

W.S. 1,146

ORIGINAL

BUREAU OF MILITARY HISTORY 1913-21  
BURO STAIRÉ MILEATA 1913-21  
No. W.S. 1,146

ROINN  COSANTA.

BUREAU OF MILITARY HISTORY, 1913-21.

STATEMENT BY WITNESS.

DOCUMENT NO. W.S. 1,146

Witness

Eugene Kilkenny,  
Detective Branch,  
Garda Síochána  
Dublin Castle,

Identity.

Captain Aghavara Company, South Leitrim Bgde.;  
Adjutant South Leitrim brigade;  
Member of South Leitrim A.S.U.

Subject.

Cloone Company Irish Volunteers  
South Leitrim, 1917-1921.

Conditions, if any, Stipulated by Witness.

Nil

File No. S. 2445

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STATEMENT BY EUGENE KILKENNY,

Detective Branch, Garda Síochána, Dublin Castle.

I was born in Aughavass, near Cloone, Co. Leitrim. My mother taught in the local school there, which I attended. She emphasised everything Irish, and we were all brought up with a good national outlook.

A Company of the Irish Volunteers was started in the area in 1917 and I joined them. We were not required then to take any oath, but just enrolled in the ordinary way and paid a small subscription weekly towards expenses and the purchase of arms. The strength of the Company was approximately fifty. We had no arms except a couple of old type revolvers; where they were got, I do not know. Peter McEnteer, the Company Commander, acted as instructor. After his release from prison where he had been incarcerated for his activities in Wexford during the 1916 Rising, Paul Galligan from Cavan and Peter Moynagh, also from that area, used to come across to us and give us instruction and assist us in organising. There were also in the area a few ex British soldiers who, though not members of the Volunteers, were more or less in sympathy with us and assisted us by giving us instructions in drill and musketry and suchlike.

When the conscription crisis loomed up in 1918, there was no dearth of recruits for the Volunteers and our numbers quickly went up to about one hundred and twenty, or so. Apart from drilling, very little was done to meet the threat of conscription. We did make out a list of all houses that had arms, which were mosly shotguns, so that they could be easily got if

the crisis came to a head, and also what stocks of food were available in the area. We made some ammunition for the shotguns by getting empty cartridges and filling them with slugs. This was done at night time.

When the conscription crisis died down, our numbers quickly dwindled down to the original figure of around fifty men again. The men who joined during the conscription crisis had no real interest in the movement and only joined us in an effort to save themselves from being inducted into the British Army which was at this time engaged in a death struggle with the Germans in France and from which very few of the men, who went voluntarily, were returning.

The Great War ended in November, 1918, and Lloyd George, who was then Prime Minister in England, declared for a general election in an effort to hold on to power. This was known as the khaki election. As Ireland was still electing members to the British Parliament, this country was also affected by the election. The Sinn Féin organisation, which had grown in strength since the Rebellion in 1916 and was helped on by the conscription threat, decided to contest all the representation in the country. The Redmond or National party held the vast majority of the seats at this time. The Sinn Féin candidates were pledged not to take their seats in the British Parliament but instead to set up their own parliament in Dublin.

The election meant the beginning of a very busy time for the Volunteers as they worked hand in hand with Sinn Féin and indeed were the backbone of that organisation as most of the Volunteers were also

members of Sinn Féin. The Volunteers were busy daily - mostly at night time - in canvassing voters, collecting for the election funds, arranging transport to take voters to the polls, checking registers and correcting them, noting absentee and dead voters and suchlike.

When the election took place in December, 1918, a number of the Volunteers were sent across into the County Cavan to assist in the work there. On their way to Cavan, they were attacked by a number of ex British soldiers. Some of the Volunteers succeeded in getting through on their bicycles, but quite a number had their bicycles smashed by this mob. Otherwise, there was no trouble during the election. In our own area the Volunteers marched to the polling booths. The R.I.C. were present in small numbers but did not interfere. In an all-out effort to win the election and finally oust the Redmond Party, in whom at least all the younger generation had lost all confidence, personation was resorted to on a large basis. I myself voted at least fifty times. In our area the majority of the people were on the side of Sinn Féin.

At this time a Brigade organisation to some extent had come into being in South Leitrim. Edward O'Brien was the Brigade O/C, and I think Joseph Beirne was the Brigade Adjutant. There was no Battalion organisation in existence as yet, just companies or the nucleus of companies in different areas. Even as such, the companies co-operated with one another and worked hand in hand, so to speak. This was particularly demonstrated during the general election.

In January, 1919, the members, who had been returned on the Sinn Féin ticket and who were not in jail for the alleged German Plot, met in Dublin and thus the first Dáil came into existence. The Dáil, having declared, again, the Irish Republic of 1916, took over responsibility for the Volunteers and instituted them as the Army of the Republic. From now on, we were no longer officially the Irish Volunteers; we were the Irish Republican Army - I.R.A. All our members, including officers, were now required to take an oath of allegiance to the Dáil as the Government of the Republic. All our existing members subscribed to this oath. The Dáil now floated a Loan and the Volunteers were engaged in collecting for this loan. The people then were not as well-off as they are to-day; yet it was extraordinary how they supported the loan. Although it was put to them that it was a loan, I am sure that many of them looked upon it as a subscription and they had no idea that it would ever be returned to them. A good sum was realised. I cannot remember now who acted as agents in the area for the Loan. The Volunteers issued temporary receipts to each subscriber and later each received an official receipt. Throughout the period, drilling and other training went on as usual.

Towards the end of 1919 and the beginning of 1920, the R.I.C. began to evacuate some of their small outlying stations and concentrate their force on the larger ones, particularly in the towns and strategic points. This evacuation was caused by a number of such stations throughout the country having been attacked and, in some cases, captured by the Volunteers.

The R.I.C. were always looked upon as the "eyes and ears" of the Castle Government and the principal tool for holding the country in subjection. Their withdrawal gave us more space, so to speak, and allowed for freer movement by the Volunteers. In fact, it could be said that this evacuation was the first loosening by the enemy of their grip on the country. The barracks in our area was evacuated, but it was not destroyed by us; as well as I can remember, it was immediately occupied by someone as a dwelling. Cloone barracks was also evacuated, and this was burned down by us on Easter Saturday night of that year, 1920.

The withdrawal of the R.I.C. left the country without a police force, or at least without an effective one, and lawless elements in the population began to show their teeth and indulge in petty robberies and suchlike offences. The Volunteers now had to take over the policing of the country districts, and indeed even the towns where there was a force of R.I.C. Even where the R.I.C. had their stations still, they were to a great extent ineffective as the people would not co-operate with them.

Police work threw a heavy and onerous duty on the Volunteers and particularly so as these men had to attend to their ordinary every day to day work and could only give their off time to police work. There were some, of course, who could devote more of their time to the work. The Volunteers had to do patrol duties and make arrests and detentions, and have their prisoners brought before the Sinn Féin courts which were now functioning successfully in the area. They also had to enforce the decrees of the courts but, on the whole,

this did not give much trouble, as the people generally abided loyally by the decisions given. We had a place in our area where prisoners were detained - an unknown destination, as it was called. This unknown destination was situated on the Cavan-Leitrim border. There was another one up in the mountain on the North Leitrim side. Both the courts and the unknown destinations were a great source of worry to the British, and they were continually probing to find them out but without success. Father Ryan often acted as a judge in the Sinn Féin courts. Guards and food for our place of detention had to be provided by the Volunteers and, in providing food, the local people were extremely helpful.

The British army had now established strong garrisons in our area. They took over the Workhouse in Mohill and a big castle outside Ballinamore and occupied them with strong forces; and, of course, they also had a very big garrison in Carrick-on-Shannon which was a permanent station of theirs.

Towards the end of 1919, a general raid for arms was ordered throughout the country by our Headquarters. We raided every place we knew there was a gun. Some of the people, when asked for the arms, gave them up willingly, but in other cases they had to be taken from them forcibly. There ~~were~~ a good many members of the Protestant faith in our area and they were generally loyal British subjects, and they resented their guns being taken from them by us, but their resistance was only passive. In one such area, we dressed ourselves in khaki, or British army uniforms, and proceeded to one of those Orange, or Protestant, areas and got all

the arms there then without any trouble. The Protestant element in this district always went on the Orange walk on the 12th July every year, and you could hear them beating their big drum. Later on, we went into this area again and burned the big drum and all the Orange sashes we could find. This place was at the end of our parish towards Carrigallen.

In the general raid for arms, we got only shotguns and a few old revolvers of the Bulldog type. We did not get any rifles at all, not even sporting ones. The guns and cartridges collected were distributed amongst the Volunteers, and each man was responsible for the safety and care of the arms allotted to him. This was considered the best way to care them at the time. We soon discovered that we were only a jump ahead of the enemy and that they had started to collect all the arms in the country, but we had swept the area pretty clean before they arrived. It was good intelligence work on the part of our G.H.Q.

I remember one night when a priest, a cousin of mine who was home from Australia, was visiting my home. I had three or four revolvers in a press in the kitchen. I was Captain of the local Company at this time. I showed the guns to my cousin. He said he would not leave the house until I hid the guns. I took his advice and, wrapping them in a cloth, took them out of the house and hid them in a turf stack. Next day my house was raided by a party of military under an officer and a couple of R.I.C. who acted as their guides. The officer walked straight over to the press where I had the revolvers previously, but found nothing in it. It was very curious why he should have gone straight to



this press. It looked as if his information was good and that somebody had informed on me. A number of the Volunteers had brothers in the R.I.C., and we were a bit suspicious of them. It may have been the result of loose talk on the part of some of our men. The officer never looked anywhere else in the house. One of the Volunteers had also a brother serving in Dublin Castle and we were also suspicious of him.

A boycott of the R.I.C. had been carried out on the instructions of G.H.Q. in an effort to force them to resign. They were refused food and supplies, on the instructions of the Volunteers, and were compelled to commandeer their supplies. I don't think the boycott had the desired effect as I do not remember any of them resigning. My mother was a teacher and, in the earlier years of my life, the R.I.C. often visited our house and would sit for hours talking to her. When my house was raided for the revolvers, I recognised one or two of the R.I.C. as some of the men who used to visit our house. They acted as the guides for the military.

A Battalion organisation was now in existence in the area. I think --- Briody was the first Battalion O/C, and the Vice O/C was John Conlon, who was also Battalion Quartermaster. The Battalion Adjutant was Barney McGee. The Battalion was comprised of the following Companies:-

- "A" - Carrigallen - Captain - Packie Cosgrave.
- "B" - Aughavass - Captain - Peter McIntyre.
- "C" - Cloone - Captain - Frank Maguire.
- "D" - Cornageeha - Captain - J. McGarry.
- "E" - Drumreilly - Captain - Brian McEnroy.

"F" - Fairglass - Captain - ... Kirwan.

"G" - Drumeela - Captain - J. Lee.

"H" - Barnaculla - Captain - Patrick Keville.

The strength of the Battalion would be approximately three hundred and fifty, all told. Cloone Company was the strongest with a strength of about one hundred and seventy.

The Brigade was made up of three Battalions - the 1st Battalion, Cloone area; the 2nd Battalion, Ballinamore area; the 3rd Battalion, Mohill and Carrick-on-Shannon area. The 4th Battalion, comprising the Drumkeeran and Manorhamilton area, was not organised until after the Truce. I have no idea of the armament of our Battalion which was the 1st (Cloone), except that it was mostly shotguns.

I was on the run at this time. I went from Company to Brigade rank. I never held Battalion rank. An Active Service Unit, or Column, was organised in the Brigade area late in 1920 or early in 1921. Its members consisted principally of men who were on the run. I was not a member of the Unit until I was appointed Brigade Adjutant and, previous to that, I do not know much of its activities. The Brigade Headquarters moved around with the Column. The O/C of the Column at first was Michael Gahigan but, after some time, he was replaced by Charles McGoohan who was afterwards a Commandant in the National Army and is only recently retired. Seán Mitchell, who was now Brigade O/C, and Seán Connolly from Longford, who was on an organising mission in the area, were also with the Column. The

strength of the Column was about fifteen.

The Column always kept on the move, more or less. It would stay a night in one place, or a day or so, and then move off to another. They were billeted and fed by the people in the districts where they put up. There were a few good hide-outs where the Column could go when big round-ups were taking place. Drumreilly was one of those areas and was always considered a quiet place. There was also a place on the mountain side, called Straw Longford, which was a very useful hide-out and they never caught us there. Between Mohill and Carrick-on-Shannon was also a pretty safe area, as the countryside there is wild and open and you could not easily be surprised.

All the Column were armed with service rifles and different types of revolvers. I don't know where they got the rifles from, but I think they must have got some of them from G.H.Q. I don't think they got any of them locally. There were strong British military garrisons on every side in the area.

I was appointed Brigade Adjutant about March, 1921. Seán Mitchell was then Brigade O/C, the previous O/C, O'Brien, had been arrested. Harry McKeon was Vice O/C, and Pat Tiernan was Brigade Quartermaster. The Staff, with the exception of the Quartermaster, moved around with the Column. After the ambush at Garvagh where six of the Column, including Connolly, were killed, we lost some rifles - six or seven. Sweeney was the only one who escaped on that occasion. I was not there and anything I know about it is only hearsay.

An ambush was planned on a military vehicle which was accustomed to travelling from Carrick-on-Shannon to Mohill. Some of the Column, assisted by local Volunteers, took up positions on the side of the road near Drumsna, which had been blocked by cutting a trench across it. Instead of the usual vehicle - a van - turning up, a force of about two hundred British military arrived in Crossley tenders on the scene. When this situation was appreciated, it was obvious that no purpose could be served by engaging this force, and the Column was pulled out and succeeded in making good its escape. The British fired some shots around the area and then commandeered some local people and compelled them to fill in the trenches on the road again. There were no casualties among the Volunteers of the men of the Column.

In November, 1920, the R.I.C., for no apparent reason but purely as an act of vandalism and with the purpose, I suppose, of terrorising the people, burned the halls and some private premises at Drumsna and Johnstown Bridge.

Regarding the ambush at Garvagh where Connolly and the other men were killed, a Protestant farmer named William Lattimer, who lived at Glassdrummond, had seen Connolly and the other men go into a house at Selton Hill, called Flynn's. He, Lattimer, went into Mohill and gave this information to a Dr. Pentland who, in turn, passed it on to the British military. The military went out to Selton Hill and surrounded Flynn's house with a large force, including armoured cars and Lewis guns, with the result that Connolly and the others were killed in trying to fight their way out. It was now

decided that Lattimer and Dr. Pentland would have to pay the death penalty for their action. A few men of the Column were sent to Lattimer's house with instructions to shoot him. The house was locked and barricaded, so they threw a few hand grenades into it, thinking this would finish him off but, to their surprise, he came out after the explosions. They shot him then. Dr. Pentland succeeded in clearing out of the country but, shortly afterwards, he was killed by being crushed to death against a wall by a lorry in London.

An Auxiliary policeman, stationed in Ballinamore, was keeping company with a girl at Drumshambo. Charles McGoochan, who was then O/C of the Column, met this Auxie. on the road and opened fire on him with an automatic pistol. After an exchange of shots, the Auxiliary was killed.

A couple of lorry loads of British military and R.I.C. were in the habit of travelling along the road at Shemore Hill, probably on their way from Drumshambo to Dromore. The Column undertook to ambush this party. The Column blocked the road and took up a position on the side of the hill. When the lorries came along, they opened fire on them. The road block held up the lorries and a general battle ensued which ended when the Column retired after about half an hour's engagement. There were no casualties on the I.R.A. side, but there were supposed to be fourteen or fifteen of the enemy force knocked out. Amongst the British casualties was a Lieutenant Wilson of the British army. The public press, in commenting on this engagement, paid tribute to the deadly marksmanship of the I.R.A. After this ambush, there was intense military activity in the

area and around Ballinamore and Drumshambo, and keeping communication and moving around was almost an impossibility.

A week after the Shemore ambush, the Selton Hill affair and Connolly's death took place. As nearly half of the effective strength of the Column was lost, there was some disorganisation in the Brigade area. An organiser, Captain Paddy Morrissey, was sent down by G.H.Q. to reorganise the South Leitrim Brigade. He travelled around extensively and inspected all the Companies in the Brigade area. A meeting was held in Pat Tiernan's house and was attended by Brigade, Battalion and Company officers. At this meeting Seán Mitchell was appointed Brigade O/C, Harry McKeon, Vice O/C, Pat Tiernan, Brigade Quartermaster, and myself, Brigade Adjutant. From that time on until the date of the Truce on the 11th July, 1921, I was attached to the Column. After the Shemore ambush, there was no other engagement with the enemy although they were continually carrying on round-up after round-up. The British military garrisons had been strengthened considerably, and it was as much as we could do in the Column to keep alive. You might say that we had to run from house to house. We could not go near our own houses and we had to sleep out in the open fields. The women used to bring us cans of food, under the pretence that they were going into the fields to milk cows.

On one particularly big round-up, the enemy had aeroplanes, artillery and Red Cross units; it seemed as if they had decided there was going to be a pitched battle. I believe they were of the opinion that

Mick Collins was in the area at the time. The only operation we could undertake then was to fire a few shots at one of their barracks when we were near it and then make off as quickly as we could. Our ammunition was very limited and we could not afford to fire many shots. It would not run to more than ten rounds per rifle at this time and each man depended on that to save his life.

I joined the I.R.B. about 1919 or 1920. Sean Mitchell took me into the organisation. Billy Pilkington, now Father Pilkington, was head of the organisation for Sligo-Leitrim-Roscommon area. We used to hold meetings in the Rockingham Arms Hotel, Boyle, and I used to drive there in a car on Sundays so long as that was possible. I don't think there was anyone else in my own particular area in the I.R.B. except myself. There may have been one or two others but, as the organisation was so highly secret, you would not know who were members except those you contacted at meetings. Business conducted at the meetings was generally a survey of the situation existing and what could be done to intensify the warfare against the enemy, and exhortations to keep the ordinary Volunteers going and active. In this way, the organisation served to keep a backbone in the struggle and that was about its most useful purpose. Members of the I.R.B. were not supposed to surrender to the enemy.

Not much could be done in the way of making munitions in the area. When Sean Connolly came to us from G.H.Q., he got a large number of concrete road mines made and also an amount of large bombs which we made from cart wheel boxes. Those cart wheel bombs

were of different sizes and were known by us as "patrol" bombs, the intention being to use them against foot patrols of police and military. Connolly was an expert on the making of mines and bombs. We did not know anything about their construction until he arrived in the area. We got explosives from the County Council quarries with which to fill some of them, but we could never get enough of it. After the Truce, we made hand grenades in a factory set up in the area. We also made a large amount of lead slugs which we filled into shotgun cartridges.

All internal communications within the Brigade were carried by despatch riders, either on foot or on cycles. Despatches to and from G.H.Q., Dublin, were carried by the railway guards.

Charles Pilkington was the Intelligence Officer for the Brigade. This man was a rate collector and, as such, travelled the area extensively and mixed with a lot of people in doing so, and he was able to get information about the enemy strengths in their different locations. Each battalion also had its intelligence officer and section, but they were not of much value except for local items. We had an agent in the Post Office in Mohill who was able to get us copies of all military or police messages passing through. Such messages, if of any importance, were always in code and, as we had no means of deciphering them, all copies were forwarded to G.H.Q., Dublin; and the time lag in this procedure reduced their value to us very much.

A small number of men were executed in the area for being spies or informers for the enemy and, as a result of these executions, ~~and as a result of these~~



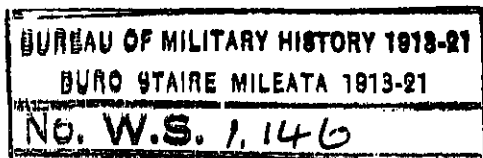
~~executed~~, a number of others cleared out of the area. We could not say if they were actually enemy agents or not, but apparently some of them at least got frightened. I am not in a position to state how the men executed were traced, as it did not come within my work.

At the Truce, despite the intense enemy activity, we were prepared to carry on the fight. Arms and particularly ammunition were very scarce but our morale was very high. The people were with us all the time and supported us loyally despite all their troubles, and they would have, I am sure, continued to stand by us.

SIGNED: Eugene Kilkenny  
(Eugene Kilkenny)

DATE: 21<sup>st</sup> April 1955

21st April 1955.



WITNESS: Matthew Barry  
(Matthew Barry)