brennan), and three I.R.A. men who were afterwards murdered while prisoners by Auxiliaries and R.I.C. on Killaloe Bridge - Michael McMahon (Brod), Alfred Rogers and Martin Gildea - arrived in my house around 11 o'clock in the morning. Each man had a rifle and a revolver. After a meal they opened a conversation with me on the subject of where they would get something to shoot. On my suggestion, it was decided to go into O'Brien's Bridge about three miles away where there were usually Black and Tans and R.I.C. drinking in the publichouses during daytime. We left my place about 3 o'clock in the evening and, going across country over Ardtaggle Hill, we entered O'Brien's Bridge on the east side of the village. The R.I.C. Barracks was about 100 yards off towards the south. We then walked up the village street, taking a quick look into each pub we passed. In the last pub - John Ryan's - 15 or 20 yards from the barracks, we saw through the window the uniformed caps of three policemen.

Personally, I believe that on the same day Brennan was in the mood that if this opportunity had not presented itself he would have gone right into the R.I.C. barracks rather than leave the place without getting one of the enemy. At any rate, he decided to attack the police in Ryan's with revolvers and, ordering me to take over custody of his own and the other three rifles and to remain on guard at the door, he led the others into the bar, flanked by McMahon and Rogers with Gildea in the rear. He fired as the door was opened by one of the others and then they all began shooting. Two of the police were killed outright, but the third man got away through the rear. The police got no chance to fire, but Brennan himself was wounded in the wrist by one of his own men.

I gave each man back his rifle except Brennan, who was not now fit to use it, and we left the village by the route through which we had entered it, going on then to Ardtaggle. There we went into Pat Clancy's and Brennan's wound was dressed by Mrs. Clancy. She also made tea for us after which we left and moved on to Kilbane where we stayed for some time with Father Murray, the local curate. I left the party outside Father Murray's and went to Gunning's of Newtown where I stayed for the night. The others travelled on through Ceherhurley into Hogan's, Coolreagh, outside Scariff which was then a favourite haunt of the Brigade O/C. Before separating from him in Kilbane, he told me that I had been appointed O/C. 3rd Battalion in succession to John O'Brien who had been arrested on the previous night.

Up to the O'Brien's Bridge shootings, while I might have been on the black books of the enemy, my home was not unduly molested by any of his forces. Immediately after, the place was raided by police from Broadford and Auxiliaries from Killaloe. It may have been the case that I was recognised in O'Brien's Bridge by some of the local people. In any event, I escaped arrest and went 'on the run' into the Cratloe district. There I slept in a disused house owned by a man called Larry Ryan and got food from different families around the vicinity.

In November and December 1920, I assisted the Cratloe I.R.A. in holding up the train twice at Ardyolus Station when we seized the mails and afterwards censored the letters. I don't think anything of importance was found in either raid. Each time we left back the censored letters in mailbags at the railway station and the letters were later delivered to the addressees in the ordinary way.

In the month of January 1921, I was back in my home area when word reached me to report for an attack on an R.I.C. lorry

at Cratloe. Accompanied by another Volunteer named Tim O'Neill we were making our way across country towards Cratloe after dark when we almost walked into a party of military who were lying concealed position at Fermoy Cross on the Broadford-Limerick road. Though coming under fire, we managed to evade them, but again we were almost on the point of walking into another detachment also lying in wait. Learning from some of the local people that a large body of troops had occupied the countryside during the evening, we moved back into Broadford and gave up the attempt to get to Cratloe. Though the ambush did take place next day in Cratloe, which is about 17 miles from my own place, it is probable that some of the I.R.A. from Tulla and Scariff who were on a similar errand as I was may have been seen passing through the country earlier in the day and that the information had reached the British authorities regarding these movements.

About a week after the Cratloe attack I received word from Brigade H.Q. to report at Oatfield in the Sixmilebridge area. Armed with a rifle I went there unaccompanied by any men from my own battalion and found I.R.A. men arriving mainly from the 2nd Battalion. We were put up for the night in houses in Oatfield and Sallybank. Next morning about 5 o'clock we mobilised in Kelly's of Oatfield and marched about four miles across country to Glenwood. Other men from the 4th, 5th and 6th Battalions had joined us since the previous night and I would say that, apart from scouts who were unarmed, there were a total of about 30 men assembled, armed with rifles, shotguns and revolvers. We learned that the purpose of the mobilisation was to attack a police tender expected to travel between Broadford and Sixmilebridge and that it was intended to bring off the attack outside Glenwood House, situated about three miles from Sixmilebridge, and $5\frac{1}{2}$ miles from Broadford on the road between these two villages which runs through Belvoir Cross.

I'm not too clear now as to who was in charge of our brigade (East Clare) at the time, but until the attack began it seemed to me that the Vice O/C., Tom McGrath and Austin Brennan - Michael Brennan's brother - appeared to be in control of that operation. Though Michael Brennan was present, he did not take any prominent part in issuing instructions or in the allocation of the men to the different positions. Actually the man who, to my mind, played the part of leader on that day was Joe Clancy, brigade training officer and an ex-British soldier.

About 7 o'clock in the morning the I.R.A. party was divided into three sections. Section A of which I was a member was entirely equipped with rifles and was comprised of Joe McNamara, Bodyke; Martin McNamara (The Neighbour), Kilkishen; myself, Michael O'Dea, Tulla; Paddy Carty, Tulla; Jack McCormack, Clonlara and Paddy Quin, Moymore. Michael Brennan was also with us, but he had a revolver and did not occupy a position on the wall of the road like we did. He stood a few yards behind. We were placed just inside the wall on a bend which gave us a clear view of the road for about 50 yards. Section B was under the command of the Brigade Vice O/C. Tom McGrath, and was placed from 30 to 40 yards from us on the Broadford side and just inside the road wall. I cannot remember the strength or composition of this Section, but I do know that it comprised most of the shotgun men. Section C, under the control of Austin Brennan, was posted behind a low fence in a sort of reserve position which was 30 yards or so from the road at the rear of the other two sections. Joe Clancy, to whom I have referred, was standing on top of the wall under cover of a holly bush, and a few yards away from Section A. The tender did not show up until about 3.30 in the evening. Our instructions were to withhold our

fire until we got orders from Michael Brennan. As the vehicle was approaching and, lest any mistake might occur, Clancy kept calling to us "Keep cool, boys" "It may be a civvy car". He repeated this remark a few times until the tender was about 40 yards or so away and then shouted "Police" and dropped down at the same time into his position. For some reason, which I never found out, Michael Brennan did not give orders to fire until the tender was almost on top of us, 4 or 5 yards away. When he did so we left loose a deadly volley which brought the car to a halt about 2 yards outside our position. It was put out of action by the first few bullets and, while nearly all the occupants were also hit in the opening burst of fire, the driver and another constable got clear and, though leaving their guns behind, they managed to arrive safely in Sixmile-bridge. Of the others, six were killed and two wounded. The dead included the officer in charge, District Inspector Clarke.

The booty captured comprised eight rifles, six revolvers and a large quantity of .303 and .45 ammunition. The lorry was burned.

After the attack our party moved off into Oatfield and there dispersed to their own districts. Widespread reprisals followed throughout the locality. My house and the house next door were burned, also the Creamery in Bridgetown, and Hynes's in that townland, Larkin's and Hayes's of Leitrim, and Duggan's Fitzgerald's and Tom Dillons's of Annaghclare. Strange to say, no person was shot in the wild and indiscriminate shooting indulged in by the R.I.C., Black and Tans and Auxiliaries while engaged in their orgy of incendiarism.

I overlooked referring to the fact that scouts drawn from the local company of the I.R.A. were posted on points overlooking all the roads in the vicinity of Glenwood. The I.R.A. sustained no losses in the attack.

A fortnight or three weeks after the Glenwood ambush,

I was with Michael Brennan and Peter Flannery and Jim Tuohy, both from the Scariff side. That night we went to Rossroe where we got our supper in Gilligan's. We were told there that there were two beds ready in McDonnell's barn in the same townland. Being tired and sleepy we were glad to hear this news and went to the barn where we were soon sound asleep, after divesting ourselves of some of our attire. At around 10 o'clock next morning, one of the Gilligan girls came to us with the news that a lorry of police was halted on the road 100 yards away. Being the first to get dressed I went outside to keep the police covered until the others were ready. Each man had a rifle and a revolver. I regret to have to tell that the two men from Scariff left their guns in the barn and after getting out cleared away and left us in the lurch. Brennan, who was the last out, brought their guns with his own. Availing of cover provided by a fence, the two of us made our way to a field at the rere of the barn and, as we were going over a stone wall at the other end of this field, the police saw us and opened fire. Brennan fell on his face and, thinking he was after being hit, I was about to return the fire when he shouted: "Don't fire; they'll burn the house". He recovered almost at once and got across the wall under the cover of which we crawled away until we got about 200 yards from the lorry. The police were now getting into the fields to surround us when Brennan told me to fire one shot, but not to fire to hit. He was still most anxious to nothing that might infuriate the police into more reprisals. The shot sent clay splattering around the feet of the leading policeman whereupon, along with the others, he beat a quick retreat to the lorry which immediately drove off leaving us to proceed on our way without further interference. As I now come to think of it, I believe that Brennan had not at that time recovered from the wound he received at O'Brien's Bridge and as a result was not able to

to use a rifle.

While back in Cratloe I took part in three or four raids on the mails, holding up the train at Cratloe station. I cannot say if we ever got anything of value as a result of these raids. Through having to go back from time to time to my own battalion area to look after affairs there I missed a few engagements in which the East Clare Brigade participated. On a couple of occasions I was present when ambushes were prepared but did not come off owing to the enemy not putting in an appearance. One of these was at Elmhill, when the Vice Brigade O/C. was in charge, and another was at Spencilhill about 5 miles from Ennis where, I think, for the only time during the Black and Tan struggle the east and mid-Clare Brigades joined forces to attack the enemy. There were between 80 and 100 men mobilised for that attack, but I believe, due to having news of what was in store in-store-for them, the enemy did not put in any appearance.

My connection with the movement for independence was almost entirely on the military side. The only connection which I had with the civil side of the movement was in regard to the collection of rates for the Clare Co. Council. I know very little about the facts which led up to this work, having been allocated to the I.R.A., but because of orders from my brigade officers I arranged for the collection of these moneys in my battalion area. This was done by the officers of the different companies who, according as they had completed their collections handed over the money to me and, in turn, I delivered it to Paddy Brennan, a brother of the Brigade O/C. In this job the people throughout the battalion area co-operated excellently with us and there were very few defaulters indeed.

Signed: John Ryan

(John Ryan)

Date: 22.3.55

Witness: D. Griffin

(D. Griffin)

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