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ORIGINAL

BUREAU OF MILITARY HISTORY 1913-21
BURO STAIRÉ MILEATA 1913-21
NO. W.S. 1247

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BUREAU OF MILITARY HISTORY, 1913-21.

STATEMENT BY WITNESS.

DOCUMENT NO. W.S. 1,247

Witness

Michael Higgins,
Belclare,
Galway.

Identity.

Member of Sylane Company
Tuam Battalion, 1917 - 1921.

Subject.

Sylane Company Tuam Battalion,
Co. Galway, 1917-1921.

Conditions, if any, Stipulated by Witness.

Mil

File No. S.2557

Form B.S.M. 2

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STATEMENT BY MICHAEL HIGGINS,

Belclare, Galway.

I was born in January, 1895, at Belclare and was educated at Belclare National School until I reached the age of fourteen and a half years. After leaving school I worked at home until I became a postman in 1912.

I joined Sylane Company of the Irish Volunteers in 1917. The strength was then about twenty. The company was organised by Michael Walsh and Bernard Kelly, both from Sylane district in the parish of Belclare. Michael Walsh was then a student in U.C.G. Bernard Kelly became the first captain of the company. Martin Bane was lieutenant and Patrick Conway was 2nd lieutenant. Martin Bane is now a priest in U.S.A. Patrick Conway emigrated and is also in the U.S.A.

The company drilled once a week (every Wednesday night) when it was first formed and twice a week later on. It was all foot drill at first. Later we drilled with pikes, which were made at the request of Michael Walsh by a blacksmith in Tuam. Each Volunteer in the company fitted a handle to the pikehead. I remember that the weapons were very heavy. Michael Walsh taught us pike drill. The only words of command I now remember are "Left Parry" and "Right Parry". I have a hazy recollection of something like "Forward Thrust", but I do remember distinctly that both the pikehead and the handle were very heavy and that I was always glad when the pike drill instruction was over as it made me very tired. It was hard to learn.

I remember very little of the agitation against conscription for Ireland but I remember the general election of 1918 very well. I spent several evenings canvassing for Dr. Brian Cusack, the Sinn Féin candidate. Volunteer Henry Hussey of Belclare accompanied me.

I remember that in 1919 our company got about twenty shotguns as a result of arms" raids. Most of the guns were got from people who were friendly towards us, but I remember being in an arms" raid in Kilbannon where we were fired at by a man called Duffy. When we approached Duffy"s house the owner opened a window and fired out at us. None of us was hit. Captain Bernard Kelly was in charge of the raiding party at Duffy"s and other houses in Kilbannon. The Volunteers under him were Joseph O'Brien, Jack and Michael Garvey (brothers), Michael Leonard and myself. There was also some trouble in the raid on Colonel Bernards of Castlehackett. I was not engaged in that raid but Thomas Hussey, Company Q/M and later lieutenant, could give an account of it. I cannot remember whether all the raids for arms were carried out on the same night. The principal men engaged in them were Bernard Kelly, Captain; Patrick Conway, lieutenant, afterwards Brigade Q/M North Galway Brigade; Martin Bane, lieutenant, now Fr. Bane; John "Dick" Conway, afterwards lieutenant; and Thomas Hussey, Company Q/M, afterwards lieutenant Sylane Company. The raids were carried out towards the end of 1919.

I was arrested some time in June, 1920. I remember I was sowing turnips at the time so it must have been early in June. I was charged with unlawful assembly and sentenced to three months" imprisonment. My arrest and that of three others (Company Q/M Thomas Hussey and Volunteers Henry Hussey

and Martin Conneely) was due to the escape of a prisoner named Connolly from Miltown Company area. Connolly, nick-named "Oighre", was arrested by the I.R.A. and brought to our company area while awaiting trial. I cannot remember what was alleged against him. He was kept in our area for six days and six nights. There was no proper prison accommodation and Connolly was kept in an out-house with two Volunteers guarding him at the time.

One morning about 6 a.m. the two Volunteers guarding him left a short while before the two who were due to relieve them arrived. "Oighre" made good his escape in this short interval. I was not told of his escape and could not therefore take any precautions against my arrest. It seems that when "Oighre" got free he made his way to Tuam and told his story to the R.I.C. there. He led a party of R.I.C. to Belclare and identified me and the others as the men who had held him prisoner. He gave evidence against us at our trial in Tuam and later in Galway. We did not recognise the court and I remember that the R.I.C. in Tuam pulled off my cap so roughly in the court that they took some of my hair along with it. I was dismissed from my position as postman after that but I got it back again about 1923. I cannot remember the exact date.

I remember the attack on Castlehackett R.I.C. barracks in January, 1920. The barrack was situated about halfway between Tuam and Headford at the top of Glenseagh Hill. The garrison consisted of five constables and a sergeant. Michael Walsh, who organised Sylane Company in 1917, and Lieutenants P. Conway and M. Bane told us of the impending attack at a meeting of the company. Michael Moran and Thomas Dunleavy of Barnaderg Company area were present at that meeting also. Michael Moran was then, I think,

Commandant of Tuam Battalion and Thomas Dunleavy was Battalion Q/M. The meeting took place only a very short time before the attack, less than a week I would say.

I cannot remember very much of what was said at the meeting beyond that the barrack was to be attacked in a few days after. I do remember that it was arranged that I would meet the men taking part from Barnaderg Company and show them the way. I met them as arranged. There were about twelve of them under the command of Michael Moran. They cut the telegraph wires at Claretuam on their way to the attack. The wires were also cut by Sylane Company at Cave Hill about a quarter of a mile on the Headford side of the barrack. I brought the Barnaderg men cross country to a small plantation about half a mile across the fields from the barrack, where we met all the rest of the attacking party. There were only two companies engaged in the attack Sylane and Barnaderg. The Barnaderg men I remember were: Michael Moran, who was Commandant of Tuam Battalion; Thomas Dunleavy, then Q/M Tuam Battalion; and Michael Joe Ryan, afterwards Brigade Engineer, North Galway Brigade. The men from our own (Sylane) company who took part in the attack, as far as I can remember them, were: Michael Walsh, a student in U.C.G., and the man who organised the Sylane Company in 1917;- Lieutenant Martin Bane, now a priest in U.S.A.; Lieutenant Patrick Conway, afterwards Brigade Q/M, North Galway Brigade, and now in U.S.A.; Thomas Hussey, then Company Q/M, afterwards Lieutenant Sylane Company, John "Dick" Conway, then a Volunteer, afterwards Lieutenant Sylane Company; and the following Volunteers: Michael Banks, Michael Leonard, Michael Garvey, Jack Garvey, Joseph O'Brien, P. Fleming, Thomas Moran, Martin Reilly, Henry Hussey, Michael Kivell, Michael Walsh and myself. There

were two men named Michael Walsh in the attack.

In the plantation where the I.R.A. assembled for the attack each man got his own instructions and it was made quite clear to him what position he was to occupy and what part he was to play in the attack. Lieutenant Patrick Conway and I were told off to explode a mine at the gable facing towards Tuam. When Lieutenant Conway and I arrived at the gable we commenced to dig a hole at the foot of it with a pick and spade. It took us about fifteen minutes to open the hole for the charge of gelignite. We had the hole nearly finished when we heard the small window in the gable above our heads opening. We were not alarmed because we were well protected by a party at the gable, including Michael Walsh U.C.G. student, Thomas Hussey and Michael Joe Ryan, all of whom I have already mentioned.

As far as I can now remember, Michael Walsh's rifle jammed and Thomas Hussey fired immediately with his shotgun. I heard a body falling and a voice inside saying "Oh my God". I heard afterwards that the man who opened the window and who was wounded in the face by Hussey's shot was Sergeant Higgins, a native of Bundoran. We worked on after this and laid down our mine, lit the fuse and took cover behind the wall where Walsh, Hussey and Ryan were in position. The gelignite exploded but the charge was not strong enough to make a breach in the gable. We had only about ten sticks of gelignite which I had got from two Dublin men who were sinking a well at Belclare. MacCarroll and Peppard were their names. They gave me detonators and fuse also. They were I.R.A. men. They gave as much explosive as they could. They only got a certain amount every week from their boss, John Grace, a Dublin contractor.

The explosion split the gable from top to bottom. I think another few sticks of gelignite would have brought down the gable altogether. The split was so wide at the bottom of the gable that you could put your fist through it. It ran along the whole length of the gable and for about four feet into the roof. I had no experience of explosives except what I learned from MacCarroll and Peppard. Lieutenant Conway had very little experience as far as I can remember.

Most of the I.R.A. were in attacking positions at the front of the barrack along the main Tuam/Headford road at a range of about twelve yards. All the I.R.A. were armed with shotguns except Michael Walsh, U.C.G. student, who had a rifle. I have a sort of vague idea that Michael Moran and Thomas Dunleavy had rifles also but I can't be certain. The firing lasted for three hours and a half. Home-made grenades were thrown at the building and one of these smashed the front door of the barrack. A long time before we were withdrawn we heard bullets whistling over our heads. We thought they were from the barrack at first but after a long time we found they were coming from the hill at the rear of the barrack. We withdrew across country and again I showed the way home to the men from the Barnaderg area. There was no casualty suffered by the I.R.A. and, as far as I know, the only one of the garrison wounded was Sergeant Higgins.

There were about ninety shotguns in Castlehackett R.I.C. barracks and each of the garrison had a rifle and revolver. The shotguns belonged mostly to people in the neighbourhood who had handed them in for safe keeping or from whom they had been taken by the R.I.C. by force.

About a dozen of the guns belonged to a shooting party that had handed them in after being entertained at Colonel Bernard's of Castlehackett. I think the main idea behind the attack was the capture of all those weapons. Castlehackett R.I.C. barrack was evacuated the day after the attack on it and it was burned to the ground at Easter, 1920, when all the evacuated R.I.C. barracks were burned.

I took part in the attack on Castlegrove R.I.C. barracks a few months after the attack on Castlehackett. I cannot give the exact date. There was a very big number of men engaged in this attack drawn from Tuam, Barnaderg, Caherlistrane and Sylane Companies. I would say that there was very little short of a hundred men engaged in this attack. It is difficult to estimate the number of men when they are seen only at night. My position was in front of the barrack armed with a shotgun at a range of about fifteen yards. The attack lasted three and a half hours. I remember the Verey lights going up. I heard afterwards that British military came from Tuam to assist the garrison at Castlegrove but that they turned back when about halfway to Castlegrove. I cannot remember any road blocks in connection with this attack but the Tuam Company could have made road blocks without my knowing it. There was no member of the I.R.A. party wounded and I do not think that any of the R.I.C. was wounded. I have no idea of the strength of the garrison at the time of the attack. This barrack was a long way from my place, being about six miles from Tuam on the main Tuam/Ballinrobe road. I remember there was an explosion at one of the gables, set off, I think, by Lieutenant M. Bane of Sylane Company, but it did little damage. I am not rightly sure who was in charge of Castlegrove barrack attack but I think it was Commandant Michael Moran.

I was also at a prepared ambush at Ballyglunin. A force of cavalry was stationed at Annagh within a mile of the ambush position. A military lorry was expected to come from Athenry to Annagh, where the cavalry force was stationed, but it did not come. I remember that was the August Bank Holiday, 1920. About forty men from Sylane, Barnaderg, Tuam and Caherlistrane Companies, under the command of Michael Walsh, U.C.G. Company, took up positions at 6 a.m. and remained in position until about 4 p.m. The lorry that was expected came as a rule about 3 p.m.

I remember (although I cannot remember the date or the year) going to Barnaderg Company area with Thomas Hussey and Brigade O/C Con Fogarty and shearing the hair off the head of a young girl. She had written to an R.I.C. man giving him information about Volunteer activities and the letter was captured in a raid on the mails. We brought the letter with us and Brigadier Fogarty read it for the girl and her people when we arrived at the house, which we were shown by one of the Dunleavy brothers of Barnaderg who were all officers in the Volunteers. The girl admitted writing the letter. Brigadier Fogarty gave them a lecture on the gravity of the offence and said she was being treated leniently in having her hair cut off. There was a scene. The girl was crying and her people were sprinkling holy water on her and on us. She was a very beautiful girl before her hair was sheared and I pitied her although I knew I should not in the circumstances. I saw her in Tuam one day shortly afterwards. She stared at me from the door of the R.I.C. barracks and I got out of her view as quickly as I could.

I remember that I had charge of two sections for drill in the early days of the Volunteers but I held no rank.

The local people were very loyal to us and assisted us in every possible way. The local R.I.C. were not sympathetic either as a body or individually.

I would say that the Volunteers were good determined men but were badly handicapped by the lack of arms. Michael Moran, the Tuam Battalion O/C up to the time of his death at the hands of the enemy in Galway City, was a fine cool determined leader and was a great loss to the Volunteers in this area.

These are the principal incidents as far as I can remember them. Anything I have omitted is due to lapse of time and memory. I have not mentioned the carrying of dispatches and other routine duties which at times was almost a whole-time job.

Signed:

Michael Higgins
(Michael Higgins)

Date:

13 Sept 1955

13th Sept. 1955.

Witness:

C. Moynihan (C. Moynihan)
(Investigator)

