

W. S. 1,175

ORIGINAL

NO. W.S. 1,175  
BUREAU OF MILITARY HISTORY 1913-21  
BUREAU STAIRÉ MILÉATA 1913-21

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BUREAU OF MILITARY HISTORY, 1913-21.

STATEMENT BY WITNESS

DOCUMENT NO. W.S. 1,175

Witness

Micheal O Ciardubhain (Kirwan),  
49 Tighthe Eoin Naomha,  
Inniscorthaidh,  
Co. Loch Gharman.

Identity.

Adjutant 1st Battalion  
North Wexford Brigade, 1919-1920.

Subject.

National and military activities,  
Enniscorthy, Co. Wexford, 1916-1921.

Conditions, if any, Stipulated by Witness.

Nil

File No. S.2491

Form B.S.M. 2

STATEMENT BY MICHEÁL Ó CIARDUBHÁIN,

49, Tighthe Eóin Naomha,  
Inniscórthaidh.

BUREAU OF MILITARY HISTORY 1913-21
BURO STAIRÉ MILEATA 1913-21
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1916:

Early in the morning on April 27th, 1916, rifle shots rang out in an attack on the R.I.C. barracks in Abbey St., Enniscorthy. This was the culminating point of several days of feverish activity amongst the leaders of the Irish Republican movement in Co. Wexford since Easter Monday when the Dublin Brigade made their effort in Dublin and district. A few hours later the tricolour was hoisted over the Athenaeum, the local town hall, and three volleys were fired to salute it. This was a thrilling moment but I think the early morning volleys ringing out over the Slaney, which flows past the barracks, caused the greatest thrill, as I thought at the time they were the first shots fired against the old enemy in Enniscorthy since the battle of Vinegar Hill on June 21st, 1798.

Although I did not take part in any shooting during the week (the attacks were called off early as it was the leaders' intention to pin the R.I.C. in their barracks), I was busily engaged on routine work until the surrender on Sunday night. Outposts were set up on all the main roads and by-roads leading into town and scouting parties were sent out in various directions. One large party marched to Ferns and took over the town, and another party was on the way to Gorey when the surrender came.

I was not interned after the Rising although hundreds of men from the town and district were sent off to

various prisons in England & Wales. Naturally, Volunteer activities ceased during the summer of 1916, but the national spirit was never stronger at any time than it was during the succeeding years. Almost every family in town had some member or relation interned, and when releases began in the late summer of 1916 crowds assembled each night at the railway station to welcome those coming home. No one ever knew who was actually coming until the Dublin train steamed in about 9.30 p.m., and a right hearty welcome awaited each. In the Gaelic League rooms and in the Concert Hall rebel songs were sung at every function, until it seemed all Ireland was on the side of the rebels. British troops were stationed in the town for a long time afterwards and, of course, there was always a few West Britons to welcome them.

At Christmas the last remaining untried prisoners were released from Frongoch and they arrived in Enniscorthy on Christmas Day. Those included many who were to be leaders during the ensuing years like T.D. Ó Sionóid, Patrick Keegan, Jas. and Denis O'Brien, Jas. Cullen, Jas. Cleary, all of Enniscorthy, with Philip Lennon, New Ross, and many others.

Shortly after Christmas Patrick Keegan, who had been the moving spirit in the pre-rising manufacture of munitions, with a small party commenced the cleaning and overhaul of the service rifles dumped after the surrender. Those were brought to his mother's house in Irish St., where they were dismantled, cleaned, oiled, greased and put away for the fight which we were all sure would not be long coming now. The party consisted of P. Keegan, John Davis, Michael Davis, Thomas Roche, Frank Gibbons,

Thos. F. Meagher and M. Kirwan. Later on during the year the old '98 Club at Mary St., Enniscorthy, was reopened and a workshop set up in the attic and the working party became much larger. The full names appear in the brigade reports which are attached herewith.

Meanwhile the rest of the leaders were released during the summer and they received a tumultuous welcome home. Almost at once the reorganisation of the Volunteers was under way, the first meeting being in the old Sinn Féin Club at Slaney St. when two companies were formed, 'A' and 'B' of the 1st Battalion. Two other companies were also formed - 'C' Company and 'F' Company, 2nd Battalion. This 'F' Company was composed entirely of men living across the bridge in what is known as the Shannon area.

The first O/C of 'A' Company was Captain M.W. O'Reilly, formerly of the Dublin Brigade and then engaged in the insurance business in Enniscorthy. When the whole brigade area was organised he became first Brigade O/C, which rank he held until he returned to Dublin to start the New Ireland Assurance Co., of which he became, and still is, Managing Director. The brigade at this time took in all Wexford and part of Wicklow round about Carnew, which comprised the 4th Battalion area.

It was felt generally that another attempt would be made to strike a blow at the old enemy, particularly as the World War still dragged on and things did not seem to be going too well with Britannia both on land and sea. In the old workshop at Antwerp immense quantities of buckshot were manufactured and distributed to outlying

districts like Ballindaggin and Ballycarney, where small working parties were engaged in filling shotgun cartridges. The procedure at "Antwerp", the '98 Club at Mary St. where the workshop was set up, was that those working at their ordinary pursuits during the day assembled immediately after work and worked until midnight. At week-ends we worked all Saturday night until first Mass at 7 a.m. Sunday morning. A very strong gunpowder was manufactured here also for use with buckshot in shotguns and also for crude bombs made from stone jars filled with shrapnel. Those bombs were tested at the "Haunted House", a very lonely unoccupied farmhouse on the banks of the Slaney to the north of the town. This house had a very bad reputation and very few people ventured near it so that it was ideal for our purpose.

At the same time Volunteer activities went on as usual. I was attached to 'A' Company, 1st Battalion, and was Company Adjutant. We had frequent night operations, including sham battles with companies from the 2nd Battalion, with route marches and the ordinary close order drill, <sup>and</sup> rifle drill ~~etc.~~, and so things drifted on to 1918 and the conscription scare.

1918:

The threat of conscription was a God-send to those charged with the organising of companies both in the town areas and in the outlying country districts. Many of us from the Enniscorthy Companies were detailed for training some of those companies then being established in places like Kiltaly, Ballycarney, Marshalstown, Rathnure, <sup>and</sup> Caim ~~etc~~ <sup>etc</sup>

The munition making was stepped up and large quantities were distributed to the Ross Battalion, <sup>and</sup> Carnew ~~B~~ Battalion, etc. The driving force in those activities was the late Vice Commandant, Seamus Rafter, ably assisted by Patrick Keegan who was Brigade Q/M. Early in the year an ambush was arranged for a party of R.I.C. vacating Galbally barracks near Bree who were being driven into Enniscorthy on a "long car", then a popular mode of transport in the country. The ambush was arranged for the "Dungeon Road", a most suitable place, very dark (as may be guessed from the name) and overhung with rocks, with the river Boro at the other side. Unfortunately they drove in by another road. I always thought the driver got some wind of the ambush and chose the other road for his own safety.

1918 (June/July):

We all thought at this time that war might break out at any moment. During this time Michael Davis, Q/M 1st Battalion, and myself were detailed to examine the rivers flowing into the sea at Courtown and Cahore or Ballygarrett. We understood that preparations were being made to land arms in those places from small boats.

In September the brigade suffered an irreparable loss in the death of Seumas Rafter who was injured in an explosion at his own house. He was making up some of the extra strong gunpowder, intended for grenades when there was an explosion and he was badly injured. He died a few days later and his funeral was the greatest tribute ever given

to a leader in the County Wexford. Large numbers of the Volunteers who marched the seven miles to Ballindaggin, where he was buried, and back again to Enniscorthy, wore Volunteer uniform and the usual military honours were rendered at the graveside.

Shortly afterwards six of the principal officers of the Brigade Staff were arrested and lodged in jail, charged with wearing the forbidden uniform and giving orders to Volunteers at the funeral. They were courtmartialled in Cork and sentenced to six months, which they served in Cork prison. As other arrests were expected we set up a squad of scouts to watch the R.I.C. barrack nightly, particularly coming on to early morning, with runners to call some of the remaining officers if there was any unusual police activity. In this way several officers were warned in time and got away. One of them, Patrick Keegan, Brigade Quartermaster and Acting Commandant, went on the run and was never captured. He was sent to America early in 1919 to assist in the gun-running operations and was engaged until the Truce operating on American boats plying between New York and Cork and Dublin.

#### 1919:

With many of our officers in jail our activities were somewhat restricted during 1919. After the intense preparations to resist conscription it was only natural a slump should set in when the danger passed. The ordinary Volunteer training operations, however, went on apace and no effort was spared to obtain arms of all kinds. Quite a

number of British army members from the district when coming home brought their rifles with them and many were seized. Eventually home-coming soldiers were debarred from bringing their rifles so that source dried up. About this time a Volunteer from the North of Ireland was working in Enniscorthy and he informed us that it was possible to buy arms in the North. His name was Seán Magauran, and eventually some of the 1st Battalion funds were allocated for the purpose and Magauran, accompanied by Seán Whelan and Frank Gibbons, in a car commandeered from a member of the I.R.B. in Enniscorthy proceeded to the North and after various adventures did in fact purchase a half dozen service rifles and brought them safely home. During the winter of 1919 many raids for arms were made on loyalist houses by members of 'A' Company and quite a mixture of valuable material was obtained.

1920:

Immediately 1920 had dawned a sweep was made by R.I.C. and most of the prominent Volunteers were rounded up and subjected to an identity parade, but no one was identified as having taken part in the raids. The first Lieutenant of 'A' Company, P.J. O'Byrne, and myself were, however, charged with possession of documents and sentenced to two months in default of bail. The night we were removed from Enniscorthy there was a riot outside the railway station and a baton charge made.

On my release I found I had been appointed Adjutant No. 1 Battalion during my absence



and came home whilst an all out effort was being made to speed up activities in the area. A newcomer to Enniscorthy, Volunteer Joseph McMahon, from Kilmaley in Clare, had many new ideas for barrack attacks. He had recently taken part in the attack on Hugginstown barrack near Kilkenny where he had been employed. He was now employed in Enniscorthy where he assumed the nom de plume of Cassidy. Under his directions a working party was set up in Albert Smith's house in Tomnalosset to manufacture percussion bombs made from steel piping and plugged at both ends with a long nail acting as the percussion pin. The bombs were fitted with tails to ensure they fell on the percussion pin, which then penetrated a detonator and set off the gelignite.

By the way, a very large quantity of gelignite had been seized during the summer of 1918 from the Co. Engineer, W.F. Barry, and Co. Council employees who were preparing to blast Ryland Quarry. This gelignite, of which we had a large quantity, was now turning in useful.

It had been decided to attack Clonroche barracks, seven miles from Enniscorthy on the main road to New Ross and Waterford. A large quantity of arms and ammunition was taken into Enniscorthy from dumps at Kelly's, Trombrick, and Doyle's, Coolnee, and parked in convenient position for the attack, which was arranged for a Sunday night at the end of April.

Arrangements were made with the New Ross and Wexford Battalions to send squads of men to seal off the road between their towns and Clonroche. A bomber

squad had been training in the fields at the back of the factory in Albert Smiths and riflemen had been tested and picked. We moved in about midnight and the attack opened with a bombing attack and then the riflemen came into action. Desultory bombing and rifle attacks went on for two hours and the garrison was called on to surrender, but there was nothing doing. Eventually after a hurried consultation the attack was called off.

The only casualties occurred a mile from the barrack on the retreat when Lieut. P.J. Byrne dropped an unexploded percussion bomb and several Volunteers were wounded in the legs. They were treated by Dr. Kelly, Killanne, and taken to friendly houses until they were fit to go home. Lieut. Byrne, however, had to be brought to the Mater Hospital, Dublin, for treatment. Enniscorthy Courthouse was taken over about this time or shortly before by a section of the Devonshire Regiment under Capt. Yeo, who became infamous later for his treatment of prisoners and civilians during raids, etc. Shortly after the failure at Clonroche an abortive attack was made on a cycling party/ <sup>of R.I.C.</sup> from Clonroche Barracks on their way home to Clonroche from Enniscorthy. A few Volunteers were collected with revolvers only and the R.I.C. party was ambushed at Red Pat's Cross, about a mile outside the town, quite close to Enniscorthy Golf Club and the residence of the District Inspector of R.I.C. Joseph McMahon was in charge.

Round about this time two officers from headquarters - Messrs. Frank Thornton and Liam Tobin -

came to Enniscorthy to arrange the execution of D.I. Lee Wilson of Gorey. Seán Whelan, who with Joseph McMahon and Ml. Sinnott accompanied the headquarters officers on the job, has written his story of this operation so I need not enlarge on it. Two nights later a few of us met Seán Whelan and Joseph McMahon on their way into town from Doyle's, Coolree, whence they had proceeded on the conclusion of the operation and accompanied them to town.

Shortly afterwards we again had a visit from F. Thornton, accompanied on this occasion by Eamon Fleming. This time they were on the trail of R.I.C. members who were supposed to be hiding out in loyalist houses in Kilkenny, at Jeffares, some five or six miles inside the County of Kilkenny from the New Ross side. Several parties of Volunteers were organised in the No. 1 Battalion area. Most of us cycled in small squads and proceeded to the pre-arranged spot. The suspected houses were then surrounded and two men were arrested and brought by car to Martin Kelly's house at Tombrick, Ballycarney, Ferns, where they were detained and interrogated. They were subsequently released.

August:

Another operation ordered by G.H.Q. was the raid for explosives on the lighthouse at the Tower of Hook, where a large quantity of tonite and electric detonators was seized.

Another G.H.Q. order at this time called for the burning of all abandoned R.I.C. barracks and every such barrack in the brigade area was destroyed.

In our own area here this included Galbally, Killanne, Blackwater, Oylegate, Hollyfort, Courtown Coastguard Station, Clonevan barracks, Camolin, and Coastguard Stations at Kilmichael and Morriscastle.

The Wexford Battalion about this time arranged to seize a large quantity of brass 18lb shells, without caps or detonator, which had been made up in Pierce's foundry during the 1914-18 war. We arranged to supply the transport so we seized 2 lorries out of town and brought them to Wexford by a roundabout route. We drove into Pierce's yard, where the Wexford men loaded them up and we dumped them at Capt. Jordan's place near Adamstown. Following a G.H.Q. order at this time all guns and sporting rifles in the area were collected one Saturday night. The arrangement covered the whole area. During those raids some British Army officers' uniforms were seized and they were used shortly afterwards to trap a spy - James Doyle - who lived in the Ballycarney area. A letter which he sent to O/C British troops at the Courthouse, Enniscorthy, was intercepted by Seán Whelan. In this letter Doyle offered to supply information. As he lived in a good Volunteer area quite near Kelly's, Tombrick, where a store of arms was kept and not too far from Doyle's, Coolree, we thought he may have picked up some information of importance, so a trap was set for him. Two of our Volunteers, James Whelan and one other whose name I cannot recall, were dressed in the British uniforms and called to his house after dark. Thinking he was really speaking to British officers he told all he knew about the area, the names of men whom he knew to be Volunteers and especially

those who were very active, and volunteered to lead the soldiers to their houses. He was arrested at once and a courtmartial set up, presided over by Commandant Phil Lennon, New Ross. He was condemned to death and shot a few nights afterwards at Knockroe, Borris, just over the Carlow/Wexford border.

Round about this time also an ambush was set up on the Enniscorthy-Bunclody road. This was the first ambush prepared in North Wexford and it was the intention to ambush a lorry with supplies coming from Wexford with stores for some of the Devon Regiment stationed at Bunclody. A tree was partly sawn through and a well armed party waited all day, but no lorry came. Eventually a motor car with some R.I.C., including Sergeant Torsney, came along and some of the riflemen had a shot, but the car had passed by too far before Torsney was recognised and no damage was done to the police, who were quickly out of range.

Military and police activity was greatly intensified about this time and many raids and arrests took place. I was arrested early in October and detained in Enniscorthy Courthouse. Shortly afterwards during a night raid in Enniscorthy (caused, I think, by widespread seizure of mails by Volunteers) several other Volunteers, including the Acting Brigade Commandant, Eamon Balfe, were arrested and we were all removed to the Detention Barracks in Victoria Barracks in Cork, and so ended my career for the time being.

Signed:

Micéal Ó Ciardubháin  
(Micheal O Ciardubhain)

Date:

26.5.55

26.5.55

Witness:

Seán Brennan Pt. Colend.

(Investigator).