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BUREAU OF MILITARY HISTORY 1913-21  
BURO STAIRÉ MILEATA 1913-21  
No. W.S. 1181

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

DOCUMENT NO. W.S. 1,181

Witness

John O'Connor, T.D.,  
Farmer's Bridge,  
Tralee,  
Co. Kerry.

Identity.

Q.M. Farmer's Bridge Company  
Irish Volunteers, Co. Kerry.

Subject.

Farmer's Bridge Company Irish Volunteers,  
Co. Kerry, 1914-1921.

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STATEMENT OF JOHN O'CONNOR, T.D.

Farmer's Bridge, Tralee, Co. Kerry.

I was born in July 1899, in the townland of Poulanaddrá, Ballyseedy, Tralee. I was sent to the local national school until I was 15 years of age. When I left school I started work on my father's farm.

I joined the Volunteers when they were first formed at Farmer's Bridge in the year 1914. There were 70 men in the company at the time. An ex-British soldier named William Dunne drilled the company and was generally the chief officer. We subscribed 2d per week for the purpose of buying rifles.

Tom O'Donnell - later Judge O'Donnell - a member of the then Rural District Council, and a man named Michael Aherne attended a parade one night in the Spring of 1915 and addressed the Volunteers. They appealed for recruits for the British army and informed the Volunteers that all of them would receive uniforms and would become proper soldiers to defend the shores of Ireland. The statements by O'Donnell and Aherne caused some disorder in the parade and after awhile it broke up and thereafter the Volunteers ceased to exist.

In Autumn 1917 the Volunteers were reorganised in Farmer's Bridge by the local young men of the area. A man by the name of Moss Galvin became captain and a John Duggan became Lieut. the strength of the company then was about 50 men. We immediately started drilling and parading. We had a few shot-guns which we used for practice in the handling of arms.

Early in 1918 when the threat of conscription became a reality the company strength increased to about 85 men. All of the new members continued in the company under duress. We held test mobilisations very often at different hours of the night and made sure that the new men always attended. We held a local collection about this time for the purpose of buying

arms and succeeded in collecting about £40. Up to the end of the year we did not succeed in purchasing any arms. Due to the Sinn Fein representative - Austin Stack - being returned unopposed, the local Volunteers took no part in the general election of that year.

Early in 1919 the company officers, with the approval of the company, decided to build a hall for use by the unit with the money collected in 1918 as it was not possible to purchase arms. We continued to drill and parade up to the end of the year.

All through 1919 there was very little activity except for the usual meetings in the hall which had been completed in the year. We of course kept up drills and received some useful instruction in the use of the rifle by our drill instructor - William Dunne - who rejoined the Volunteers at the reorganisation of the company. We succeeded in raising a considerable fund for the purchase of arms through the proceeds of dances held in the hall. We were in an isolated area, the nearest R.I.C. barracks was at Tralee, three miles away. The R.I.C. were apparently unaware of our activities.

In the latter end of the year I succeeded in obtaining a rifle and 27 rounds of .303 ammunition in Tralee from a man named Pat Barry - a shoemaker who had been a member of the Volunteers in 1914 in Tralee. The rifle was a Martini Henry. Another man of the company - Moss Galvin - also got a Bulldog revolver and six rounds of ammunition about the same time.

In January or February 1920, the company captain received orders from the battalion O/C. - Michael Doyle - in Tralee to have all arms in the area brought under the control of the company Q.M. I was appointed Q.M. for this purpose and, with the help of the members of the company, I collected 44 shotguns and one revolver in the area. With one exception the local farmers gave up their guns willingly. This exception

was a man who denied that he had a gun. I went into his house one day in his absence and found the gun hidden there.

Among the men of the company who took part in collecting the guns were Joe McMahon (deceased), Maurice Galvin, Michael O'Connor and John Duggan.

About the Spring of the year an agitation was started by Volunteers of the area for the division of about 350 acres of land known as Ballyseedy Estate which was owned by people by the name of Blennerhassett. Fences on the estate were broken down and cattle driven off the land. The agitation did not last long. The Volunteers, however, wanted activity and felt that they were doing something to let the public know that they were prepared to carry on the fight. In this connection they always paraded with the shotguns which had been collected earlier.

Included in the company at this time was a dispatch clerk named Jeremiah O'Connor (deceased) who was employed by a firm of bacon curers in Tralee. He discovered that large consignments of bacon were being dispatched to the British forces in Kilworth and Fermoy areas, Co. Cork. He arranged to let us know when the next large consignment was about to be dispatched. In about March 1920, he informed us that about eight tons were about to be consigned to the military at Fermoy on the Tralee-Mallow train.

The company was mobilised and a number of the men were instructed to bring horses and carts - 15 in all - to the main line at a place called Caherbreagh in the open country between Tralee and Gortatlea. We had placed fog signals on the tracks. When the train carrying the consignment of bacon approached the spot where we were located it was flagged by one of our men. The train came to a standstill. We approached the driver, fireman and guard and explained our mission. They were very co-operative. Having removed the bacon we allowed the train to proceed.

The bacon was taken to a place known as Dowling's Fort at Farmer's Bridge and dumped there for the night. The Volunteers then notified the local people that the bacon would be sold by auction on the following evening. The local people turned up for the auction in large numbers and the auction turned out to be a complete success. A small lot of the bacon, however, remained unsold, so I and another Volunteer commandeered a motor car - the property of the local landlord, Blennerhassett - loaded up the bacon and disposed of it in shops outside our area. We realised a sum of £200 on the entire sale of the bacon. It so happened that there was never any R.I.C. activity in our areas over the raid.

Of the £200 received for the bacon, we sent £120 to G.H.Q. Dublin, for the purchase of rifles which we never received. The money was, however, refunded to the company during the Truce period.

About the same month - March - the company officers received instructions through the battalion staff to send two men of the company to Tralee to take part with members of the companies in the battalion area in the seizure and destruction of all Government documents in the Custom House, Tralee. I and a Volunteer named Frank Hoffman were selected from this company for the job.

We went into Tralee where we all met at a point in the vicinity of the Custom House which was only 40 yards from the R.I.C. barracks. The Brigade O/C., Paddy Cahill, was in charge. In all, about ten men took part in the actual operation apart from the men of the local company who acted as scouts. Among the men who took part were Frank Hoffman, Eugene Hogan and Paddy Garvey.

Through one or two friendly officials in the building the Brigade O/C. had obtained the keys of the building some time after it had been closed. At about 8 p.m. we went into

the building in a body and systematically collected all records and documents which we removed to the yard of the building, sprinkled them with petrol and then set them alight. The operation lasted for two hours; the documents weighed about half a ton.

On 25th March 1920, Tom McEllistrim, Battalion O/C. of Ballymacelligott Battalion, Kerry No. 2 Brigade, and John Cronin, company captain of Ballymacelligott, carried out an attack on Gortatlea R.I.C. barracks. They had planned the attack some time earlier. With two other members of this company - Moss Galvin and John Duggan - I was invited in by McEllistrim to participate in the attack. We assembled in Ballymacelligott Hall about 30 men in all. McEllistrim was in charge.

We marched in a body from the hall to the scene of the attack - a distance of three miles - having previously sent out scouts to keep us informed of the position at Gortatlea. When we arrived at Gortatlea the attacking party was divided into three sections. No. 1 section, which consisted of ten men, was in charge of McEllistrim; No. 2 section of another ten men was in charge of Charlie Daly, later executed at Drumboe, Co. Donegal. The man in charge of the 3rd section I cannot remember.

The barracks was a double wooden hut type of building strongly fortified with old shell boxes filled with gravel protecting all external walls. A house, the property of the local railway stationmaster, was situated within ten feet of the eastern end of the barracks. The plan arranged was for No. 1 section to which I was attached to enter the house of the stationmaster, who was a man named Crowe, proceed to the top storey, break through the roof, get on to the chimney at the gable-end of the house, and from there to call on the R.I.C. to surrender. If the R.I.C. failed to surrender, our next

step was to open fire down through the wooden roof of the barracks.

When we entered the stationmaster's house we discovered that he had an invalid daughter who had to be removed very quietly before we could start operations. Three men were detailed to take her in blankets for a considerable distance across country to safety. Having got the girl away, the three men returned. Immediately on their return, we broke out through the roof by removing slate lathes and slates. McEllistrim called on the R.I.C. to surrender. Their reply was a volley of rifle fire with a shout of "Never". We then got the order "Open fire" which we did immediately. We had made provision for the burning of the barracks from overhead as a last resort, as we wanted to get the stores intact. We had paraffin oil and petrol in bottles as well as sods of turf soaked in paraffin. As soon as we opened fire, the R.I.C. sent up a Verey light through a 4" pipe in the roof. The pipe had been fixed specially in the roof for this purpose. One of our men immediately confined his fire to a spot just below the pipe to prevent further lights being sent up. He succeeded in doing so, as we later learned that the R.I.C. man operating the Verey pistol was wounded.

We were attacking for half an hour when we decided that we would have to fire the barracks as we had very little ammunition left. All of our section were armed with rifles or revolvers, the other sections had one or two rifles each and shotguns. We threw the bottles of paraffin and petrol into a valley between the roofs of the two huts which made up the barracks, followed by lighting sods of turf. The building caught fire immediately. It was not long until the R.I.C. shouted for mercy. We got the order "cease fire" to allow the garrison to come out which they did in a few minutes, having first attempted to destroy their arms in the fire.

We captured the garrison of six men including a sergeant; two of them were wounded. The only man who brought out his arms was the sergeant, who brought out a revolver which I seized together with his belt. Our men dashed into the burning building and succeeded in salvaging six rifles the stocks of which were burned. Sections Nos. 2 and 3, which were located south and west of the barracks, opened fire when the order was given and continued to do so until the order "cease fire".

The O/C. sent word to a local priest that two of the R.I.C. were wounded. He (the priest) attended the two men shortly after we had left the scene with our booty. All approaches to Gortatlea barracks had been effectively blocked previous to the attack by the companies surrounding the area, the result being that reinforcement did not reach Gortatlea until midday the following day.

It so happened that when we left Gortatlea barracks that morning, the sergeant and one constable cycled into Tralee for reinforcements. I had left our party and was on my own at about 6 a.m. making for home when I walked into the two R.I.C. men returning in civilian clothes from Tralee. They dismounted and approached me. The sergeant said: "you burned us out this morning, young man". I was still armed with my rifle and captured revolver; they were unarmed. I drew the revolver and ordered both of them to put their hands up which they did very promptly. They pleaded for mercy. I then ordered them to mount their bikes and get off about their business.. After several attempts they succeeded in mounting their bicycles and went off, while I dashed for a nearby wood for cover in case reinforcements came along after them.

About three days after our success at Gortatlea we formed a local active service unit which was composed of men from



the four companies - Scartaglen, Ballymacelligott, Cordal and Farmer's Bridge, my company. The three first-mentioned companies formed part of Ballymacelligott Battalion, Kerry No. 2 Brigade, while my company - Farmer's Bridge - formed part of Tralee Battalion, Kerry No. 1 Brigade. Out of these four companies our active service unit consisted of 21 or 22 men who regarded themselves as seasoned soldiers.

We carried on with our normal occupations during the period, but met or assembled when called upon by McEllistrim to attack or harass the enemy whenever possible.

Shortly after the attack on Gortatlea Barracks, the Brigade O/C., Paddy Cahill, warned me not to engage in activities outside my own area. He certainly did not approve of our attack on Gortatlea which was carried out without his prior knowledge.

In spite of Cahill's warning and disapproval of the Gortatlea attack, we decided to attack the R.I.C. barracks at Scartaglen. McEllistrim, Battalion O/C. of Ballymacelligott took charge of the proposed attack which was planned for the 31st March 1920. The information which we had received from the local company was to the effect that the windows of the barracks at Scartaglen were not protected in any way. Our plan was to hurl a bomb into each of the six windows of the barracks which was a one storey wooden hut building. I was one of the six men selected to hurl a bomb as was also a man named 'Pedar Clancy', alias Crowley, from Mitchelstown area. 'Clancy' was supposed to be P. Clancy of G.H.Q. Dublin and was introduced to the battalion staff by a member of the West Limerick Brigade staff. The story of 'Clancy's' discovery and exposure and subsequent execution as a spy can be told by David McCarthy who was on our active service unit at the time and is now residing at "Breigh", Portmarnock, Co. Dublin.

Due to the foresight of McEllistrim, who was of opinion

that the barrack windows could not possibly be unprotected, he advised us to wait in a field at a point a couple of hundred yards from the barracks until he would go in and examine the windows. McEllistrim went into the village and examined each window in turn and found that they were all protected by steel shutters and that the exterior of the building itself was protected by shell boxes filled with sand. He returned to the column in the field and told them the position and after some consultation he decided to call off the attack for the time being. In all, about 22 men turned out that night for the proposed attack. Of these, 16 or 17 were armed with rifles while the remainder had shotguns. I carried a rifle. The bombs which had been made locally were made from cart wheel boxes filled with gelignite into which a detonator with fuse attached had been inserted; the fuse would have to be lit before the bomb was thrown.

A month later, our unit returned to Scartaglen. We were armed as before, but this time we only took one of the home-made bombs as well as a number of bottles filled with a mixture of petrol and paraffin. McEllistrim was again in charge. When the unit reached the village it was divided into three sections, two large sections and one small section of about six men. The section of six men to which I was attached, in charge of McEllistrim, stole quietly on to a haystack situated about 20 feet from the corner of the barracks. The other two sections occupied buildings in the village overlooking the barracks to the east and south in which direction the barracks was facing. Our plan was to set fire to the barracks from the haystack in the first instance with the bottles of mixture and lighted sods of turf soaked in paraffin. The O/C. gave the order to let go the bottles and lighted sods of turf. These succeeded in setting fire to the shell cases which in turn set fire to the roof of the barracks. One of our men on the haystack then lit the fuse of the home-made bomb and hurled it on to the top of

the shell boxes so as to breach the roof. The bomb exploded and breached the roof as intended as well as an elevated galvanized water storage tank situated about 8 feet from the barracks. When the water tank was breached, a gush of water descended on to the burning roof and boxes and extinguished the fire completely.

From the moment our section threw the bottles of mixture on to the shell cases, the other two sections opened fire and kept up intermittent fire all the time we were using the bottles and bomb. We also opened fire immediately the bomb exploded. The attack had lasted up to five hours when we got word that reinforcements of enemy forces were on their way from Killarney. We then gave up the attack and dispersed to our respective areas. The following day the barracks was evacuated by the R.I.C.

Shortly before the second attack on Scartaglen 'Clancy' the spy had been detected and had been sent back to the West Limerick Brigade area from which he had come.

About May 1920, the members of Farmer's Bridge Company seized the mails from the Mallow-Tralee train at a place called Ballymacthomas between Gortatlea and Tralee. All letters were censored and returned to the roadside at Ballyseedy Cross where they were subsequently collected by Post Office officials.

A short time afterwards we again held up the train at the same place and again seized the mails. Having censored the letters we left them for collection in the same place as before. In these raids on mails we never got one letter from anyone giving information to the enemy. We did obtain several official letters to the different military and police barracks which we sent to Brigade H.Q. In these raids on the trains the railway personnel were always very co-operative.

In Mid-July 1920, we started intensive training in the company area. At this time we had in the company two rifles

and 44 shotguns. The men of the company received practice in the use of the rifle and the handling of arms. About this time I was very keen to bring off some kind of a major operation against the enemy forces and discussed the matter with the company captain, Moss Galvin, and John Duggan, the 1st Lieutenant. Between us we planned to carry out an attack on a convoy of military lorries - about three in all, which used travel occasionally between Tralee and Killorglin.

We selected the ambush position and notified Paddy Cahill, the Brigade O/C. He did not approve of the position on the grounds that it did not afford a way of retreat for our men. Cahill, in fact, did not want any attack whatever to take place. His excuse was that he always had a major engagement in the making. However, we took Cahill's advice and selected an alternative position which did give a way of retreat. I then invited Tom McEllistrim who had unofficially taken charge of our active service unit, which was composed of men from the four companies referred to earlier, to inspect our new position, which he did. I was accompanied by Galvin and Duggan of this company. Duggan protested against men from an outside area taking part in an engagement outside their own area, saying that it was against the instructions of the Brigade O/C. Upon hearing this, McEllistrim refused to take any further part in the proposed attack. This was a serious blow to our company, as we were deprived of the services of the active service unit which, at that time, were in possession of 12 rifles. We also missed the confidence McEllistrim inspired in the men of Farmer's Bridge Company because of his experience and leadership. We, however, were determined to carry out the operation and again consulted Cahill. He then very reluctantly agreed to send us 10 men with 10 rifles for the job. All of the 10 men were from the Tralee Battalion. McEllistrim or his unit took no part in plans for the proposed attack.

Eventually the company decided to carry out the attack with the aid of the 10 men from Tralee. On the 11th August the convoy of three lorries passed the ambush position to Killorglin to attend Puck Fair on the following day. We expected that they would return on the 12th when the fair was over. We mobilised on the night of the 11th and selected positions for the attacking party and distributed our arms which consisted of 44 shotguns and 2 rifles, each Volunteer with a shotgun receiving 10 rounds of buckshot. Men of the company were detailed to dig a trench across the road. The trench when dug was 4 feet wide by 2 feet deep running across the entire road leaving a by-pass near the hedge which ran alongside the road. Having dug the trench, we stretched a couple of lengths of wire across it on top of which a canvas covering was placed.

The local men were then told to reassemble at 4 o'clock on the morning of the 12th. The 10 men from Tralee were also told to report at a given point near the ambush position at the same time.

At 4 o'clock the following morning we took up our appointed positions with our 12 rifles, 44 shotguns and a number of home-made bombs. The bombs had been made from the wheel boxes of carts with a filling of gelignite into which detonators with fuses attached had been inserted. The fuse would have to be lit in order to explode the bomb. We remained in position all day and were about to retire at 8 p.m. in the evening when our scouts signalled the approach of three lorries of military. When the three lorries came within a half mile of the ambush position they stopped. A two-seater car with two army officers ~~with~~ which had been leading the convoy proceeded, however, into the ambush position and crashed into the trench. Seeing this, the military in the lorries dismounted. Moss Galvin and I decided that we could not engage them as we had been deprived of the advantage of

a surprise attack. At that moment they were in a better position on our flank. In the circumstances we had to withdraw without any exchange of shots.

A month later we decided on another ambush in a different place known as the Horseshoe Bend, three miles from Tralee on the Tralee/Castlemaine road. We were again dogged by ill luck. This time we had regular land mines of guncotton type which we intended to explode with the aid of an electric detonator and fuse. At 5 o'clock in the morning our men, who numbered 60, assembled in a nearby quarry armed with 44 shot-guns and 12 rifles. Two or three of the men were detailed immediately to go to the bend in the road and, with pick and shovel, to dig a couple of holes in the road in which it was proposed to place the mines. Our men had just dug one hole when a tender with five R.I.C. men and three communications men aboard swept into our selected position and actually passed over the hole that had been made in the road. Our men who had dug the hole had just time to jump across the ditch alongside. The R.I.C., it appears, were on their way to install a wireless station in Milltown R.I.C. barracks, about 7 miles away.

The tender proceeded to Milltown from where the R.I.C. communicated with Tralee. Anticipating what was about to happen we withdrew. Before 9 a.m. the locality was infested with R.I.C., Tans and military, but we had succeeded in retreating. The I.R.A. man in charge of the mines was a qualified engineer named Paddy Kelly, now living in Celbridge, Co. Kildare.

Late in October, the Brigade O/C., Paddy Cahill, asked for volunteers from the company to participate in an attack on enemy forces in Tralee which had been fixed for 31st Oct. 1920. With four other men, I was selected from among the men who volunteered and, on the night fixed for the attack, reported

to John Joe Sheehy at the Sports Field, Tralee - now Austin Stack Park. Sheehy had, a short time previously, been promoted Acting Battalion O/C. Tralee Battalion.

The three local companies in the town - Boherbee, Rock St. and Strand St. - were mobilised that night. I was allocated a position at Edward St. with members of Boherbee Company. I had a rifle; one or two others also had rifles; the others had shotguns. John Joe Sheehy was in charge of the section to which I was attached. His instructions were to open fire anytime after 9.30 p.m. on any enemy personnel in our vicinity. It so happened that no enemy appeared in our position that night. A section under Paddy Paul Fitzgerald did, however, capture two Tans that night; these two Tans were later taken outside the town, shot dead and buried where they fell. This same section later in the night opened fire on a Tan patrol, wounding two of them.

I went to Castleisland on the following day, which was the 1st November. Tom McEllistrim had arranged an attack for the same day on a military patrol in Castleisland, which, at the time, had a military barracks as well as the usual R.I.C. barracks. The patrol usually consisted of 16 men both Tans and military; they assembled as a rule in the village and proceeded to the Post Office where they collected their mails a couple of times a day. The 1st November was a holiday and fair day in Castleisland, the fair being held on the Main Street. The plan prepared by McEllistrim was for the I.R.A. to mix with the people of the fair and, as the patrol was wending its way through the street, two of our men - one of whom would be armed with a revolver - to walk side by side with each soldier or Tan in the patrol. As soon as each pair of I.R.A. men had their man covered, McEllistrim would give a shrill blast of a whistle whereupon the patrol would be overpowered or shot if necessary and disarmed. The I.R.A. numbered 33 with McEllistrim in charge.

As the patrol came through the street our men stepped into their allotted positions but, to their surprise, they discovered that the strength of the patrol had been increased on this particular day to 22 men. Seeing the position, McEllistrim hesitated in giving the signal. Eventually the enemy spotted something unusual and opened fire all round, mostly in the air. Pandemonium broke loose. People attending the fair scattered in all directions. Many of them mounted their horses and made for the country in all directions, abandoning their carts and stock. In a couple of minutes the street was cleared except for moaning cattle and screaming dogs. We mingled with the fleeing people and made good our escape.

A conference was then held with McEllistrim acting as chairman to decide our next move. We decided to attack the patrol the next morning. McEllistrim sent me to Farmer's Bridge for our 44 shotguns and 2 rifles. With the help of some members of this company I conveyed the arms to Castleisland. We all met again at a place called "Nell Mac's pub" in Castleisland and finally decided to attack the patrol next morning at 8 a.m.

Having so decided, we called on Tadhg M. O'Connor, Battalion O/C. of Castleisland Battalion, and invited him to take part. He agreed at first and arranged to attend a further meeting that night to make final arrangements, but he failed to turn up. It transpired afterwards that he went to the local parish priest - Father Brennan - instead, and reported the matter to him. In the meantime, we decided to carry on with the attack and occupied houses on either side of the street between the R.I.C. barracks and the post office that night.

Early next morning at about 7.30 a.m., Fr. Brennan arrived on the scene. He saw me at one of the doors and accosted me, saying "What is all this about?" I referred him to McEllistrim



who explained to him that the job had to be done. Fr. Brennan replied: "If you persist in your attitude I will report the matter to the barracks." With that, McEllistrim decided to abandon the proposed attack. A short time after the priest had left, the patrol passed up the street and returned again. We made no attempt to attack in the circumstances. A short time later we withdrew. I would like to pay tribute to the occupants of the houses we met that night, each and every one of whom welcomed us, provided us with food and were glad that the enemy were being attacked in their village.

Some time later I applied for a transfer from Tralee Battalion, Kerry No. 1 Brigade, to Ballymacelligott Battalion (McEllistrim O/C.) Kerry No. 2 Brigade. My brigade O/C. would not approve of it at first; later, he informed me that he would approve of my transfer if I handed over my rifle and revolver to my company captain. This I refused to do. Some time after Christmas 1920, however, my transfer came through after a visit by Andy Cooney of G.H.Q. Dublin to the area.

Immediately on my transfer to Kerry No. 2 Brigade, I was accepted in a flying column which, around this time, had been formed in the brigade area. I brought my rifle and revolver with me. The column was made up of 30 men from the different battalions in the brigade. Dan Allman became O/C. of the column.

We went into training immediately at a place called The Gap of Dunloe in the Killarney mountains. A man named John Flynn from Kenmare area, who was an ex-British soldier, became Training Officer to the column. We were billeted in a wooden hut in the area. The hut had been specially constructed for the job and was situated about seven miles from Killarney where there was a military barracks as well as an R.I.C. barracks. We spent about four weeks in training which included close order drill, extended drill, theory of the rifle and some bomb practice with Mills bombs. Our rifle ammunition was scarce,

so we could not use it while training. Guards were posted for the 24 hours of the day.

Eventually we moved out and on the night of 17th March 1921, took up ambush positions at Dysart at a point half way between Farranfore and Castleisland on either side of the road. Dan Allman was in charge. It had been arranged that Farranfore R.I.C. barracks was to be attacked by the local company. In anticipation of reinforcements being sent from Castleisland to reinforce the garrison at Farranfore, our ambush positions had been chosen for the purpose of attacking the reinforcements.

The attack on Farranfore barracks took place at the appointed hour - 12 midnight. We remained in position until 4 a.m., but the expected reinforcements never showed up. We then withdrew and proceeded to selected billets in the Scartaglen area, a distance of 7 miles away.

On the night of 19th March a section of the column visited a house owned by people by the name of Boyle, in the townland of Leaha, who were known to be giving information to the enemy. Father and son were taken prisoner and later ordered to leave the country, which they did. After this, the entire column proceeded in a body to march south in the direction of Rathmore and billeted in the townland of Kilquane, Barraduff, near Headford. Our objective now being to ambush a military ration party which once a week, but not on any particular day, travelled by train from their barracks in Killarney to a military post in Kenmare and returned a few hours later to Killarney. We arrived in Kilquane on a Saturday evening where, after some refreshments, we attended a dance that night which was held in <sup>a</sup> the local farmer's house. Next day, the local company captain, Jim Daly, informed the column leaders - Dan Allman and Tom McEllistrim - that one of his men had reported to him that a man called Sandy, an itinerant, who was regarded locally as a spy, had left the neighbourhood and was on his way to

Killarney. Daly was ordered by the column O/C. to send a couple of his men after Sandy and have him arrested. After this the column moved off and proceeded to Gortdarrig which we reached early on Monday morning.

A few hours later Allman and McEllistrim received information which had been brought in by Con Moynihan that the ration party had passed through Headford railway junction that morning and that they would probably have to return in the afternoon. A decision was taken on the spot to ambush the party at Headford junction as they were changing trains there for their return journey to Killarney. From information supplied by the local company, the column were familiar with the procedure that would be adopted by the military party when they arrived at Headford. They would disembark from the Kenmare train on the platform, move over the line to the other platform to which the Killarney train, coming from Mallow direction, would come in soon after, form up in two ranks with protective flanking squads of five men each, and hold that position until their train came in.

Allman and McEllistrim planned to post the column on the embankment on either side of the station and, when the military party had taken up their position on the Killarney platform, to blast them with rifle fire. They reckoned they should be able to finish the job with a couple of volleys, those of the military who might not have been killed or wounded by the fire of the column would be in no condition to prevent us from seizing all the rifles and ammunition as well as a Vickers machine gun which the party carried in a wagon next to the engine.

Having made the decision, the column set off on a forced march to reach Headford before 3.15 p.m. at which time the train from Kenmare was due in the station. When we arrived about 300 yards from the station the column was halted and told

to fall out. We reckoned we had at least 20 minutes in which to carry out reconnaissance of the position and to post the column. Allman, McEllistrim, Dan Healy, Jack Cronin and Moss Carmody handed me their rifles while they entered the station to make arrangements for the posting of the column. In the meantime, some members of the column had been ordered to move some empty wagons which stood in the station out of the line of fire from the embankment to the Killarney platform. It was just 3 p.m. as McEllistrim and Carmody were entering the signal cabin. Carmody's job was to mount guard in the cabin to provide against the danger of the signals being set against the incoming Kenmare train which was due in first. McEllistrim questioned the signalman as to how the train was running. To his consternation, he was informed that the train was due in a few minutes. He left Carmody in charge of the signal cabin and dashed for the platform to inform the column. The work of moving the wagons was suspended while the column got into positions in a matter of seconds. I dashed on to the platform and dropped the five rifles which I had slung over my shoulder at the feet of McEllistrim, Healy, Cronin and Carmody, after which I took up a position with other members of the column behind the embankment nearest to the Killarney platform. In the meantime, Allman with a man named Jim Coffey had taken refuge in a lavatory which stood about halfway down the Kenmare platform. They were later joined there by Healy who had collected Allman's rifle which he handed to him in the lavatory. When McEllistrim picked up his rifle, he dashed for the station-master's house which faces the Kenmare platform. This was to be operations headquarters. With McEllistrim in the station-master's house were John Flynn and Paddy Lynch.

As the train came to a stop in the station, doors were flung open, military and civilians piled out on the platform. A young soldier crossed to the lavatory; as he was about to

enter he saw Coffey with his rifle in his hands. Coffey, it appears, made a grab for the soldier's rifle; the soldier backed out on to the platform. Allman, thinking he was about to give the alarm, drew his revolver and fired; the soldier dropped to the ground. The military party turned towards the sound of the shot. As they did so, the column opened fire; they did not wait for orders. In the first volley the officer in charge of the party was shot dead as he was leaving the carriage together with a number of his men. Those behind in the carriage opened fire through the doors and windows, but their fire was wild and indiscriminate. The civilians, who were mostly cattle dealers, dashed for shelter or safety. Eventually the ration party were all on the platform where they rallied behind a sergeant who led a dash down the platform towards the Mallow end. As the sergeant led the men down, he was shot dead by a column bullet. The men paused, bewildered. As they did so the column poured a volley of shots into them; most of them dropped dead or wounded where they stood. The survivors, led by a second sergeant, jumped from the platform and crawled under the train or tried to get around the engine; the men in the latter group were picked off by McEllistrim and the men with him in the stationmaster's house. The Vickers machine gun had fired a few rounds but the men manning it had been shot dead as soon as it came into action.

At least five or six survivors had managed to get under the train. We behind the embankment at the Killarney platform side could not effectively fire on them because of the intervening platform, neither could the men behind the embankment on the Kenmare side because they could not command an effective line of fire on the platform from their side. There was a lull for <sup>a</sup> while except for occasional sniping. During the lull I thought of Carmody trapped in the signal

cabin. He had been unable owing to the shooting to leave by the door. I made my way to the back where I broke the glass panes making an opening through which he climbed.

After shooting the soldier in the first instance, Allman, with Healy and Coffey, came out of the lavatory and, lying down to the side of the platform, opened fire on the military at the same time that the other members of the column had opened fire. They then retired to the end of the platform where a sloping ramp afforded them cover to continue the attack. When Allman now sized up the situation from his position, he was determined to dislodge the few military under the train. Coffey edged out from behind the ramp and fired a shot up along under the train; in return he had his arm wounded by a bullet from one of the military. He warned Allman of the danger, but Allman came out from behind the shelter of the ramp, knelt down on the line and lifted his rifle to fire. Next moment a military marksman had sent a bullet through his chest.

Healy and Coffey pulled him back into cover. It was obvious that he had been fatally shot for blood was gushing from his mouth ears and nostrils. With Allman's death McEllistram assumed sole command. Coffey left his position to acquaint McEllistram. At the Kenmare embankment he was directed to the stationmaster's house.

Unknown to the column, the Mallow-Killarney train had been held up on the line some 300 yards from the station by the signals being set against her. The presence of more military on this train was first realised by the section at the end of the Kenmare platform who observed an officer standing on the footplate of the engine. This section opened fire on the train, at the same time sending word to McEllistram that enemy reinforcements were at hand.

McEllistram immediately ordered the section of the column on the Kenmare embankment to retreat, after which he crossed

the line and ordered the men on the Killarney side to withdraw. As they withdrew, I pointed out to him where Allman and another of our men named Baily - who was also shot dead - were lying. As I did so we observed a squad of military advancing along the line from the train which had been held up outside the station. There were only four of the column now left - McEllistrim, Browne, Jack Brosnan and myself. We decided to retreat as fast as we could.

At the back of the embankment we found a boreen which wound for a quarter of a mile between stone-bound ditches of bog mould. At the end of the boreen we separated; McEllistrim and I made for an open field devoid of any cover. As we reached the centre of the field, bullets clipped the grass all around us. Fifty yards away we saw a bog ditch four feet high. We raced for the ditch and cleared it in one bound. The enemy did not follow us but contented themselves with firing from the roads around the station. We eventually crossed the Flesk river and were in safe country.

The ration party had consisted of a Lieutenant, two sergeants, a corporal and 26 other ranks. Of these 23 had been either killed or wounded. We lost two dead and one wounded. Two cattle dealers and a publican and his daughter were among the civilians wounded. One of the cattle dealers, named Breen, died on his way to hospital.

The column in their retreat collected Sandy, who had been arrested by members of Jim Daly's company, and locked in a cowshed for the time being. He was later tried by courtmartial and shot dead as a spy by members of the column.

McEllistrim and I retreated to a place called Kilgarvan where we met the other members of the column that night, after which we moved to billets in the home of people by the name of Quille at Gortloughra near the West Cork border. The Quilles were also members of the I.R.A. and we remained there for four

days. We paraded and drilled every day we were there. Our ammunition was practically exhausted. After four days we transferred to another billet in the townland of Mangerton to the north of Kilgarvan. In the meantime, Kenmare military post was reinforced by a body of Auxiliaries, Kenmare being about 7 miles from Mangerton.

The last day of our stay in Mangerton the Auxiliaries came out in very strong force to raid and round up the area, apparently having received word that we were there. Our scouts saw them approach. They had got to within 500 yards of us. We managed to elude them and moved off that night to a place called Carnahone, between Beaufort and Killorglin, a distance of 20 miles across country.

We remained in Carnahone for a night or two and proceeded from there to a position between Castleisland and Brosna, which was known as the Black Banks where an ambush was laid. Here we took up positions on each side of the road. McEllistrim was in charge. He became O/C. of the column after the death of Allman. We were assisted by a number of men from the local companies. They were armed with shotguns. The proposed ambush never materialised as the expected convoy of military lorries which travelled occasionally between Castleisland and Brosna failed to travel on this occasion.

Next day we received information that the military at Castleisland were to go on a certain day to close Knock Post Office, which was situated on a by-road off the main Castleisland-Abbeyfeale road. We took up positions west of Headley's Bridge on one side of the main road in extended formation. A good ambush position had been selected giving the attacking party all ground advantage. Three gelignite mines had been laid. Tom Fleming, a mechanical engineer, was in charge of an electric detonator with which it was intended to explode the mines. The strength of our party numbered 90, half of



whom had rifles; the others had shotguns; the men with the shotguns were placed in positions within 40 yards of the road.

We had been in our positions from early morning when at last we received a signal from our scouts that three lorry loads of military were approaching. When they came to a breen about three quarters of a mile from the ambush position they turned into it and proceeded via this breen to Knock.

We remained in position all day hoping that they would return by our positions, but they did not do so. It afterwards transpired that the military were informed in Knock of our presence in the area after which they left hurriedly by a different route again to return to Castleisland. We were informed while in the ambush position by a scout who arrived from knock that the enemy was aware we were waiting for them. We could do nothing but retire.

About the latter end of May an ambush was prepared for a military ration party which travelled from Castleisland to Gurtalay and back every Friday. (Gurtalay R.I.C. barracks was captured and burned down in March 1920, but the railway station there was occupied by military in March 1921).

When the ration party delivered the rations at Gurtalay the engine of the train on which they travelled was turned at Gurtalay station to take them back to Castleisland. This operation lasted about half an hour. During the half hour we removed a 28 foot length of rail from the track a short distance from the station. About 35 men all armed with rifles were then placed in position in an old fort at the spot where the rail had been removed. McEllistrim was in charge. Andy Cooney of G.H.Q. Dublin was among the men taking part.

When the train reached the broken line it managed to keep in position and, with the exception of the guard's van, came back on the track. The guard's van was occupied by a machine gun crew. Two or three of our men fired a few shots at the van. With the van bumping over the sleepers the train reached Castleisland. We were disappointed, as the whole thing was

over before we realised what had happened. We then withdrew. It was about 5 o'clock in the evening.

Later that evening a large force of Auxiliaries came out in lorries from Tralee and endeavoured to engage the column. They outnumbered us 10 to 1. We retreated to the northern tip of Dulaig and succeeded in eluding our pursuers. Later that night a decision was taken that the brigade column should be disbanded as the days were too long and it was almost impossible to evade the huge enemy concentrations located at the time in the county. Each man returned to his own battalion area where they set up battalion columns.

With Tom McEllistrim, Moss Galvin, Paddy Burke, Jack Herlihy, Moss Carmody and John Cronin, I returned to the Firies or 1st Battalion area, Kerry No. 2 Brigade. In a short time a battalion flying column was established in the area where, in spite of many arrests, the local companies were highly organised at the time. Lines of communication were well established and messages and dispatches were handled very efficiently. We could move very freely within the area, but found it almost impossible to get a single enemy detachment that we could attack. The military and police moved around as usual but their strength was such that any thought of attack on them was out of the question. Several ambushes had been laid, but they did not meet with any success due principally to the strength of the enemy patrols and convoys at this period. The strength of the column numbered about 20, of whom 10 or 12 had rifles while the others had shotguns.

Around this time we received information that Tadhg Brosnan, Battalion O/C., Castlegregory Battalion, and Tom O'Connor, Battalion O/C., Killorglin Battalion, both in Kerry No. 1 Brigade area, were planning an attack on a cycle patrol of R.I.C. who travelled from Killorglin through Castlemaine to Tralee and back once or twice a week. They requested the

assistance of a few of our men on the battalion column. Moss Galvin, Dan Keating and I volunteered to assist and some days later met Brosnan and O'Connor near Milltown. We were informed that the patrol had passed through Castlemaine on their way to Tralee that morning and that it was intended to ambush them on their way back that day.

With members of the Castlegregory and Killorglin battalion as well as members of the Kerry No. 1 Brigade flying column, we took up positions on one side of the road between Castlemaine and Milltown in extended formation. In all, we had about 45 men most of whom were armed with rifles, the others had shot-guns. Brosnan and O'Connor were jointly in charge.

After a while we were informed that the patrol had arrived back in Castlemaine and had gone into a publichouse there. We waited and eventually saw them cycle into the ambush position. When they were well within the position, O'Connor gave the order "Open fire". We fired a couple of rounds each; there was no reply. Seven R.I.C. were shot dead. Two others, who made up the patrol, managed to escape. When we crossed the ditch we collected seven rifles and a number of revolvers as well as a sum of about £150 and a number of important dispatches on the officer in charge of the patrol. This attack took place on 1st June 1921.

After this we returned to our own area where McEllistrim and I visited the different companies in the battalion and attended parades and test mobilisations throughout the area for about a month. On the Saturday prior to the truce the battalion column was disbanded. I returned to my home at Farmer's Bridge.

Early on Sunday, 10th July, McEllistrim sent a scout to me with instructions to proceed with my rifles to Scartaglin. I left at once and there met Humphrey Murphy, Brigade O/C.

Kerry No. 2 Brigade, who informed me that it had been decided to attack a curfew patrol that night in Castleisland. About 40 seasoned men of Kerry No. 2 Brigade had been mobilised for the attack. When we reached Castleisland, the attacking party was divided into three sections. Twenty five of the men had rifles; the remainder had shotguns; I was in charge of a section of 15 men who were allocated positions on the south side of Main St. A second section occupied positions on the north side of the street, while Humphrey Murphy with a bout six men occupied a position in the ruins of what had been at one time a library - it was burned down by the Black and Tans some time earlier - on the extreme eastern end of Main St. I divided my section by placing about half of the men in certain houses and archways in the ambush position proper while I sent the other half further down the street to take up positions somewhat nearer the barracks. These positions had to be approached from the rear of the houses, across hedges, dividing walls and ditches.

As the second half of my section were making their way to their positions, a signal was given by the scouts that the patrol was leaving the barracks. The sections on the flanks were not in fact prepared when the patrol approached. As the patrol was about to enter the ambush position, the section under Murphy opened fire, with the result that the patrol scattered for cover into doors and archways and returned the fire of the section in the ruins of the library building. The section of my men in the houses and archways immediately opened fire on the patrol party seeking cover in practically the same positions in which the I.R.A. on the flanks were located. The result was confusion in the extreme. Murphy and his men had opened fire without ascertaining whether the flanks were in position to attack. The shooting lasted about 15 minutes and later became intermittent. Eventually, Murphy with his section

withdrew without ascertaining the position in regard to the men holding the flanks. In the meantime, a fearless soldier, a Sergeant Pattison, in charge of the patrol, practically surrounded my section. We could not retreat due to the high hedges and walls at our back. After a further 15 minutes we managed to extricate ourselves and retired to a place named Cordal where we met Murphy and most of the attacking party. Here we discovered that two of our men had been trapped in the town. With a number of the attacking party, I decided to return and, if possible, to facilitate their escape. As we were returning, we met the two men on their way out. It was a disastrous attack for us. We lost three men shot dead that night. Their names were - Jack Flynn, Dick Shanahan and Jack Prendiville. The enemy lost six dead and a number wounded.

Next day the Truce came about. We collected our three dead men and buried them with military honours.

During the Truce I attended a training camp at Castlemaine where I received instruction in the Thompson machine gun section, and I also attended another camp at Chutehall.

Signed; John O'Connor

Date: June 8<sup>th</sup> 1955.

(John O'Connor)

June 8th 1955.

Witness: John J. Daly  
(John J. Daly)

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