

ORIGINAL

BUREAU OF MILITARY HISTORY 1913-21
BURO STAIRÉ MILEATA 1913-21
NO. W.S. 1251

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BUREAU OF MILITARY HISTORY, 1913-21.

STATEMENT BY WITNESS.

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Witness

Martin Chambers,
Craiganock,
Co. Clare.

Identity.

Captain 'B' Company
Third Battalion West Clare Brigade.

Subject.

Monmore Company Irish Volunteers,
West Clare, 1914-1921.

Conditions, if any, Stipulated by Witness.

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STATEMENT BY MARTIN CHAMBERS

Craiganock, Co. Clare.

(formerly Captain B/Company, 3rd Battalion, West
Clare Brigade).

I was born on 11th November 1891, at Monmore, Kilrush, where my parents lived on a good-sized farm. Though I am also a farmer, my holding is one which I bought myself.

My first connection with the national movement began in May 1914, when I joined the Kilrush Company of the Irish Volunteers which was then being formed. This unit disintegrated soon after the Redmondite split in the Autumn of 1914, and the area was without any Volunteer organisation until 1917. In April of that year, a company of Irish Volunteers was established at Monmore, about three miles from Kilrush. I was appointed company captain and the unit consisted of about 100 men.

We had no trained men to act as drill instructors, so I and the other officers had to resort to the use of British Army Training Manuals for guidance. We seemed to make a good enough job of the drill instruction as, later on, when we met other units who had ex-British soldiers as drill instructors, they did not impress us as being anything better than our own. To assist us at rifle drill, we got a number of timber rifles made at a cost of 1/- each by a local blacksmith called John Pender.

For some months after the formation of the company in Monmore, we drilled quietly twice a week, after Mass on Sundays and on each Wednesday night. As soon, however, as public drilling started throughout the country, in July or August 1917, our company began to drill in the village of Doonbeg opposite the R.I.C. Barracks there. An officious R.I.C. constable named

Hurley reported my activities in connection with this drilling to his District H. Q. in Kilrush and, having been made aware of this indirectly through a police leakage, I kept out of the way of the police afterwards and was 'on the run' until the Truce in July 1921.

The advent of the 'conscription threat' in the Spring of 1918, did not materially affect our company, as practically all men of military age were already in the Volunteers. Like most other areas, each Volunteer, who had not a shotgun at his disposal for use in the event of resistance against conscription, provided himself with a pike. The pikeheads were forged from 'ribbon iron' by the blacksmith already mentioned and, when mounted on timber shafts, were about 7' or 8' long. They cost 2/6d each and each man paid for his own weapon.

Despite the fact that in the Spring of 1918 many parts of Clare were affected by an outbreak of agrarian disputes resulting in widespread cattle-drives and seizures of ranches, the Monmore area was not troubled in that respect. Drilling proceeded regularly and without any unusual incidents until June 1918. At that time all the Co. Clare formed one Volunteer Brigade of which the most prominent officers were the Brennan brothers of Meelick. About 18th June 1918, orders were received from brigade H. Q. to attack R. I. C. patrols wherever they appeared in West Clare. In my company area it was decided to attack a patrol of four R. I. C. men from Doonbeg barracks who did regular patrols. I selected four other Volunteers for this attack. The party was armed with three shotguns and two of the 'conscription pikes'. About 11 o'clock that night the late T. V. Honan of Ennis and Christopher McCarthy, a prominent Volunteer officer from the Kilmurray Ibrian district, landed in the home of Conor

Whelan, Shragh, Doonbeg, with orders from Brigade H.Q. to cancel the attack. I never heard the reason for this, but at any rate the attack was abandoned.

Towards the end of 1918, Clare was divided into three brigades, East, Mid and West, and our area became portion of the West Clare Brigade. The first O/C. was Art O'Donnell, Tullycrine, Kilrush. The only outstanding result of this reorganisation which I can remember was that Battalion Council meetings commenced to be held regularly. In addition to the battalion officers, O/C, Vice O/C., Adjutant and Q.M., each company in the battalion sent a representative or two to these meetings. The 3rd Battalion comprised the companies of Cooraclare, Monmore, Doonbeg, Cree, Bealaha and Cloghanmore. I must say now that while there was always a lot of talk at these Battalion Council meetings, any suggestion which came from the more militant representatives regarding attacks on the British forces received scant consideration. In many parts of Ireland armed attacks on R.I.C. were becoming common, but West Clare was doing little or nothing in that respect.

In August 1919, having some time previously become intimate with Bill Hough, a native of Monmore, who had been in the American army, I made arrangements with him to attack a lorry of twelve soldiers at McGrath's Cross, Moyasta. These troops usually carried rifles and one Lewis gun. We selected about 40 Volunteers for the operation, nine of whom were armed with Lee Enfield rifles and five revolvers obtained from Brigade H.Q., while the remainder had double-barreled shotguns. The attack was arranged for 15th August. All the men went to Communion that morning at 9 a.m. Mass in Monmore. After Mass, a Volunteer named Jack Hassett from Cooraclare arrived on a bike with a dispatch for me from Sean Liddy,

then battalion commandant, warning me that he disapproved of the attack and that he would hold me responsible if it occurred. A final sentence in the dispatch stated that "he would explain later". Very reluctantly, indeed, the ambush was called off. A few days later, I received a further dispatch from Sean Liddy in which he gave as the reason for disapproving of the ambush the fact that "there was not enough rifles to cover off the retreat". In fact, I still believe that the party which had been assembled for this operation was big enough and sufficiently well equipped to deal with a much stronger enemy force.

During the remainder of 1919 and early in 1920, a few small and isolated attacks were made on the R.I.C. forces at scattered points throughout the West Clare Brigade area, but neither I nor my company were concerned in any of them. Arising out of one of these attacks, John Breen was killed in attack against the R.I.C. in Kilmihill. Breen was given a military funeral at which about ~~2,000~~⁵⁰⁰ Volunteers paraded. The arrangements were under the control of the O/C. 2nd Battalion, then John Flanagan,^{and}/myself. Large forces of British military and R.I.C., accompanied by two armoured cars, watched the funeral ceremonies and this prevented us from having a firing party over the grave.

Incidentally, the original Brigade O/C., Art O'Donnell, was replaced by Sean Liddy in January or February 1920, and Liddy, who had been O/C. 3rd Battalion, was succeeded by Dan Sheedy, Clonreddin. I cannot now account for these changes.

In September 1920, along with Willie Shanahan, who afterwards was murdered by British troops, I reported one night at O'Donnell's of Tullycrine, to learn of arrangements

which had been made by the brigade staff to attack a lorry of soldiers at Drumdigis. This lorry travelled between Kilmihill and Kilmore House, Knock, two points garrisoned by the British. The reception which we received from the captain of the Tullycrine company, Frank O'Donnell, was anything but favourable. Among other things which he said about Shanahan and myself was that we were "a pair of trouble makers".

It was part of the plan for this attack that a large trench should be cut in the road along which the lorry, travelled and this job was entrusted to the local (Tullycrine) company. About 10 o'clock in the morning after our arrival, Frank O'Donnell left the house to collect men to cut the trench, but after some time, he returned to tell us that he could not get a man who was willing to do so. Shanahan and myself then returned home.

A few days later, I was again notified to report back to the same locality and this time I found the trench had been cut and that an I.R.A. party had assembled there under Sean Liddy and Dr. Bill Shannon. The party consisted of about 20 men equipped with rifles, revolvers and shotguns and were assembled at Paddy Haugh's haggard. The trench was cut in the road between Drumdigis Cross and Haugh's house and was large enough to contain a lorry. The top of the trench was covered with netted wire of a very fine mesh over which was put a straw and gravel, the whole arrangement being carefully camouflaged so as to prevent detection by anyone driving towards it in a car or lorry. The main party, under the Brigadier, Sean Liddy, were put inside the road fence in the precincts of Haugh's house. Myself and another Volunteer, an ex-soldier named Pat Haugh,

were placed in a flanking position also inside the road fence about 50 yards from the main party and on the same side of the fence, and nearer to the cross roads. Each of us had Lee Enfield rifles. Willie Shanahan and Paddy Hasset, also armed with rifles, were in positions in a field on the other side of the road almost opposite the main party.

The lorry which was coming from Kilmihill put in an appearance about 11 a.m., some time before it was expected to arrive. It contained 14 soldiers under an N.C.O. Just prior to the arrival of the lorry at the ambush position, two happenings took place which, I believe, affected the outcome of the engagement. My companion, Paddy Haugh, was not too pleased with the amount of cover which his position afforded and went off to look for a furze bush to place in front of him. As well, Dr. Shannon took two men with him to go to the top of a nearby hill to make some observations. As the lorry approached the crossroads before coming to the road trench, the occupants saw our men who had left their positions and opened fire. The lorry halted just outside where I was lying.

Shanahan and Hasset were, as far as I know, the only two of the I.R.A. party who fired at the enemy. They fired a few shots each at the lorry and the enemy machine gunner, who was on the hood of the lorry, rolled off. After this there was a short lull in the firing and then all the soldiers dismounted and headed by their N.C.O. they advanced at the double up the road towards Haugh's. A number of them fell into the trench on the road, but apparently without doing much damage to themselves, as their advance was quickly resumed until they got as far as the gateway leading to Haugh's house. At this stage our main party, who had been

retreating, came under enemy fire at a range of about 200 yards. There was adequate cover in the vicinity, however, and they all made their escape. Unfortunately, Dr. Shannon and the two men who had gone with him were all captured. I stayed in my position for about two hours after the firing began. The military filled the trench and resumed their journey with the three prisoners to Kilmore House, Knock. None of our party was hit by enemy fire, and I cannot say if the few shots fired by Shanahan and Hassett inflicted any casualties.

The engagement at Drumdigis did not help to boost the morale of the I.R.A. in West Clare, an area all over which the British forces soon after became very aggressive.

I always held the view that it was not a country which lent itself to guerilla warfare in a big way. It is relatively flat, possesses few suitable ambush positions, affords little cover and is traversed by numerous roads and by-roads which an enemy holding all points of vantage and equipped with fast transport could avail of to surround and intercept I.R.A. columns. As well, their intelligence was more efficient in the area than in most places. I am not putting forward these points as an excuse for the fact that West Clare had not more military activities to its credit during the struggle for independence during the Black and Tan war, as I believe that more successful fighting could have taken place if the men in charge of the area had more heart in their work. Many of the junior officers and the rank and file were only too ready and anxious to make matters hot for the British forces and were ever on the alert to avail of opportunities. Times out of number, individual Volunteers ran to their officers when they saw or heard of chances of attacking the enemy. On one such occasion the sequel was almost disastrous if not laughable.

About 13th November 1920, a member of my company named Tom Lynch reported to me that four strange men in a motor car had inquired from him the way to Doonbeg. It was then approaching nightfall. He was certain they were Black and Tans which was subsequently confirmed. I gathered a party of seven men at once and took up a position at Monmore where I expected the Black and Tans would pass on their way back from Doonbeg to Kilrush. Bill Hough, who was one of our party, was in a better position to see the occupants of the car than the rest of us; he at once opened fire when a motor car came along from the Doonbeg direction about 6 p.m. The remainder of our party then fired. Instantly we heard screams which we recognised as coming from a woman and we held our fire, the car halting simultaneously. I jumped on to the road and was amazed to find in the car Willie Hynes, a hackney driver from Kilkee and an I.R.A. man, with one solitary passenger, a Miss Gallagher, a dairymaid who was employed in one of the local creameries. Fortunately, neither of them was hurt, but the car was fairly well riddled. No report of this incident got out. The "Black and Tans" took another road and went on to Kilkee.

By December 1920 Bill Hough was one of the most sought after men by the British authorities in West Clare. His home in Monmore was frequently raided at night by British troops stationed in Kilrush. I determined to try to teach these raiders a lesson and on several nights during December I waited with a party of about 20 men mostly armed with shotguns at Higgins Hill, $1\frac{1}{2}$ miles outside Kilrush for a chance to attack them. The enemy never showed up.

On 17th December 1920, two of the most sincere and energetic officers attached to the West Clare Brigade,

William Shanahan, brigade police officer, and Michael McNamara, captain of the Doonbeg Company, were arrested by Black and Tans between 1 and 2 a.m. in the house of Denis Reidy, Newtown, Doonbeg. They were taken prisoner to Kilrush R. I. C. Barracks and held there until 22nd December 1920. On that date they were removed to Ennis under a heavy escort of Black and Tans and military. On the way between Killydysart and Ennis McNamara was bayoneted through the heart by one of his escort and was then left lying in Shanahan's lap until the convoy arrived in Ennis Jail. Around midnight Shanahan was shot dead in his cell.

The bodies of these two I.R.A. officers were handed over to Frank Power, Vice O/C. 1st Battalion, East Clare Brigade. Shanahan's body bore marks which, according to medical evidence that almost every bone had been broken prior to his shooting.

Subsequently a man named Patrick D'Arcy, National Teacher in Doonbeg, and a native of Cooraclare, was executed as a spy by the I.R.A. Though I have heard talk which connected him with the arrest of Shanahan and McNamara, I have no information to give concerning the guilt or innocence of D'Arcy, nor was I concerned in any way with his execution, which took place in June 1921.

As the year 1920 wore to a close, the I.R.A. in West Clare generally and particularly in the vicinity of Kilrush were having a busy time harassing the British lines of communications, maintaining protection measures against enemy night raids, arranging meetings of Sinn Fein Courts and ensuring that these Courts functioned without the officials and litigants being captured by the enemy who, by that time, had become most active in trying to suppress the Courts.

In my company area there was extensive cutting of trenches on the roads used by the enemy and this work had to be done mostly at night time. The only tools at our disposal were the pick, shovel and spade. Frequently, the night's work was undone again in the course of a day or two by the enemy who filled in the trenches, frequently commandeering civilian labour to do so. When night fell again the Volunteers were back re-opening the trenches. This state of affairs went on continuously until the Truce in July 1921.

The trenching of the roads inconvenienced our own supporters as much as the enemy, especially in getting home supplies of turf which then was done by the use of horse, pony or donkey carts. In order to avoid the trenches, detours were made by the carts across fields or, if they were available, bohereens or laneways were resorted to. The civilian population were forbidden by us from filling trenches of their own accord no matter how urgent the circumstances, and I must say that in some instances this involved considerable inconvenience and hardships to the people especially in cases where there were no alternative routes to the public road. In one such case, a youthful Volunteer named Falsey, a native of Cooraclare, was shot dead while closing portion of a trench to enable him to bring a donkey cart over it to take home a load of potatoes. This shooting occurred on 7th February 1921 and aroused a great deal of condemnation among the people of the district. It was alleged that he had been shot by I.R.A. officers who objected to the closing of the trench. Under orders received from the Brigade O/C., Sean Liddy, I presided at a Court of Inquiry in Cooraclare to investigate the full facts surrounding this boy's death. The Inquiry had only proceeded with the taking of statements from two I.R.A. officers when

scouts reported that the Black and Tans were approaching. I ordered the Court to disperse and it never reassembled to finish the proceedings.

The Sinn Fein Courts in West Clare probably functioned more successfully than in any other part of Ireland. Arbitration Courts dealing mostly with land disputes were the first to be set up and, later on, District and Parish Courts began to operate under decree of Dáil Éireann. To the best of my belief, Father Culligan, C.C., Kilmihill, was President of the Arbitration and District Court, and Conor Whelan, Vice O/C. of the West Clare Brigade, was District Court Registrar. Paddy Kelly, afterwards a T.D. for Clare, was also a member of these two Courts, but I am not sure who the other members were.

The Arbitration Courts held their first sitting in the early months of 1919, while the other Courts started towards the end of that year. These Courts sat publicly in places garrisoned by R.I.C. and British military from their inception up to around the middle of 1920, without interference, but from thence onwards they were treated by the enemy as illegal bodies like every other part of the machinery of government set up under Dáil Éireann.

The opposition and suppression methods of the British Government did not prevent the Sinn Fein Courts from being held, but in order to enable them to carry on in West Clare, the services of the different I.R.A. units had to be used more extensively. It became the duty of the battalion and company officers to make arrangements for places in which the Court could meet - usually in remote parts - and to provide Volunteers to keep watch on the British troops while the Courts were in progress. The enforcement of decrees and all

the usual police work associated with Courts also became some of the tasks which had to be performed by the I. R. A. in our area. Apart from the risks connected with this work, it was sometimes very unpleasant too for individual Volunteers having to serve summonses and enforce decrees against their own friends and relations, but they stood up to their job manfully and carried out whatever duties were assigned to them.

I think it was about the beginning of 1921 that the brigade staff decided to construct dugouts for the accommodation of men who were 'on the run'. Two such dugouts were built in Sragh Bog about four miles from Kilrush in the Doonbeg direction. The third was erected in Einagh, Monmore. These dugouts were built on the sides of turf banks and were roofed with sally branches covered over by rushes. The walls were lined with straw and in dimensions were approximately.
 9' x 6' x 6'

The dugouts were used in a kind of rotation and when occupied were never without two armed sentries at night time. News of the existence of these dugouts reached the British troops in Kilrush about May 1921, a fact which became known to us through correspondence captured by the East Limerick Brigade. From that time onwards until the cessation of hostilities in July 1921, I slept entirely in the open under cover of a piece of tarpaulin which I arranged to move about from one place to another, except on occasions when I was too far away from my covering.

About the middle of April 1921, I happened to be in one of the dugouts which I have already described. There were nine or ten other Volunteers there also and, to the best of my memory, we were getting ready to go to Kilkee to snipe the R. I. C. barracks there. In the midst of our preparations

a dispatch arrived from the O/C. East Clare Brigade notifying our brigadier that a column comprised of East Clare men would be coming into the West Clare area to assist in some operation prearranged by the staffs of these two units. The Kilkee operation was then called off.

On 19th April 1921 at about 10 p.m., with eleven men from the Monmore Company, I joined the Brigade O/C., Sean Liddy, and Tom Martyn, then O/C. 3rd Battalion, at Knockerra, 3 miles south east of Kilrush, and proceeded to Gortglass, Coolmeen, where we arrived about 3 a.m. and there stayed in a disused house until 10 p.m. the following night. We met none of the local Volunteers and were without food till around 7 p.m. when tea was procured from neighbouring houses.

In the meantime, we heard that the East Clare men had arrived and set out to meet them about 11 p.m. and joined them about midnight at Moyralla. All together the total force then numbered about 35 men. I believe all the East Clare men had rifles while there were six or seven of our crowd similarly equipped. The others had shotguns or revolvers.

The combined party at once set off for Tullycrine which we reached between 3 and 4 a.m. on 21st April. The local Volunteers there had billets arranged for us in that townland and in the adjacent townland of Knockerra and, as well, provided sentries while we rested. Kilrush, the enemy headquarters, was only five miles away.

At about 8 p.m. on the night of 21st April, we were mobilised and marched to within a mile of Kilrush. There we were divided in a number of sections and instructions were given to each section as to the part it was to take in the night's operations.

Kilrush at the time was occupied by

- (a) a detachment of Scottish Highlanders who were stationed in the Workhouse;
- (b) a detachment of Royal Marines who held the coastguard station at Cappagh, a mile or so from the town;
- (c) a party of 40 or 50 R. I. C. and Black and Tans in the R. I. C. barracks in Toler St. in the centre of the town.

I think that the principal purpose for which this I. R. A. converged on Kilrush was to attack the night patrol of police. In any event, the job assigned to the section to which I was allotted was to hem in the military in the Workhouse while the attack was proceeding in the town. Of those who were with me I can remember Bill Hough in charge, Mike O'Dea, Tulla, and another East Clare man, and the following, all from West Clare: Tom Martyn, Jack Lynch, Stephen Hough, John Hough.

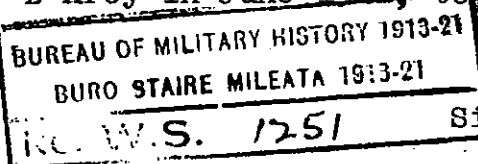
We occupied a position at the Workhouse Cross, 100 yards or so from the building from which we had command of the front entrance, taking over there about 11 p.m. Around midnight, a solitary military officer came up the back road from the town and we allowed him into the barracks without firing. He was not long inside when we heard the movement of troops and soon the front entrance gates opened to allow out a detachment of soldiers marching in columns of four. Our fire was withheld until they came within 50 yards of us and then we let them have it. Obviously they were taken completely by surprise and retreated in disorder back to the Workhouse. Though we held on until about 4 a.m. we saw no more of the enemy and, on orders, then moved off to Canny's in Derra, one mile outside Kilrush where we met the rest of the I. R. A. party. Having got a feed of milk and bread, we resumed marching in extended formation into Cooraclare

where a halt was made and then on to Cree which we reached about 6 p.m. The company captain at Cree had his men mobilised as we arrived and had also billets and food ready. The entire party rested in Cree until 6 p.m. on 23rd April when our march was resumed into Sorrel Island and on to Lissycasey, where billets were again ready.

I was in bed about half an hour when the alarm was raised that military were on the way from Ennis. Positions were taken up by us on a hill north of the village of Lissycasey in which we remained until 10 or 11 o'clock next morning and then we retired back to our billets. That night, we bade goodbye to the East Clare men who went home by boat across the river Fergus to Rineanna, while the men from West Clare returned to their home areas.

I have never been able to ascertain what casualties were inflicted on the British forces during the attack on Kilrush. I know that they admitted the loss of one R.I.C. sergeant named McFadden, shot dead, and two soldiers wounded.

After the Kilrush engagement nothing of much importance occurred in West Clare until the Truce. Occasional raids were made by the British forces in Kilrush for men 'on the run' with little success. On our part there were a few small sniping incidents of little importance. The cutting of roads, scouting for night movements of the enemy, occasional dispatch carrying, collection of rates for the County Council, and work in connection with the Sinn Féin Courts could be said to describe all the activities of the I.R.A. which took place in West Clare in the months of May, June and July 1921, apart from the shooting of Patrick D'Arcy in June 1921, to which I have already referred.



Signed:

Martin Chambers
(Martin Chambers)

Date:

13. 9. 1955

Witness:

D. Griffin

(D. Griffin)

13.9.55