

W. S. 1,189

ORIGINAL

BUREAU OF MILITARY HISTORY 1913-21

BURO STAIRÉ MILEATA 1913-21

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BUREAU OF MILITARY HISTORY, 1913-21.

STATEMENT BY WITNESS.

DOCUMENT NO. W.S. 1,189.

Witness

Thomas O'Connor,  
28 Lower Castle Street,  
Tralee,  
Co. Kerry.

Identity.

Brigade Adjutant Fianna, Tralee,  
1918-1921.

Subject.

Fianna activities, Tralee, Co. Kerry,  
1918-1921.

Conditions, if any, Stipulated by Witness.

Nil

File No. S. 2482

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STATEMENT OF THOMAS O'CONNOR,

28, Lower Castle St., Tralee, Co. Kerry.

I was born in 1903. in Tralee, Co. Kerry. I was sent to the local Christian Brothers' schools until I was fifteen years of age. After leaving the Christian Brothers' schools I went to Rockwell College for two years.

Early in 1918 the Fianna were reorganised in Tralee and the County Kerry generally by Michael O'Leary, who later became Brigade O/C. They had been in existence in County Kerry from the year 1912 but had become disorganised after Easter Week, 1916. In the town of Tralee three sluaghs - Boherbee, Rock St. and Strand St. - were organised. I joined the Strand St. slough. These three sluaghs made up the Tralee Battalion, the strength of which was 400. Paddy Daly was Battalion O/C when I joined. Other members were Billy Myles, William Griffin and Paddy Ryan.

A short time after I joined elections took place to select officers for the Brigade Staff. Michael O'Leary became Brigade O/C, Billy Myles Vice O/C, and I became Adjutant. Maurice Kerins became Quartermaster and Patrick Hanafin Intelligence Officer. The brigade strength at the time was around 1,000.

During the year the battalion drilled and paraded. We had revolver practice from time to time and also practice in handling and using Mills bombs. We had managed to obtain the revolvers and bombs from the local military barracks at Ballymullen. Billy Myles's father was a general carpenter and was employed in the barracks.

He was able to obtain the revolvers, ammunition and bombs from time to time from soldiers stationed in the barracks.

The year 1919 was a continuation of parades and drills. We held recruiting parades during the year, and by the end of the year the strength of the Tralee Battalion had increased to 600 while the brigade strength had gone up to 1,250. We were under the control of the Brigade O/C I.R.A. and his staff. Our main duties were carrying dispatches and intelligence work for the I.R.A.

In the year 1920 we were training and drilling day and night. On the 19th February of this year the I.R.A. in charge of Tadhg Brosnan and Dan Jeffers carried out an attack on Camp R.I.C. barracks. The Tralee Battalion Fianna were mobilised for the attack and were on duty from Ballymullen military barracks to Blennerville Bridge. They were placed at strategic points from the barracks to the bridge. With three other members of the Fianna, I was on duty at Blennerville Bridge. Our duty was to warn the I.R.A. taking part in the attack of the approach of enemy reinforcements. No reinforcements were sent to Camp on the occasion.

Previous to the attack on Fenit R.I.C. barracks by the I.R.A. under Paddy Paul Fitzgerald on the night of the 2nd June, 1920, I took part in blocking and trenching roads in the area around Tralee. The Tralee Battalion Fianna were fully mobilised for this event and were on duty until 5 a.m. the following morning.

On the day previous to the swoop by the I.R.A. on Tralee railway station on the 20th July, 1920, I carried a quantity of small arms from 'A' or Boherbee Company I.R.A.

to 'D' or Rock St. Company. On this occasion the I.R.A. boarded a train at Ballyroe, a short distance from the station, and with the co-operation of the guard and fireman were successful in overpowering a military guard at the station and capturing eleven rifles.

Sometime before the 30th October, 1920, an order was received by the I.R.A. Brigade Staff from G.H.Q., Dublin, to carry out an attack on enemy forces in the town on this particular night. It appears that this was a general order to all brigades in Ireland following the death of Terence MacSwiney on hunger-strike. The three local companies I.R.A., as well as the Fianna, were mobilised for this night. With Jerry Connor, Denis O'Donohoe and Jerry Myles of the I.R.A., I opened fire with a revolver on three uniformed wireless operators attached to Ballymullen military barracks. It was a very dark night and we were under the impression they were military. The three men were wounded and ran for cover. On the same night Strand St. Company I.R.A. captured two R.I.C. in the town. They later attacked a Black and Tan patrol and wounded a couple of them. The two captured R.I.C. were later shot dead by order of the Brigade Staff I.R.A.

All during this year we were engaged in shadowing the R.I.C., military, Black and Tans and Auxiliaries, particularly two officers of these forces named Major McKinnon and Head Constable Benson, as well as a local Black and Tan called "Dingle" Shea.

I took part in raids on the Great Southern Railway station in the town for military equipment consigned to different enemy barracks in Counties Cork and Kerry. The equipment consisted of field telephones, batteries,

blankets, water-bottles and hospital equipment, which we seized. On a couple of occasions we came across wagon loads of petrol in drums. We moved the wagons into a siding at the station and set fire to the petrol as it stood in the wagons.

Several of our members had obtained employment in the local post office, where, on numerous occasions, they got possession of telegrams in code passing from Dublin Castle and vice versa to the various military and police barracks in the area. The Brigade Adjutant I.R.A., Paddy Garvey, had obtained the key to these coded messages from Tadhg Kennedy, Brigade I.O. to the I.R.A., with the result that all of these messages were in the hands of Garvey or Kennedy before they were delivered to the enemy. During the year I purchased at least three dozen long and short Webley revolvers from a soldier in Ballymullen barracks. The soldier, whose name was Perry, was attached to a Signal Corps in the barracks. The revolvers were always taken out by Molly Myles, sister of Billy Myles.

At the end of the year the I.R.A. formed a Brigade Active Service Unit which was made up of about thirty men. Paddy Cahill became O/C of the unit. From then to the Truce, with other members of the Fianna, I was constantly on the road carrying dispatches to and from the different battalion officers in the area, Brigade Active Service Unit and Brigade Staff. Nearly all of these messages passed through the Brigade Adjutant, Paddy Garvey, or Brigade I.O., Tadhg Kennedy. I also took part in collecting and delivering rifles, revolvers and ammunition between the different battalions and A.S.U. during the same period, as they were required by the I.R.A. I assisted in decoding the messages taken out of the post office by our members there.

By the latter end of February, 1921, or early in March the Active Service Unit, which became known as the Flying Column, had set up headquarters in a hut at Keel. Shortly after the column decided to ambush a convoy of military and Black and Tans who travelled occasionally from Dingle to Annascaul and back. The attack was planned to take place at Lispole, midway between the two points. With other members of the Fianna we met members of the Dingle and Castlegregory Battalions I.R.A. on the morning of the 19th March at the point selected, where we were joined by the Flying Column under Paddy Cahill.

The attacking party was divided into four sections, two on either side of the road. One section occupied an old schoolhouse near a bend in the road. I was in a section of about ten men who occupied a position in a dike at the back of the schoolhouse. The dike ran along beside an old boreen which was almost parallel with the road. Paddy Cahill and Commandant Tadhg Erosnan were in this section. Another section under Paddy Paul Fitzgerald occupied a position on the opposite side of the road, while the fourth section under Michael Duhig occupied a cottage on the roadside opposite the schoolhouse. We were all armed with either rifles, revolvers, bombs or shotguns. I had a rifle.

We remained in position all day and retired at about 6 p.m. when the enemy did not put in an appearance. Next day we again occupied our positions at about 10 a.m. but nothing happened except that one of our men was accidentally wounded by the discharge of a shotgun carried by a member of the local company. We again retired at 6 p.m. Next day, on the 21st March, shortly after taking up positions one of our men accidentally discharged a punt

gun which had been placed in position outside the schoolhouse. Around 3 p.m. we were taken completely by surprise and almost surrounded in our positions on our side of the road. The military and Black and Tans had been informed in Dingle of our movements and had come out to Lispole in three or four lorries. Instead of driving into the ambush position they pulled up the lorries about half a mile from it and proceeded to encircle us from behind. Machine-gun fire was opened on us at the same time by a party of military in a field on the opposite side of the road. In the confusion which followed, one of our men, Tom Ashe, was killed and two were wounded - Tommy Hawley and Jimmy Daly. Hawley died later. Five of our men were captured. Cahill eventually rallied a number of our men and opened fire on the surrounding military. Shooting became intermittent and lasted for almost three hours. He asked me if I had a whistle. I replied that I had. He told me to blow it. When the military and Tans heard it they were under the impression that it was an order from their officer in charge to retreat. They abandoned their five prisoners and beat a retreat to the road, taking a couple of wounded men with them. They jumped into their lorries and returned to Dingle. We who had been almost surrounded got away. Among the men taking part with me were Tom Connor, Killorglin; Gregory Ashe, brother of Thomas Ashe; Mike O'Leary, Brigade O/C Fianna; Billy Myles, Jimmy Fitzgerald, Lispole, and Jack Moran of Dingle. About a fortnight later a District Inspector Hamilton who had seen me in Lispole met me in Tralee. He was about to stop me when I dashed through a nearby house and escaped.

In Tralee, with other members of the Fianna I continued to shadow Major McKinnon, Benson and two or

three ex-British soldiers who were known to be giving information to the enemy. Eventually on the 15th April, 1921, with the help of three members of the Fianna - Jimmy O'Connor, Hanafin and Mullally - Major McKinnon was shot dead by members of the I.R.A. as he was playing a round of golf. Their names were Healy, Kelly, Donohoe and Patrick O'Connor.

About a week later one of the ex-British soldiers mentioned above, whose name was Loughlin, was shot dead by three members of the I.R.A., one of whom was Thomas O'Driscoll, in the publichouse of a man named Knightly in Castle St., Tralee.

Some time after the shooting of McKinnon, while I was in the headquarters of the column in the "Hut" at Keel, the column decided to attack a military ration party who left their barracks at Glenbeigh and travelled once a week to Tralee, returning in the evening. With the column I left the "Hut" early on the morning of the 26th April and proceeded to Laca, Inch, where we procured a couple of boats and crossed over to Crumane Strand. From there we walked the six miles to Glenbeigh, having to crawl the last couple of miles to avoid detection from the R.I.C. barracks. At Glenbeigh railway station we met Tom O'Connor, Battalion O/C of Killorglin, and a number of his men. Cahill placed the main body of men behind a ditch opposite the gate through which the military would have to enter the station. He placed a couple of men in the waiting-room and signal box. I was with the main body.

The military party, which numbered 20 men, came through the gate and mingled with a number of passengers waiting on the platform. Cahill gave the order "open fire". We fired about two or three rounds each. I had



a revolver and bomb; the other men had either rifles or shotguns. The military turned and ran, dropping a machine-gun pan of ammunition and a number of rifles. They ran for their barracks which was about three hundred yards away and overlooked the railway station. We dashed for the platform and collected the machine-gun, fourteen rifles and 5,000 rounds of ammunition. I happened to pick up three of the rifles. The action had lasted ten to fifteen minutes. We called it a day and dispersed.

On the 1st June Tom O'Connor, Battalion O/C Killorglin, with the help of the column in charge of Tadhg Brosnan, carried out an attack on an R.I.C. cycle party near Castlemaine as they were returning to their barracks in Killorglin. With Mike O'Leary and members of the attacking party we took up a position behind a ditch on one side of the road about a mile from the village. We numbered about 44. Half had rifles, the other half had shotguns. I had a rifle. When the cycle party came into the ambush position Tom O'Connor gave the order "open fire". We fired a couple of rounds each. They numbered ten men. Seven of these, including a Sergeant McCarthy, were shot dead; three escaped. We came out on the road and collected seven rifles and a couple of revolvers.

One of my last actions before the Truce was to paste up around the town printed posters setting out the names of R.I.C. men and Black and Tans who had been sentenced to be shot by the I.R.A. for their activities against the I.R.A. and people generally.

During the Truce I attended a training camp at Shankill, near Dublin, and later another camp at Derrymore, Co. Kerry, where I received instruction in the use of the

machine-gun. During the Truce I was presented by Mr. de Valera, on behalf of G.H.Q. Fianna, with a silver watch inscribed with my name for outstanding services during the fight with the Black and Tans.

Signed: Thomas O'Connor  
(Thomas O'Connor)

Date: 15th June, 1955

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

