

W. S. 1,246

**ORIGINAL**

BUREAU OF MILITARY HISTORY 1913-21  
BURO STAIRÉ MILÉITÁ 1913-21  
No. W.S. 1246

ROINN  COSANTA.

BUREAU OF MILITARY HISTORY, 1913-21.

STATEMENT BY WITNESS.

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Witness

Michael Cleary,  
13 MacHale Terrace,  
Tuam,  
Co. Galway.

Identity.

Lieut. Cortoon Company Irish Volunteers,  
Co. Galway.

Subject.

Cortoon Company Irish Volunteers,  
Co. Galway, 1917-1921.

Conditions, if any, Stipulated by Witness.

Nil

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BUREAU STAIRS MILITARY 87513-246  
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STATEMENT BY MICHAEL CLEARY

13 McHale Terrace, Tuam, Co. Galway.

I was born at Monacow, three miles from Tuam, in January 1895, and attended Lavally National School until I reached the age of 15 years. After leaving school I worked at home with my father at Monacow in the parish of Cortoon.

I remember that in the year 1914 I was working for the Congested Districts Board at Brownsgrrove, a few miles from my own home. The Board's Engineer was a man named Gamble. I think he was a North of Ireland Presbyterian. He enrolled some of the men working for the Board including myself in Redmond's Volunteers. He got the foreman to drill us every day at dinner hour and he himself drilled us every Sunday at Brownsgrrove. He spent all the week days surveying. We learned a good deal of drill from Mr. Gamble and the foreman. Gamble seemed to know the drill very well and was a very good instructor. I think he was an ex-British officer. Very soon after the war started in 1914 the Congested Districts Board stopped work in the area and the drilling fell through when Mr. Gamble departed.

I joined the Cortoon company of the Irish Volunteers when it was formed in 1917. The captain of the company was Arthur Benedict O'Connor, known to us locally as A.B. O'Connor or simply as A.B. Thomas Wilson was 1st Lieutenant, and I cannot now remember the name of the other lieutenant. The strength of the company was about 40 and it did not vary very much from the beginning to the time of the Truce in July 1921. Parades were held once a week on week evenings after work. Lieutenant Wilson did most of the drill teaching as he had acquired a knowledge of drill while a member of the Tuam Company in the period before the Cortoon company was organised. We did some

exercises in foot-drill and had some lessons in the loading and unloading of a Lee-Enfield rifle which, I think, was borrowed from the Barnaderg company for the lessons. I cannot remember any lessons in aiming. I think the reason for that was that our parades were late in the evenings and were held in a barn lighted by one or two small candles.

I was a member of Cortoon Sinn Fein Club which was also started in the year 1917. A.B. O'Connor, who organised the Cortoon company of the Volunteers, was also the principal organiser of the Cortoon Sinn Fein Club. Later on in 1917 and 1918 we had visits by men from Dublin who gave lectures on various subjects including instruction on election procedure. I cannot now recall any of the names of those men. Colm O'Gaora from Connemara paid us many visits and helped the Club a good deal. He was a well-known writer and Irish scholar. He is now dead for some years.

The Sinn Fein Club had a membership of about 100. The members were a mixed lot of young and old people. The Club had the sympathy of all the people in the parish with a few exceptions. The few people who were anti-Sinn Fein were well known and I am afraid our method of converting them was faulty. In any event, it did not prove successful. Our method approaching the 1918 General Election was to paint Sinn Fein slogans on the walls of the houses of the few opponents we had in the parish. I remember one anti-Sinn Fein family, the gable of whose house faced the public road. One Saturday night we painted "Up Cusack" on the gable so that all the people going to Mass the following morning would see it. The painting was done with tar. This family became more embittered against us.

Dr. Brian Cusack was the Sinn Fein candidate for North

Galway at the General Election of 1918. I think he was in prison at the time for an offence against D.O.R.A. The Redmondite candidate was Mr. Thomas Sloyan, a draper from Tuam. I canvassed the whole of the electoral areas of Cortoon and Lavally on behalf of Dr. Cusack. I was accompanied on the canvass by Michael Quinn (now deceased) and by Michael O'Connor a brother of A.B. O'Connor, captain of Cortoon company of the Volunteers and chairman of Cortoon Sinn Fein Club. On the day of the polling I was stationed outside Lavally National School Polling Booth with a copy of the voting register and I assisted all the Sinn Fein supporters in finding their registration numbers. We had all our supporters well drilled in the matter of recording their votes correctly. Dr. Cusack was elected by a comfortable majority as far as I can remember.

In the winter of 1919-20 Cortoon company commenced raiding for arms. Some members of the company were armed with their own private sporting guns, but many had no weapons of any kind. The principal raid was carried out in Clonberne company area and it was arranged by the battalion officers. The idea behind our carrying out the raid in Clonberne company area was that we of Cortoon company would not be known to the people of Clonberne while the members of Clonberne company would. The houses to be raided were pointed out to us by members of Clonberne company. We went into the houses and took the arms while the local company remained in the background.

We got about a dozen shotguns and one German rifle in the raid in Clonberne area. The rifle belonged to an ex-British soldier who brought us to where it was hidden in a fence. We got only a few rounds of ammunition for the rifle and as .303 ammunition did not fit it, this weapon proved of little practical value. The ex-soldier handed it over to us quite

willingly. We got a good number of cartridges for the shotguns. About 12 men of Cortoon company were engaged in the raid with Thomas Dunleavy, captain of Barnaderg company in charge. Cortoon company was allowed to keep all the shotguns and the rifle. Volunteer Patrick Fleming, who was a carpenter, made a suitable wooden box for storing the weapons. He made a good job of the box so that the weapons were always dry, although they were buried in a fence. All the shotguns in our own company area were handed over to us quite freely. Some of the owners invited us to come and collect them.

In January 1920, Castlehackett R.I.C. Barracks was attacked by the I.R.A. Our company was not engaged in this attack. It was carried out by the Barnaderg and Sylane companies, I learned later.

A few members of Cortoon company took part in the attack on Castlegrove R.I.C. barracks then situated on the main Tuam/Ballinrobe road about six miles from Tuam. Sylane Company blocked the main road on each side of the barrack by felling trees. The Sylane and Barnaderg companies provided the majority of the men engaged in the attack, Cortoon, Tuam and Milltown companies providing a few men each. All these companies belonged to the Tuam Battalion. Those who took part from my (Cortoon) company were Thomas Wilson (who, by this time, had replaced A.B. O'Connor as company captain), Thomas Ryan, 1st Lieutenant (afterwards Q.M. Tuam Battalion), Company Adjutant Michael Gannon and myself, afterwards 1st Lieutenant. The attack took place in the Spring of 1920 when the nights were still fairly long. The total number of men engaged in the attack was between 40 and 50 with Brigadier "Con" Fogarty or Battalion O/C. Michael Moran in charge. I cannot say for certain which of these two was in charge.

The attackers were lined along the wall of the main road facing the front of the barrack at a range of from 20 to 30 yards. Six or seven of the men had rifles and the remainder were armed with shotguns. I was armed with a shotgun and when the attack opened I concentrated my fire on the windows nearest me. The attack lasted for about two hours. I do not know who gave the order to call off the attack or why it was given. The I.R.A. suffered no casualty and, as far as I know, none of the garrison was killed or wounded. My position was at the front of the building with Captain Wilson and Company Adjutant Michael Gannon beside me. I remember that the fire from the garrison was fairly heavy, but we had no great difficulty in withdrawing. Castlegrove R.I.C. barracks was evacuated the day following the attack and was burned down by the I.R.A. a few days later.

During the time between the attack on Castlegrove R.I.C. Barracks and the Gallagher ambush, which took place in July 1920, I took part in raids on the mail-car (a side-car) running the mails between Tuam and Dunmore. I and two or three others of Cortoon company took the mails several times. We examined all official-looking letters, keeping a special watch for letters addressed to the R.I.C. barrack in Dunmore. We never opened the letters of persons whom we knew well. As far as I can now remember, we found nothing of any military value in those raids. We always gave back the letters to the mail-car man when we had examined them. I cannot remember now if we marked or stamped them "Opened by the I.R.A." or some such endorsement. During this period parades were held regularly in fields well removed from roads. Parades were discontinued towards the end of 1920.

I remember attending a very large anti-conscription meeting in Tuam one Sunday after 11.30 Mass. The attendance

filled the square and adjoining streets. There was a big number of priests on the platform including Father Owen Hannon, P.P., Tuam, and Father Brett of Killererin parish. Representatives of the Tuam Town Commissioners and of other local bodies were on the platform also. The following Sunday the anti-conscription pledge was signed by all the people, young and old, who attended the two Masses in my native parish of Cortoon. I remember a small table being placed outside the chapel gate where all the congregation signed as they came out from Mass. I think it would be about the month of May. I cannot remember whether the Archbishop of Tuam was present at the big meeting the previous Sunday.

I took very little interest in the Republican Courts or in the Dáil Éireann Loan. I think that the elderly men looked after these things. I cannot remember any Republican Police in our company. I remember carrying dispatches from my own company area to Barnaderg and other company areas and sometimes as far as Dunmore. I was not the appointed dispatch rider in our company area, but I often carried dispatches when the regular dispatch rider was not available.

I knew nothing of the proposed attack on a party of R.I.C. at Gallagher until about an hour before it occurred. I remember I was working at home when Captain Thomas Wilson came to me and told me that a party of R.I.C. returning from Galway to their barrack in Dunmore were to be attacked at Gallagher, three miles from Tuam on the main Tuam/Dunmore road. Captain Wilson told me to hurry and get all the members of the company living near me and have them at Gallagher as quickly as possible. I remember also that he told me they were to be got to Gallagher quietly and that they were to go across the fields singly or in pairs so as not to attract attention.

I collected about five or six Volunteers and armed them with shotguns. I gave them the instructions I had got from Captain Wilson and sent them off. I remember that Thómas O'Connor, a brother of our former captain, accompanied me to Gallagher. The others from my neighbourhood either went before or after us by a different route. When Volunteer O'Connor and I arrived at Gallagher the firing had actually started. We were within a few yards of the ambush position when we heard it first. We took up our positions beside the others just inside the fence of the road on the right hand side as you go from Tuam to Dunmore. I directed my fire at the spot on the far side of the road where I thought the R.I.C. fire was coming from. I had no idea then how many R.I.C. were returning fire. The attack was over in from 10 to 15 minutes when the R.I.C. surrendered.

I learned then that two R.I.C. men were dead on the road and that they were killed almost immediately they left the van in which they had travelled from Galway. The member of the R.I.C. party at the far side of the road put up a good fight. It seems that he got across the far fence when two of the party were killed. I heard afterwards from people who lived convenient to the place that they saw him firing very rapidly and changing his position after every few shots. There were four R.I.C. in the party attacked. Three of them were armed with carbines and the fourth with a revolver. We took the three carbines and the revolver together with a very small amount of ammunition. The two surviving members of the R.I.C. were released and the van burned. Brigade O/C. Con Fogarty and Battalion O/C. Michael Moran were in charge of the 20 or so men from Tuam, Barnaderg and Cortoon Companies engaged in the attack. The following officers and Volunteers took part:-



Tuam company area:- Con Fogarty, O/C. Tuam Brigade.  
Joseph Cooney, Adj. Tuam Battalion.  
Volunteers Peter Barrett & Henry Burke.

Barnaderg do. Michael Moran, O/C. Tuam Battalion.  
Thomas Dunleavy, Q.M. do. (afterwards  
O/C. Tuam Battalion).  
Timothy Dunleavy, Captain, Barnaderg Coy.  
Peter Burke, 1st Lieut. do.  
Volunteers Michael Joseph Ryan, after-  
wards Brigade Engineer; James Courtney,  
Patrick Kelly and Thomas Kelly.

Cortoon do. Captain Thomas Wilson.  
1st Lt. Thomas Ryan (afterwards Bn. Q.M.)  
Michael Gannon, Company Adjutant.  
Volunteers Patrick O'Connor, Roddy  
Slattery, Mark Ryan, Thomas Hynes and  
myself (afterwards 1st Lieutenant).

If there were any others from the three companies I have forgotten them. There were no I.R.A. casualties. This attack took place in July 1920. No member of Cortoon company was arrested after the attack and I did not have to go on the run as a result of it. As a matter of fact, I did not have to go on the run at any time before the Truce of July 1921. Nobody was arrested after the Gallagher ambush except Brigade O/C. Con Fogarty.

It was rumoured after the Gallagher ambush that the home of Michael Moran, Commandant of the Battalion - Tuam - was to be burned by the R.I.C. The house, situated about two miles south east of Tuam, was guarded for a week by relays of Volunteers. I remember that I was on this guard one night. About a dozen others were with me and Captain Thomas Dunleavy of Barnaderg Company in charge. Michael Moran was arrested a couple of months after this. He was released and rearrested. Shortly after his re-arrest he was murdered in Galway city by British Crown Forces. His remains were brought home to Tuam and he got a very big public funeral, in which the Volunteers marched unarmed. The British military did their best to break the Volunteer ranks but, after each attempt,

we re-formed and continued the funeral march. I remember distinctly that the Archbishop of Tuam and Father Hannon, P.P., Tuam, were at the funeral and made vigorous protests to the British military about their interference. All the Volunteers of the Tuam Battalion mourned the loss of Michael Moran, the Battalion Commandant. We had great confidence in his leadership and we felt that we had lost a very brave and capable leader.

I cannot remember any incident worthy of note in the period between July 1920 and the Spring of 1921. The arrest of Brigadier Con Fogarty and the capture and death of Commandant Michael Moran would account for some at least of the inactivity, while the change of officer personnel and the delay in the appointment of Brigade O/C. no doubt had a bearing on the matter. Thomas Dunleavy, captain of Barnaderg Company, became Battalion O/C. some time after the death of Michael Moran I cannot remember how long. Timothy Dunleavy succeeded his brother Thomas as captain of Barnaderg Company while another of the Dunleavy brothers, Patrick, became O/C. of the brigade early in 1921. I think that Patrick Dunleavy had been operating in South Mayo Brigade area up to the time of his appointment as O/C. North Galway (Tuam) Brigade. Thomas Ryan, 1st Lieutenant Cortoon Company, became Battalion Q.M. in place of Thomas Dunleavy, and I was promoted to 1st Lieutenant, Cortoon Company, in place of Thomas Ryan.

In the Spring of 1921, two ambushes were laid at Carrarea about midway between Tuam and Dunmore on the main Tuam/Dunmore road. On the first occasion nothing happened for the reason that the lorry load or two of R.I.C. that were expected to come from Dunmore to Tuam did not turn up. Men drawn from Barnaderg, Cortoon and Gardenfield companies and some men from Dunmore Battalion, numbering about 40 in all, assembled in the

vicinity of a house at Carrarea about 5 a.m. and remained all day until 8 p.m. I was amongst the men who were under the command of Brigade O/C. Patrick Dunleavy. We did not enter the house during the day except for meals. Each man was allotted his own position when we arrived in the early morning. We could see the R.I.C. if they came the way two miles off. The position occupied by us covered about 100 yards and commanded a 300 yards stretch of the road. Some of our men were armed with hand grenades which they could drop into the lorry or lorries from a very advantageous position. Of the 40 or so men, about 16 were armed with Lee Enfield rifles and the remainder had shotguns. In addition, a few men had grenades.

On the second occasion the same men assembled at the same place about a fortnight later. A lorry load or two of R.I.C. were expected to pass from Dunmore to Tuam as before. Officers of Dunmore Battalion, however, had information that British military had arrived in Dunmore. In view of the possibility of the R.I.C. being strengthened by British military, it was decided to take up positions further away from the road and about a mile nearer to Tuam. We waited there from daybreak to dusk. Towards evening, one lorry load of R.I.C. and Black and Tans passed in the direction of Tuam from the Dunmore direction. Our riflemen opened fire from a range of, roughly, 200 yards, but I cannot say for certain if any of the R.I.C. was wounded. It was rumoured that two or three of them were hit. When fire was opened on them they increased their speed and did not stop within our view. They did not make any attempt to fight it out with us.

About a quarter of an hour after, two more lorries of R.I.C. and Tans came from the direction of Dunmore. We had

withdrawn some distance further from the road after firing at the first lorry a quarter of an hour earlier, and our riflemen were too far away for effective fire on the second party. We let them pass and they did not pull up. The three lorries each contained about 15 or 16 men. There was no further attack on enemy forces in the battalioin area nor any further attempted attack between then and the Truce as far as I can remember.

I attended nearly all meetings of battalion officers with Captain Thomas Wilson. The meetings were held mostly in the Barnaderg and Cortoon company areas. The Battalion officers and men on the run stayed most of their time in the village of Blackstick.

Our first Battalion O/C. was Michael Moran from Barnaderg company area. After his death while a prisoner by the British forces, Thomas Dunleavy, who had been captain of Barnaderg Company, became Battalion O/C. The Vice-Commandant of our battalion was Peter MacHugh from Sylane Company. I remember three battalion adjutants, viz: Joseph Cooney, Thomas Nohilly and Sean O'Neill. Our first battalion Q.M. was Thomas Dunleavy. When he became Battalion O/C., Thomas Ryan, 1st Lieutenant of Cortoon Company, took his place.

The following is a list of the companies of Tuam Battalion and the names of the company captains, as well as I can remember them:

Cortoon	Captain Thomas Wilson
Barnaderg	Captain Thomas Dunleavy and Captain Timothy Dunleavy
Corofin	Captain Bill Feeney (now in U.S.A.)
Gardenfield	Captain Martin Higgins
Kilconly	Captain Frank Cunningham
Sylane	Captain Patrick MacHugh (brother of the Vice-Commandant).
Milltown	Captain Thomas Feerick
Bellmount	Captain T. Hannon
Tuam	Captain Patrick Colleran
Abbeyknockmoy	Captain John Fleming

As I said before, I was never on the run at any time up to the 11th July 1921. My house was never raided and I was always able to sleep at home.

I joined the I.R.B. some time in 1920. I was sworn into the organisation by Thomas Dunleavy. I knew very little about the I.R.B. as I was never asked to attend any meeting of the brotherhood after joining.

I knew no sympathetic R.I.C. man.

I would like to say in conclusion that the local people were very good. They supported Sinn Fein and the I.R.A. financially and otherwise. They were always willing to do anything in their power for the men who were actively engaged in fighting for Ireland's independence and their houses were always open to men on the run.

Signed: Michael Cleary

Date: 12 September 1955

(Michael Cleary)

12 September 1955.

Witness: C. Moynihan  
(C. Moynihan)

