

W.S. 1,183

ORIGINAL

BUREAU OF MILITARY HISTORY 1913-21
BURO STAIRE MILEATA 1913-21
No. W.S. 1183

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BUREAU OF MILITARY HISTORY, 1913-21.

STATEMENT BY WITNESS.

DOCUMENT NO. W.S. 1,183.....

Witness

Thomas Wilson,
Bishop Street,
Tuam,
Co. Galway.

Identity.

Captain Cortoon Company
Tuam Battalion I.R.A.

Subject.

Tuam, Co. Galway, Irish Volunteers,
1913-1921.

Conditions, if any, Stipulated by Witness.

Nil

File No. S. 2479.....

Form B.S.M. 2

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STATEMENT BY THOMAS WILSON,

Bishop Street, Tuam, Co. Galway.

I was born at Knockavannie, Tuam, in May, 1896, and was educated at Lavalley National School in the parish of Tuam. After leaving school, I worked on my father's farm at Knockavannie.

There was a strong Fenian tradition in my native district and I heard many stories about the Fenians. One of these I remember distinctly. It was told to me by my mother and concerned her uncle, named Reilly, who was arrested because he was a Fenian. Instead of a prison sentence, he was sentenced to be scourged as an example to his colleagues in the Fenian Brotherhood. He was tied to the back of a horse cart in the Square in Tuam, stripped to the skin and whipped, from the Square to the bridge in Shop Street, a distance of over a hundred yards. At the bridge, he was untied and he remarked, "Thank God! I'm none the worse of it". He was an unrepentant Fenian and suffered accordingly. For the remark, he was again tied to the back of the cart and whipped back to the Square. My mother, who told me this, said he was very bad for a long time but finally recovered his full strength and health. My father and a few others of his age were members of the Land League and, later, of the United Irish League. I often saw his green membership card of the United Irish League, with the head of Wolfe Tone engraved at the top.

I joined the Tuam Company of the Volunteers in 1913 when it was first formed. The Company Captain, as far as I can remember, was Dr. Thomas Costello, and the strength was roughly about a hundred. We always lined

up at the Square in Tuam and marched to Parkmore race grounds where drill instruction was given by Stephen Shaughnessy, an Irish Guards reservist. He was a tall, handsome young man, well over six feet in height, and had a wonderful word of command. He was a native of Tuam, but never returned after the 1914-1918 war, which he survived according to rumour. I attended a parade every Sunday after last Mass. I always walked the three miles from my own place to Tuam for these parades in Parkmore. We did a good deal of foot drill and some arms drill with wooden guns.

I remember the review of the Volunteers in Athenry. I was not allowed to go to Athenry. I have a hazy recollection that I was told I was too young, or that I was not good enough at drill for an important public parade of the kind. I never attended any week-night parades of the Company, owing to the distance.

I remember that John Redmond held a big meeting in Tuam which was attended by large numbers of Volunteers. I remember them marching through the streets from the railway station to the Square. I remember distinctly that the Tuam Company took no part whatever. Another thing I remember about the meeting is that it was definitely a recruiting meeting for the British Army. Redmond spoke from the windows of Guy's Hotel, now the Imperial Hotel, and, as far as I can recollect, Dick Hazleton, M.P., and a priest also spoke. After that meeting, I cannot remember any further parades of the Tuam Company. If they had been held, I am sure that I would have got word to attend. The few of us who came in from the country up to the time of the meeting ceased to come afterwards, and we knew nothing of what was going on as regards Volunteer activity.

We heard nothing of the Rising until it was all over, and nobody from my native district was arrested after Easter Week, 1916. I joined the Cortoon Sinn Féin Club shortly after. A man named A.B. O'Connor organised the Club. He was the son of a very big farmer and left our area in 1918 and went to live in Caherlistrane. A Company of the Irish Volunteers was started in Cortoon in 1917. A.B. O'Connor, the same man who had organised the Sinn Féin Club, was elected Captain. The strength was about one hundred men. I joined the Company and was appointed Drill Instructor because of the experience of drill I had acquired in the Tuam Company from 1913 to the time of Redmond's meeting. There was no secrecy about parades. The strength of the Company fell to about fifty after conscription and, later, to about thirty-five men in 1921 or at the end of 1920. I remember that the Anti-conscription pledge was signed by everybody, young and old, outside the church gate at Cortoon, with Father Owen Hannon, Administrator, Tuam, in charge of the arrangements. All the Cortoon Company marched to Tuam the night before and went to confession. No confessions were heard in Cortoon chapel at that time. I cannot remember who were the Lieutenants in 1917.

Parades were not held regularly in 1917 and 1918. They were held roughly once a month, and there were no route marches that I can remember.

The General Election of 1918:

The Sinn Féin candidate was Dr. Cusack, and the Parliamentary candidate was Thomas Slyon, Bishop Street, Tuam, a draper. He belonged to the United Irish League and was popular with the elderly people. I spent three weeks

canvassing the half-parish of Cortoon on behalf of the Sinn Féin candidate. Tuam and Cortoon was a joint parish. There were always three or four with me at the canvass. We went out night after night, canvassing or painting slogans on walls. A good many of the older people were not with us, as Slyon had done good work for them in their struggle for the land. The great majority of the younger people were in favour of Sinn Féin. On polling day, we had two side-cars for each polling booth, to bring voters. Two cars for Cortoon and two for Lavally booths. We brought everybody we thought would vote for Sinn Féin to the booths, and those who we thought would vote against us we advised to remain at home. The principal organiser for Sinn Féin in the area was the Company Captain, A.B. O'Connor.

In 1919 and early 1920, things were quiet in the Company area. The Company Captain had then left the area to live in Caherlistrane. There was no Captain for a while, as far as I can remember. The general election was over, and there was nothing of note until the local elections. There were no parades. We all met at the Sinn Féin Club in Cortoon. The Club had a very big membership at this time and was preparing for the local elections, at which all the Sinn Féin candidates were elected or returned unopposed. As well as I can remember, there was no contest, all the candidates being returned unopposed. The local authority at the time was Tuam Rural District Council.

I was elected Company Captain in the harvest of 1919. There was no activity except drilling in secret in the fields once a week. Drilling consisted mostly of foot drill, and the strength of the Company was then about

twenty. There was no drill if the night was dark or wet. On these nights, we went into a barn and had a chat. I remember that, when I got word to collect the Dáil Loan, I did not know how to go about the job, but Volunteer Michael Gannon, afterwards Company Adjutant, got in touch with Mr. Guy, Solicitor, in Tuam and it was arranged that Colm Ó Gaora would come and initiate us into the work. Ó Gaora did come and spent one day with Volunteers Gannon, Ryan and myself, collecting. After that, we completed the collection ourselves without any further assistance. We received very few refusals and collected sums varying from one to five pounds in each house. I cannot remember how much we collected, but I do remember that we handed it over to Mr. Guy. We had more trouble about the repayment than we had about the collection of the Loan, owing to wrong spelling of names. I remember there was a good deal of work in the filling of the Dáil Loan form of application or proepectus, as I think it was called.

My Company started raiding for arms in the winter of 1919/1920. About nine or ten men, armed with shotguns, carried out these raids. We met with no opposition. The number of shotguns collected was about twenty-five, most of them in good condition. The majority of the guns were single barrel, and we got very few cartridges. We got one Lee Enfield rifle from a British ex soldier in the parish of Clonberne. We stored the rifle, shotguns and ammunition in a big wooden box made for the purpose by Volunteer Patrick Fleming. They were well cleaned and oiled once a week and were all kept together in the box in a dry fence well camouflaged on the outside.

There were no Republican police in our Company area, nor was there a parish court. The Company officers

settled a few disputes about wells and banks of turf and, in cases we failed to settle, we advised the parties to the dispute to take the case into the arbitration courts in Tuam where solicitors attended.

Early in 1920, Castlehackett R.I.C. barrack was attacked. My Company took no part in it. We got no word about it. Castlehackett is about twelve miles from Cortoon. I believe the attack was carried out by the Sylane and Barnaderg Companies. It was not taken but it was evacuated and burned shortly after. There were no reprisals after the attack on Castlehackett R.I.C. barracks.

The next operation I remember was the attack on Castlegrove R.I.C. barracks which took place in March or early April, 1920. I and about five of my Company took part in this attack, as well as Volunteers from Tuam, Barnaderg and Sylane Companies. The total number engaged would be from thirty to forty men. The officer in charge was either Con Fogarty, O/C, Tuam Brigade, or Michael Moran, O/C, Tuam Battalion (now deceased). Those two officers were present at the attack but I cannot say definitely which of the two was in charge. The R.I.C. barracks was situated on the Tuam-Ballinrobe road, about six miles from Tuam. The Garda Siochana Station now occupies the same site. It was a substantial two-story building with a garrison of about ten or twelve men and a Sergeant. There were steel shutters on all the windows.

The attack was planned at a Battalion Council meeting held at the hall at Adrigoole in Barnaderg Company area, at which all the Company officers and Battalion Staff officers were present. Those I remember are:-

Con Fogarty, Brigade O/C.
Michael Moran, Battalion O/C.
Thomas Dunleavy, O/C, Barnaderg Company;
afterwards O/C, Battalion.
Timothy Dunleavy, afterwards O/C Barnaderg
Company.
Peter Burke, Lieutenant, Barnaderg Company.
Myself, O/C, Cortoon Company.

The meeting was held a week or a fortnight before the attack. I cannot remember what the plan of attack was, but I remember that trees were to be felled about half a mile from the barrack across the main road on each side.

There were plenty of trees available for the purpose, which was to form a blockade to be manned by three or four armed men.

As regards the attack itself, I remember that most of the attacking party was in position along the wall of the road facing the building, at a range of about fifteen to twenty yards. There were about ten riflemen, and the remainder were armed with shotguns. I remember that a mine was placed at one of the gables and that it exploded but did not make a breach in the gable. The attack lasted about two hours, fire being directed at the windows. It was reported that two of the garrison were wounded but this was not confirmed. The attacking party was withdrawn after a couple of hours. The barrack was evacuated a few days after and was burned on Easter Saturday night, 1920. None of the attackers was wounded. Fire from the garrison was not heavy. They seemed to be content when we failed to make a breach. Those from my Company who took part in the attack, as far as I can remember their names, were:-

Thomas Ryan, 1st Lieutenant, afterwards Battalion Q.M.
Volunteer Michael Cleary, afterwards 1st Lieutenant,
Cortoon Company.
Michael Gannon, Company Adjutant; and
Myself.

The barrack in Barnaderg was also burned on Easter Saturday night, 1920. It had been evacuated only a short time before, and the Sergeant's wife was living there up to the night it was burned. We had to remove her and her family before destroying it. It was a two-storey stone building. We burned it with paraffin oil, all except the walls. The destruction of this barrack was carried out by the Barnaderg Company and by a few of my Company, including myself. The officer in charge was Michael Moran, O/C, Tuam Battalion.

The R.I.C. hut in Cummer, Galway Road, was also destroyed about this time. It had been occupied by a temporary garrison up to the time of its evacuation. The destruction was carried out by the Barnaderg Company. The Tuam Company, assisted by members of the Sylane Company carried out the destruction of Castlegrove R.I.C. barracks, as far as I know.

There were raids on mails about this time. The mails from Tuam to Dunmore were taken by side-car. They were often taken and examined by my Company, but we never found anything of any military value. We were looking principally for correspondence addressed to the R.I.C. barrack in Dunmore, but we never found any. We often cut telegraph lines between Tuam and Dunmore. I cannot remember why we did this except that it was ordered by the Battalion O/C, Michael Moran (now deceased). We were very careful to act only on orders.

The next operation was an ambush of a party of R.I.C. at Gallagher in July, 1920. They were a party who attended the Galway Assizes and were returning to their barrack in Dunmore from Galway when the attack occurred. I remember that, on the day before the attack, I got orders from Commandant Michael Moran to prevent two jurymen from my Company area attending the Assizes. They were Messrs. O'Connor and MacCormack. I placed a few men to see that they did not leave our area, but the two men made no attempt to do so. It was evening when I got word to get as many armed men as I could from my Company to Gallagher to ambush the R.I.C. It was Lieutenant Peter Burke of Barnaderg who brought me word. I got about ten of my Company to Gallagher in a short time. They went singly, or in pairs, so as not to attract attention.

It was 7 p.m. when I arrived at Gallagher, on the Tuam-Dunmore main road, two and three quarter miles from Tuam. I cannot say who was in charge, but it was either Con Fogarty, Brigade O/C, or Michael Moran, Battalion O/C. Positions were taken up on the right-hand side of the road going from Tuam in the Dunmore direction. There were about twenty-five men, and all but three or four were in position when the van containing the R.I.C. came into view round the bend of the road, about one hundred and fifty yards from the ambush position. The three or four men who were not in position were dragging a tree into position on the road, to form a road block to bring the van to a standstill. These men jumped over the fence and apparently were not seen by the occupants of the van which continued on its way until it stopped at the tree opposite the ambush position. I cannot remember if there was a scout at the bend of the road where the R.I.C. van

first came into view. The attacking party inside the fence occupied a space of only about twenty to twenty-five yards. They were side by side, almost touching one another. None of the I.R.A. was placed on the far side of the road.

When the van came to a halt, all our party opened fire on it. The R.I.C. party jumped out of the car and two of them were killed in the centre of the road. One of them crossed the fence on the far side of the road and fired for about a quarter of an hour. I heard the bullets hitting the barbed wire above my head. I cannot say if the fourth man fired at all. He would have been the driver. The man who crossed the fence on the far side of the road surrendered with his hands up when (as far as I can now remember) his ammunition was exhausted. We collected three carbines and one .45 revolver. We got very little ammunition. The R.I.C. party seemed to have a very limited supply with them. None of our party was hit.

Having burned their van and taken the papers carried by the R.I.C. from a box like a trunk, we withdrew in the direction of Barnaderg. We stayed there until it got dark and then went home. We were anxious to avoid being seen armed in daylight. We had to warn some people who were guilty of loose talk following the ambush. Reprisals followed the attack. The R.I.C. burned the Town Hall in Tuam and Canney's drapery next door to the R.I.C. barrack. They also broke windows and looted shops in the town of Tuam. They did not burn any house near the ambush position at Gallagher.

Those who took part in the Gallagher ambush, as far as I can remember, were:-

Con Fogarty, O/C, Tuam Brigade.

Michael Moran, O/C, Tuam Battalion.

Joseph Cooney, Adjutant, Tuam Battalion.

Thomas Dunleavy, Q.M., Tuam Battalion,
afterwards O/C, same Battalion.

and the following officers and men from the Tuam,
Barnaderg and Cortoon Companies:-

Tuam Company: Harry Burke (rank not known) and
Volunteer Peter Barrett (now
deceased).

Barnaderg Company: Timothy Dunleavy, Company Captain.
Peter Burke, 1st Lieutenant.
Michael Joseph Ryan, afterwards
Brigade Engineer.
Volunteers James Courtney,
Patrick Kelly and Thomas Kelly.

Cortoon Company: Thomas Wilson, Company Captain
(myself).
Thomas Ryan, Lieutenant,
afterwards Battalion Q.M.
Michael Gannon, Company Adjutant.
Michael Cleary, Volunteer,
afterwards 1st Lieutenant;
and Volunteers Patrick O'Connor,
Roddy Slattery, Mark Ryan and
Thomas Hynes.

We were armed with rifles and shotguns. I and about nine
others were armed with Lee Enfield rifles and the remainder
had shotguns.

The ambush took place in the middle of July, 1920.
I remember it was a wet evening and we were soaked after
crossing through the hay and corn fields where the crops
were very high. Shortly after this, I remember getting
orders that all officers and men suspected by the R.I.C.
were not to sleep at home at nights. From that to the

Truce in July, 1921, I slept in the houses of neighbours. Sometimes, when it was very late in the night, I slept in a barn, or in a cock of hay, or in a rick of straw, in order not to trouble the people who accommodated us.

Immediately after the Gallagher ambush, a party of Volunteers lay in ambush each night for about a week on the Tuam side of Michael Moran's house, which was less than two miles from Tuam, on the Dublin road. Moran was Battalion O/C and it was rumoured that his house was to be burned. About ten to twelve men lay in ambush for the incendiaries each night. The night I was there, Lieutenant Peter Burke of Barnaderg Company was in charge. Our position was immediately inside the fence of the Tuam-Dublin road, on the right-hand side as one goes from Tuam in the Dublin direction. There was a wood at our back which would have afforded good cover, in case the enemy proved to be too strong for our party. The house was not burned, or no attempt was made by the enemy to burn it.

Michael Moran, Battalion O/C, was arrested in November, 1920. He was released and re-arrested in a few days. He was killed while a prisoner at Nun's Island, Galway. His body was brought to the Tuam Cathedral where an unarmed guard of honour of Volunteers kept watch until the funeral took place. About two hundred unarmed Volunteers marched in military formation in the funeral. British military broke through the ranks of the Volunteers and pushed the unarmed Volunteers into the sides of the road. I heard the officer in charge of the British military say, "They are marching in military formation", and I remember distinctly hearing the Archbishop of Tuam say, in reply, "They are not

march~~ing~~. The R.I.C. did not show up at the funeral.

In the Spring of 1921, two ambushes were laid near Carrarea, on the Tuam-Dunmore road, about four miles from Dunmore. Brigadier Patrick Dunleavy was in charge on both occasions. Brigadier Fogarty had been captured by this time. One lorry of R.I.C. and Black and Tans went from Dunmore to Tuam two or three times a week to collect mails and bring back supplies from Tuam. It was also known to the I.R.A. that, occasionally, two or three lorry-loads of enemy forces went in the opposite direction (from Tuam to Dunmore) and this was taken into account in deciding on the number of men required for the attack on the lorry going for the supplies from Dunmore to Tuam. On the first occasion, up to forty Volunteers assembled. They were armed with rifles (about twelve) and shotguns. I think there were also a few Mills hand grenades. There were no road blocks, as the road was a very busy one and the danger of word reaching the enemy was too great. The road was not mined. The Volunteers were in position immediately inside the fence of the road. The countryside stretching away from the road was very level and open, and afforded very little cover if we were forced to break off the engagement. The enemy lorry did not turn up during the time we occupied the ambush position on the first occasion, which was the end of March, or early April. We got into position before daybreak and remained the whole day until it got dark in the evening.

On the second occasion which was about mid-April, the same number of men assembled in the same place. We arrived and took up positions about daybreak. Shortly after having taken up our positions, word was received

that three lorry loads of British military had arrived in Dunmore the day before. A meeting of the officers, including the Tuam and Dunmore Battalion Staff Officers, was held and it was decided to withdraw as it was considered that the British force might be too strong for our force. We were withdrawn about a mile from the road and brought nearer to Tuam. We occupied houses there for the day. In the evening we were brought to about one hundred and fifty yards from the road and occupied positions covering a stretch of the road, roughly two hundred yards in length. At this point, there were good fences to help cover a withdrawal if necessary, and darkness was approaching. One tender of R.I.C. passed from Tuam in the direction of Dunmore. We opened fire on the tender but failed to bring it to a halt. We withdrew as soon as the tender went out of sight. We heard afterwards that some of the R.I.C. were wounded.

A few minutes after we had fired at the tender containing the R.I.C., two further lorries passed in the direction of Tuam to Dunmore, but we had withdrawn too far from the road to engage them. After that, the parties of R.I.C. and British military travelled in much greater numbers and it was out of the question to attack them in flat country where reinforcements could reach them very quickly from Tuam.

Intelligence:

We relied on our sisters and neighbours to give us any information they came by, regarding enemy movements. My own sisters brought despatches to Tuam. Young girls often gave us information about the approach of enemy raiding parties. The Manager of the Co-operative Store

in Cortoon - Mr. Peter Bodkin of Ballaghalode - often gave us valuable information. He was in a favourable position to obtain information. There was no branch of Cumann na mBan attached to my Company.

Communications:

As I have stated above, young girls brought despatches into and through the town of Tuam. In the matter of delivery of despatches in the country areas from Company to Company, Volunteers did the work, taking short-cuts on foot across fields, or taking bye-roads on bicycles. My Company had a good deal of despatch work to do as the Battalion Staff Officers stayed most of the time in the nearby villages of Ballaghalode, Poldorragha and Blackstick where the people, although poor, were truly loyal and devoted to the I.R.A. These three villages were never raided during the War of Independence period. The village of Blackstick was in Barnaderg Company area, and the other two villages were in my own Company area (Cortoon).

Raids by Enemy:

From the time of the Gallagher ambush in July, 1920, to the Truce in July, 1921, the enemy continually raided houses of Volunteers in my Company area, but only one man out of my Company was arrested during that time. My own home was raided very many times and a great deal of damage was done in the course of those raids. On one occasion, an attempt was made to burn the house, but my sisters succeeded in

putting out the fire. The house of the Company Adjutant, Michael Gannon, was raided and all the furniture broken. Kenny's public house at Cortoon was raided on one occasion when bottles of whiskey and stout were broken after the raiding party had helped themselves to all the drink they wanted.

Great credit is due to the local people for their help and hospitality. Volunteers on the run were always most welcome to food and shelter. The people seemed to regard it as a privilege to help.

I.R.B.:

I was sworn into the Irish Republican Brotherhood by Thomas Dunleavy in the year, 1920, as far as I can remember. I cannot recollect attending any meetings of the Brotherhood.

SIGNED: Thomas Wilson

DATE: 8th June 1955

B.M.
5 W

(Thomas Wilson)

WITNESS: C. Moynihan
(C. Moynihan)

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