ROINN COSANTA.

BUREAU OF MILITARY HISTORY, 1913-21.

**STATEMENT BY WITNESS.**

# DOCUMENT NO. W.S. 1,230

**Witness**

Micheal O Cuirrin (Michael Curran),
Baile na nGall (Ballinagall),
Rinn (Ring),
Co. Puirt Lairge (Co. Waterford).

**Identity.**

Cap tain, Ring Company Irish Volunteers,
Co. Waterford, 1917 - .

**Subject.**

Ring Company Irish Volunteers
Co. Waterford, 1913-1923.

**Conditions, if any, Stipulated by Witness.**

Nil

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ORIGINAL



STATEMENT BY MÍCHEÁL Ó CUIRRÍN,

Baile na nGall, Rinn, Dún Garbháin,

Co. Puirt Láirge.

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I was born in Baile na nGall, Ring, Co. Waterford, in the year 1897. My people were farmers, and native Irish speakers, as I am myself.

My first connection with the National Movement was in 1913 when I joined the National Volunteers. We had a Company of about twenty-five men, and, when the split in the Volunteers occurred in 1915, every man of the twenty-five men left the National Volunteers and formed a Company of Irish Volunteers.

We had at the time only a few guns, a couple of sporting rifles and a shot-gun or two.

We got no advance news of the 1916 Rising and first heard about it when the Insurrection was actually 'on foot'. We got no orders to take any action in our district, and, consequently, took no part in the Rising at all.

Following 1916, the Ring Company faded out for a while, but was reorganised in mid 1917 at which time I was in business at Wolfhill, Leix.

When the Volunteers were reorganised in that area, the late P.J. Fleming asked me to join. I did so and remained with the Wolfhill Company for about six months when I was called back to Ballinagall, County Waterford.

I found, on my return, that the local Volunteer Company was still in existence, but no regular meetings were being held and things were

being allowed to drift. I called a meeting of the men and at that meeting was elected Company Captain. Louis Boyle was appointed 1st Lieutenant and Nicholas Lenane, 2nd Lieutenant.

We had about twenty-five men on the roll, but very few of these were armed. The position regarding arms was much the same then as it was prior to 1916. I, myself, happened to have two .22 rifles with which I was able to give the men a good deal of target practise. At the request of the Brigade O/C, we organised a dance to raise funds to purchase arms. I remember getting together £12,as a result of the dance, and passing the money to the Brigade O/C, Pax Whelan of Dungarvan.

Parades were held twice a week, our Drill Instructor being an ex-British Army man who was also a member of our Company. I used attend regular Battalion Council meetings at various places in the 3rd Battalion area, the Commandant being Jim Mansfield of Old Parish.

In the summer of 1918, a new quay was under construction at Helvick Head. A magazine was built to store explosives to be used for blasting operations. The foreman who held the key of the magazine lived close to the Works.

A Company Council was held and it was decided to hold up the foreman for the key at midnight and capture the explosives.

Four of us went by a circuitous route around the hills towards the foreman's house and donned masks when we reached the place, as we were all well known to him. The man was on the point of going to bed when we knocked at the door which was opened cautiously.

I held a small Belgian automatic and gave the order "Hands Up", which was promptly complied with. I explained what we wanted and the

key was handed over. As we were leaving, the foreman called me back and asked that some of the explosive be left and that he would not report the loss of the remainder to the authorities. We agreed, as this meant we could carry out another raid in the near future which, in fact, we did.

We took a large quantity of explosives that night and stored it in a dump which took weeks to construct and we did all the work on it at night.

A description of this dump might be of interest to record.

Digging in a field of mine one day near a huge rock, my shovel struck something hard. On further digging, I succeeded in raising a large flat stone which covered a cavity fully six feet wide. On investigating, I found the hole to be about fifteen feet deep, the sides being built up with stones. To me this looked like a readymade dump. There was an accumulation of clay at the bottom, but four of us worked in relays with buckets at night and cleaned it out. I made a man-hole and covered it with fresh sods which rendered it impossible to discover. It was perfectly dry inside and ideal for the storage of guns or explosives. In my opinion this cavern was constructed by smugglers for use as a hiding place for goods, many years previously.

During the year 1918, Company activities were confined to drilling and general training with a view to tightening up discipline. Practise with the .22 rifle was carried out by every member of the Company in turn.

In the month of May, 1919, I received information that guns and ammunition were stored in the residence of the Sheriff at Helvick Head.

At about 1 o'clock in the morning a party of six of us headed for the Sheriff's house. I carried my automatic revolver. The remainder of the men were unarmed. The house was surrounded by a high wall which we scaled. The windows and doors were strongly barricaded. We cut through one of the windows with a few tools we had and gave the place a thorough searching. We found only a small quantity of ammunition lying loose. We ripped the floors and tested the ceilings but, to our dismay, found nothing worthwhile. We took away with us a powerful telescope which proved very useful later on.

The caretaker who lived close by reported the matter to the local R.I.C. who were stationed about a mile away. The next day we saw, to our disgust, the R.I.C. marching away with five rifles and a quantity of ammunition which they found safely hidden in a sofa with a false bottom. We raided the same place in 1921 when the Sheriff lived there. That raid was carried out in daylight, but all we got was some ammunition.

In the summer of 1920, I got the Intelligence Officer at work collecting information regarding the Coastguard Station at Helvick, with a view to attacking it.

After a month or so when all was ready I sent a despatch to Jim Mansfield, 3rd Battalion Commandant, who made preparations right away for the attack which was to take place on a Sunday night in August.

Men from various Companies in the Battalion were mobilised at a place called Terry's Cross, about a mile from the Station, and a message sent to Brigade Headquarters to supply the attacking party with ammunition, as the Coastguards were expected to put up a stiff resistence.

After hours of waiting and no ammunition,a Council of the officers was held when it was decided to call off the attack. The men were dismissed and went home, sorely disappointed.

The next day we learned that the roads leading into the area had been guarded by military thus preventing the ammunition bearers from arriving.

In the summer of 1920, a party of R.I.C. numbering about thirty, came into our area on a Sunday afternoon with rifles strapped on their bicycles. They cycled towards Helvic. About ten of our Company, including myself, were sitting at a crossroads. As they passed they seemed to take particular notice of us, as I heard one of them pass the remark, "Some Rebels".

I sent a scout on a bike after them to report their movements. The scout soon reported that all of the R.I.C. were in Murray's public-house, and the bicycles were lying against the wall with the rifles strapped on.

I told the scout to return and continue to watch the movements of the R.I.C. I also sent some of the men with me to round-up others of the Company and to bring along their arms (shot guns). Every man was to travel alone around the hills on the Atlantic side and to meet up at a certain point in the hills.

We met as arranged, about twenty of us, and marched through the hills towards Murray's public-house. When we came in view of the public-house we were disappointed to find the R.I.C. going around a bend in the road about half a mile away. They didn't make much delay in the public-house.

About September, 1920, four of the Ring Company raided the mails coming into the area from Dungarvan. A letter was found addressed to a James Whelan and was from an R.I.C. man previously

stationed at Ring. This R.I.C. man was making an appointment with Whelan to meet him in Cody's public-house, Ring, where Whelan worked as an assistant.

We got suspicious, so we put a new envelope and stamp on the letter and let it through the next day. I placed a guard in the vicinity of Cody's on the appointed day. The report he brought back confirmed my suspicions, so we laid a trap for the spy, Whelan.

Shortly afterwards I got six or seven of my men to dress up as military and R.I.C. and they made their way into the house where Whelan slept. One of our men, by the name of Louis Boyle, who was a perfect mimic at the Cockney accent, did all the talking. Whelan gave Boyle all the information at his command about the Company, the names of the officers and men and the location of the dump.

Next day I sent a report to Battalion Headquarters. A National Council was held and sentence of execution was to take place. However, information reached us that Whelan didn't get paid for his dirty work, so he was finally reprieved having been severely warned as to his future conduct.

During 1920, I received orders from Commandant Mansfield to destroy the vacated barracks at Ring and I had everything ready when he arrived about midnight. We were wet to the skin as it had rained heavily during the night.

We got to the barracks, burst in the door with a sledge, went upstairs, placed hay around the walls and then poured oil on the hay. We then gave it a match. The flames licked the ceiling and soon the floor and ceiling upstairs was a roaring furnace. As we reached the landing to come downstairs the flames were eating the stairs halfways up. We plunged through the

flames, getting badly scorched in doing so and got safely to the first floor. We found that the flames had come through a slit in the floor. In a short time the stronghold was in ruins.

About the middle of January, 1920, I had a visit from the Commandant who told me that the R.I.C. barracks in Ardmore was to be attacked on a certain night, and asked me to post scouts on the Dungarvan-Ardmore road. This I did.

I was within a couple of miles of the scene of the attack with a bicycle squad. We could plainly hear the crack of rifles and shotguns as the barracks was being attacked. Verey lights could be seen in the sky. The attackers withdrew, as the Military from Youghal were on their way to help the R.I.C.

The day after we destroyed the Ring R.I.C. barracks a lorry-load of R.I.C., with the District Inspector, came out to view the remains of the barracks.

The lorry was parked about a mile from the barracks on the main Ring-Dungarvan road. The driver, who was armed, acted as sentry.

One of the Ring Volunteers named Patrick Whelan, who stood well over six feet in his bare feet and didn't know the meaning of fear, came to my house which was situated close to the main road about 300 yards from where the lorry stood.

He stuttered and stammered with excitement, trying to explain to me about the police and the lorry. He wanted both of us to attack the sentry. I said, "No, we must get some men, as the lorry must be burned". The police were well on their way to the barrack by now.

While we were discussing things, two more Volunteers with revolvers came along.

We cut across fields until we came within one field of where the lorry was and were crouching inside a fence, when a neighbour's dog ran out of a house and started barking viciously at us. Whelan got so mad at the dog that he inadvertently popped his head over the fence and was spotted by the sentry who must have 'got the wind up', because he got behind the wheel of the lorry and, like a flash, drove off in the direction of the barracks.

We left our position and went further afield, still keeping the road in view. The lorry came back in ten minutes and, as it passed the spot where we were, the police were seen kneeling down in the lorry with their rifles resting on the sideboard.

Whelan was so angry that he asked my permission to go back and shoot the offensive dog.

In the month of May, 1920, the Battalion Commandant, Jim Mansfield, came to my area and ordered me to provide five or six men on bicycles to proceed to a district between Dungarvan and Stradbally and cut down communication lines as Stradbally R.I.C. barracks was about to be attacked.

He accompanied us to the place where we spent hours cutting wires. However, the attack did not take place, as the military came to the rescue of the garrison, so our precious time was wasted that night.

Ambush at Piltown Cross, Co. Waterford.

Early in the month of November, 1920, I had a despatch from the Commandant telling me that an ambush had been planned to take place at Piltown Cross about fourteen miles south-west of Ring and, approximately, three miles north-west of Youghal. I was ordered to detail three or four men to go to Piltown Cross and the rest of my Company for outpost duty.

Lieutenants Boyle and Lenane were put in charge of the outposts of about fifteen men. William Walsh, Tom Sheehan and myself left for Piltown on bicycles on the night of 1st November, 1920.

The night was bitterly cold and we had about twelve or more miles to cover before reaching our destination. Finally, we got there and soon we were placed in position.

The Ardmore R.I.C. barracks was to be attacked the same night and the Youghal military were expected to come to their aid.

As we lay in our positions, shivering with cold and excitement, the Verey lights went rocketting into the sky from the besieged garrison at Ardmore. The suspense was now beginning to get on the nerves of our men.

We were just beginning to think that the guns would go off when the roar of a Crossley tender was heard in the distance. As it came nearer, I could hear my heart beating a tatoo against my ribs, as I waited to receive my real baptism of fire.

When the lorry was half way through our lines the order to fire was given. Volley after volley was poured into the human freight. Panic-stricken, the 'Tommies' jumped off the lorry now stopped dead. Some fell off wounded or killed. The British O/C. jumped over the fence between two of our men. One 'Tommy' made a mad dash along the road, but was soon laid in his tracks by our marksmen. He was found to be mortally wounded and only lived a short time.

One other soldier was killed outright and five or six wounded. There was only one slight casualty on our side. The road was

littered with rifles and equipment whichwere readily collected by willing hands and stored away in safety.

When all was completed, the Commandant dismissed us,thanking the men. Each man returned to his respective home not to sleep, but ponder over the events of the night.

Engagement at Robert's Cross, Ring.

In March, 1921, I was visiting a neighbour's house where an old lady had just returned from Dungarvan. I was there about an hour when she suddenly remembered having a letter for me. When I opened the letter, I found it was a despatch from the Brigade O/C. telling me that an ambush was to take place that night at 8 p.m. at Egan's Bridge which is situated about three miles south of Dungarvan on the main Dungarvan-Ring road. The order was to mobilise all my men and proceed to the scene of the proposed ambush. It was just 8 p.m. when I was handed this despatch.

I rushed out of the house and blew my whistle, which was a pre-arranged signal for the men to mobilise at my home. About ten or twelve men heard the whistle blast and came straight away to my place. I explained our mission; the men went to get their guns and we proceeded on foot along the road to the scene of the ambush.

Just when we reached Robert's Cross, which is three miles or so from Egan's Bridge, a pony and trap with a lantern in front of the trap held by a man, approached us from the Dungarvan direction. There were six men in the trap in civilian clothes. We paid no attention to them, believing them to be farmers coming out from Dungarvan. They passed us and were gone on a few yards when they stopped the pony and peppered our ranks with rifle fire. They were military who had left a lorry further down the road and who had dressed in civilian clothes which they got from farm-houses nearby.

The military lorry was now approaching from Dungarvan and we found ourselves caught between two fires.

I ordered a retreat to the North, as we had a good advantage with the fall of ground and had little difficulty in finding cover.

One of our men, Declan Regan, who was alongside of me, was seriously wounded in the left hand, the whole knuckle of which was shattered by a .303 bullet. As he got over the fence he collapsed. Jack Curran, Tom Hayes and myself, who were about forty yards in front of him, heard him shout, "I'm done!"

I called the other two and came back to Regan in a crawling position under a hail of lead. One man caught his (Regan's) two legs and one man under each arm-pit. We finally succeeded in getting him out of the range of fire. Our faces and hands were a mass of scratches and cuts from briars and brambles.

The night was dark and we lost our way in a dangerous marsh. Weak from loss of blood, Regan fainted four or five times on the way. We bandaged the injured limb and, by the aid of the lighthouse and the tide which, lucky enough, was out, we managed to struggle home giving the wounded man lifts in turns on our backs. We had then covered roughly six miles from the scene of the attack.

When we got to Ballinagall village the military were there ahead of us, so we were forced back to safer ground. We were lucky to find the local doctor at home. He attended to our patient. The same doctor (Doctor Moynihan) served in the European War. He was loyal to our cause and made Regan as comfortable as possible for the next two months.

About the month of April, 1921, the Battalion O/C, Jim Mansfield, was billeting in the Ring-Helvick area. While he was with us a British Man-of-War came into the harbour. Lifeboats were launched and manned with military fully equipped. About 200 or more were landed on the new pier at Helvick. The men formed up and moved off towards Youghal whilst the O/C. and myself looked on with interest.

The military had no sooner gone than we heard that they had left a bicycle behind them at Bateman's. Bateman was a signalman attached to the lifeboat service in his house a short time previously.

We visited his house that night and got him to 'phone the military in Youghal to find out if they were coming back for the bicycle. The O/C. in Youghal replied that he would send a lorry the following morning. We proposed to attack that lorry when it came out to Helvick.

We had left the house just a short distance when we noticed a boat coming from the Marine Station at Ballinacourty, across the harbour. It contained four Marines carrying rifles. We were armed with revolvers and had full advantage over the Marines, but we had to forego the attack as we had 'bigger fish to catch' when the lorry of military arrived next day to collect the bicycle. It never dawned on us that the Marines had come ashore for the same purpose. Apparently, the British O/C. at Youghal had 'phoned the Marines asking them to do the job of collecting the bicycle, which they did, and departed unmolested.

It was, I think, in April, 1921, when I received orders to get two boats ready to put to sea as a ship was expected to land arms at Helvick Head.

Some of my Company were fishermen, so we manned the boats and put to sea night after night 'cruising' the Atlantic for a month or six weeks. Relief came to us at last, for the order was cancelled for the time being.

At the same period we had instructions to refrain from military activities; the area was to remain perfectly quiet, not even parades were allowed.

I should have stated before this that about March, 1921, I received orders from the Battalion O/C. to destroy the Coastguard Station at Helvick as we heard that Marines were to be stationed there. The station was, at the time, occupied by Coastguards, their wives and families.

Assisted by members of the Old Parish Company we removed the furniture from the five houses occupied by the Coastguards. We saw to it that the women and children were accommodated in neighbouring houses.

The chief boatman was in charge. We placed him under arrest. We had great difficulty in 'firing' the houses so, as dawn was approaching, we placed a few land-mines in the houses to complete the destruction.

We returned the next night with picks and sledges and demolished the roofs, leaving nothing but the bare walls. In a few days our area was devoid of any vestige of British domination.

Sometime in March, 1921, I received orders to select a suitable place for use as an arms and ammunition dump.

Four of the best men in the Company and myself traversed the whole area at night, in search of a suitable spot. Finally, we

picked on a grand site on the side of a cliff. The place was sandy but very dry. The work would be easy as the ground had a grand slope and we could tunnel right through. The sea was close and our excavations could go into the tide unnoticed.

I got four men to work at night until 6 o'clock in the morning. Others collected timber to serve as props,and Cumann na mBan did the catering as usual so that the men were never in want. I made it my business to inspect each night's work to ensure that the tunnel was safely propped .

After much labour we got the work in ship-shape but, paying the place a visit one Sunday morning, I found that the side of the cliff had moved and our dump had 'gone west'.

Nothing daunted, we searched around again and discovered a stone bridge well built in the mountain. It was fairly high inside. We cut a tunnel underneath for the water and covered it over with stone flags. I then sent the Company picking cork, a lot of which got washed up by the tide. This cork was carried in sacks to the scene of operations and was used to line the floor and walls of our dump, rendering it safe and dry.

By this time the men were getting impatient for some military action, when an order came from Battalion Headquarters to commence a look-out for another arms ship. This was in September, 1921.

The whole Company was billeted in a farmer's house on Helvick Head and the old watch-house on the Head was used as a look-out although it was without doors or windows. The men took turns watching to sea for six or eight weeks. Units of the Brigade acted on outpost duty, and Cumann na mBan did the catering.

One night, when a thick mist enveloped the harbour, a British cruiser came in and dropped anchor. We hoped our expected guest did not show up that night. About midnight, one of our watchmen reported seeing flashes of light through the mist. I dashed to the watch-house, but could see nothing.

Next morning the British cruiser had disappeared and later on we learned that the ship carrying the arms had gone on to Passage East and landed her cargo. Lucky for us and everybody concerned that there was a heavy mist that night, or all would have been lost.

During the Truce period I attended a training camp for officers of the Waterford Brigade, which was conducted by Paddy Paul of Waterford. After this training I returned again to my Company.

In March, 1922, I got orders to stand by and prepare for a landing of arms at Helvick by another ship. We went to our look-out posts on the Head again and one morning, as it blew a gale from the North-East, the men on watch spied a schooner painted in fancy colours and making for the harbour but, evidently, in distress.

We manned the lifeboat and put to sea while the schooner was fast making for a reef of sunken rocks in the mouth of the harbour.

As we approached the schooner the coxwain of our boat saw she was bearing fast down on us. We just barely avoided being rammed. She was a German boat and, when they saw the red, white and blue colours on the lifeboat, the crew of the schooner thought they were doomed. However, after a little while, we succeeded in persuading them that we were friends, not enemies as they thought. Their knowledge of English was limited which didn't help matters.

After a strenuous morning being tossed about in a raging sea we managed to get our precious cargo safely into port. I then got

in touch with the Company Transport officer to arrange to transport the cargo of arms and ammunition. By 6 o'clock that/evening same the whole consignment was unloaded and brought to a place of safety.

The ship, which was named 'The Hannah Bremen', remained for a few days to dispose of her part cargo of cement, which she carried as a decoy.

When the Civil War broke out in June, 1922, I took the Republican side with about fifteen men of my Company. I might mention here that I was offered (and refused) a Commission in the Free State Army.

I took an active part with the Republican Forces until the 'Cease Fire' order of April, 1923, when I left the country for the U.S.A. and did not return to my native place again until 1932.

Signed: Micheal O Cuirrin
(Micheal O Cuirrin)

Date: 26/8/1955
26/8/1955

Witness: T. O'Gorman
(T. O'Gorman)