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ORIGINAL

BUREAU OF MILITARY HISTORY 1913-21

BURÓ STAIRÉ MILEATA 1913-21

NO. W.S. 1269

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BUREAU OF MILITARY HISTORY, 1913-21.

STATEMENT BY WITNESS.

DOCUMENT NO. W.S. 1,269

Witness

John Ronayne,
Ballybrack,
Doneraile,
Co. Cork.

Identity.

Second Lieut. Mourne Abbey Company;
First Lieut. Burnfort Company Mallow
Battalion, Co. Cork.

Subject.

Mourne Abbey Company Irish Volunteers,
Co. Cork, 1914-1922.

Conditions, if any, Stipulated by Witness.

Nil

File No. S.2565

Form B.S.M. 2

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L.O. W.S. 1269

STATEMENT BY JOHN RONAYNE,

Ballybrack, Doneraile, County Cork.

I was born at Greenhill, Mourne Abbey, Co. Cork, on July 27th, 1895. My parents were farmers. I was educated at Burnfort National School until I reached the age of 15 years. I then went to work on my parents' farm.

I joined the Irish Volunteers on August 4th, 1914, at Burnfort following an organising meeting outside the church gate after Mass. This meeting was addressed by Tomás MacCurtain - at the time O/C Cork Brigade Irish Volunteers - and by Patrick Toomey, Kilmona. The meeting resulted in seven recruits - the pioneers of the Volunteers in the area. They were: Maurice Walsh, Dan Jones, Jack O'Connell, Denis Lenihan, John Conway, Paddy Sullivan and John Ronayne (witness). We then set about organising in the parish of Mourne Abbey and after some time the strength of the unit reached about 14. The company was the Mourne Abbey Company, Burnfort and Analeentha (where the two churches (R.C.) in the parish were situated) being the main centres from which the members were drawn. There were no officers in the early stages but after about six months Liam Jones, who had joined up in the meantime, was elected O/C. The officers then were:

O/C - Liam Jones
1st Lt. - Michael Hanlon
2nd Lt. - John Ronayne.

The company at this time was an independent unit of Cork Brigade.

The only type of training carried on was ordinary ^{GLOSE} class order foot drill, which was usually carried out in the

fields in the district. Occasionally on Sunday evenings we went on route marches to surrounding districts in an endeavour to organise further units. Amongst the districts visited were Killavullen, Bering, Ballyglass and Mallow.

We had no arms in the early stages but an arms' fund was established and weekly collections were taken up from the members. When the price of a gun or two had been collected we bought the arms and ammunition from Joe Barrett, gunsmith, Mallow. All arms purchased in this way were shotguns.

Training went on as usual throughout 1915 and up to Easter, 1916.

During the week prior to Easter, 1916, the Mourne Abbey Company O/C (Liam Jones) got an order from O/C Cork Brigade (Tomás MacCurtain) to parade the unit at Bering after Mass on Easter Sunday. All men on parade were to carry any available arms and three days' rations. About twenty members paraded. They were drilled by an ex-British soldier named Coughlan who was working in the district. This half company (Burnfort) assembled after Mass at Burnfort Church and then proceeded to Analeentha Church where they met the remainder of the company. All were armed with shotguns and a few also had revolvers.

The whole company then cycled to Bering where we met units from the surrounding districts. The number on parade at Bering would be about 200. The combined units carried out manoeuvres on Shea's Mountain in the vicinity of Bering for a couple of hours. When the manoeuvres had finished a messenger arrived and a discussion took place between the officers. The parade was then dismissed, the members being informed that pending further orders

they were not needed. Our company (Mourne Abbey) then returned home. We met every night during Easter Week to discuss the happenings in Dublin, but no further orders were received and no action was taken. There were no arrests in the area in connection with Easter Week, 1916. When the manoeuvres were being carried out at Beeing there were a number of Volunteer officers from Cork City present, including Seán Sullivan and "Pa" Toomey.

After Easter Week the company continued to meet and parade in secret. Drilling and organising continued all the time. All arms held by the company were hidden in a dump which Maurice Walsh and I built on my home farm. The dump was built of concrete and lined with timber and felt. It was built into a stonefaced fence at a gap. The opening was facing the gap and was sealed by a concrete slab which was supposed to be a gate post. The dump was 7 feet long, $2\frac{1}{2}$ feet high and $2\frac{1}{2}$ feet wide. In this dump at one time we held 105 shotguns. I was responsible for the care and safe custody of these arms. The guns were cleaned at least once a week. Most of the guns had been collected from the owners, who surrendered them voluntarily.

There was no appreciable change in the strength of Mourne Abbey Company until conscription was threatened in the spring of 1918. This threat led to a big influx of new recruits and the membership reached about 200. It was then decided to divide the company into two units - Burnfort and Analeentha. The officers of the new companies were:

Burnfort

O/C - Jack Sullivan
1st Lt. - John Ronayne (witness)
2nd Lt. - Maurice Walsh

Analeentha

O/C - Jerome Buckley
1st Lt.) I can't recollect
2nd Lt.)

When the threat of conscription had passed there was a small reduction in strength but it was not of noticeable dimensions.

During the spring and summer of 1918 all members were engaged in various activities in preparation for the anticipated fight against conscription. They were watching and reporting on the movements of enemy forces, making buckshot, reloading shotgun cartridges and helping to manufacture pikes and other weapons in the local forges. We also made bombs from cocoa tins filled with concrete and scrap metal and charged with a stick of gelignite. There was, of course, a detonator and fuse also inserted.

I think that about this time the companies in the area were organised into a battalion. Mallow was Battalion H.Q. and the companies in Mallow Battalion were: Mallow, Burnfort, Analeentha, Dromahane, Two-pot-house, Ballyclough, Lombardstown, Killavullen. The officers of the battalion were:

- O/C - Liam Jones
- Vice O/C - Dan Hegarty (I think)
- Adjt.- Paddy McCarthy
- Q/M - Jerh. Buckley.

In March, 1918, I was one of a party from Burnfort Company which went to Waterford City on protection duty in connection with the by-election. The candidates were Dr. Vincent White (Sinn Féin) and Capt. Wm. Redmond (Irish Parliamentary Party). Waterford City at this time was very much anti Sinn Féin and the Sinn Féin workers and supporters got a very rough time from the Redmondite section. About six members of the Burnfort Company went with me to Waterford, amongst them Maurice Walsh, Tom Walsh, John Conway and Dave Moylan. On the night of the polling I

received a flesh wound from a revolver ^{bullet} ~~wound~~ in the thigh and was treated by the Sinn Féin candidate (Dr. White). When the election was over the Burnfort section returned home.

When the conscription scare had passed in the summer of 1918 all Volunteers were busily engaged organising Sinn Féin and preparing for the general election in December. There was, however, no contest in our area - North East Cork - as the Sinn Féin candidate (Tom Hunter) was returned unopposed.

Cork Brigade was divided into three brigades in January, 1919. Our battalion (Mallow) became a unit of Cork 11 Brigade. The other battalions in the brigade were: Fermoy, Castletownroche, Kanturk, Charleville, Millstreet and Newmarket. The officers of the brigade were:

O/C - Liam Lynch
 Vice O/C - Dan Hegarty
 Adjt.- Tom Barry
 Q/M - George Power.

About this time training became slightly more advanced. Battalion manoeuvres were held at week-ends and at night. Selected men were trained in scouting, and signalling - including semaphore and morse codes. With Paddy Dorgan and Mick Dinan I underwent a course of training in signalling. The training officers was Jerome Buckley, O/C Analeentha Company.

Training and organising went on as usual during 1919. In addition, the Volunteers were engaged in organising and collecting the first Dáil Éireann loan. Otherwise there was very little doing.

At Easter, 1920, the only evacuated enemy post in

the area - Blackrock R.I.C. barracks - was destroyed in accordance with the general order from G.H.Q. Representatives from Burnfort, Dromahane, Analeentha and Mallow Companies took part in this operation. Liam Jones, O/C Mallow Battalion, was in charge. The end wall of the barrack was blown up by a home-made mine consisting of a box of a cart wheel charged with gelignite. The box was closed at both ends by steel plates which were held in position by a bolt running through the centre of the casing. The plate at one end was holed to allow the fuse, which was inserted in the detonator, to pass through. Bundles of hay soaked with paraffin oil were used to burn what remained of the barrack after the explosion. I was engaged on outpost duty - holding up civilians on the Quartertown road.

When the Republican Courts were established in the summer of 1920 I was appointed a member of the parish court. One of the other members was "Pats" Curtin. Maurice Curtin was clerk of the court. The court was assembled as cases fell due for hearing and was usually held in the schoolhouse in the district. The types of cases heard by the parish court included cases of assault, abusive language, breaches of licensing laws, non payment of small debts. The orders of the court were generally enforced by the I.R. Police. As well as being a member of the Mourne Abbey parish court, I was also a member of the district court for the area. Another member of the court was Edmond J. Cussen, Charleville. This court usually dealt with cases involving title and where the amount of claim exceeded £150.

Cork 11 Brigade Column was formed in September, 1920. On its establishment it was billeted during its

training period in the Burnfort area at Ronayne's (my home), Greenhill, Looney's (Island), Dorgan's and Mahoney's (Island), Lenihan's (Knockbrack), Leary's and Dennehy's (Gortanelig). The column was in charge of Liam Lynch. Ernie O'Malley was Training Officer. I cannot remember the names of the members of the column who were in training in the area for about two weeks. The column then moved off and returned after about 8 or 10 days. On the evening of the column's return to Burnfort area (Saturday) I was sent by the O/C with a despatch to Owen Harold at Mallow. On the way the front fork of my cycle broke and I was pitched on to the road. I was found some time later and removed to the Nurses' Home, Mallow. I had broken my nose and my face was badly torn. I had been picked up by a man named O'Keefe who was hostile to the I.R.A. In my semi-conscious state I apparently handed him the despatch and he later informed me that he had delivered it to its proper destination. This despatch had apparently something to do with the arrangements for the raid on Mallow military barracks which took place on the following Tuesday (28/9/1920). I was still a patient in the Nurses' Home when the raid took place. When the British troops sacked the town of Mallow on the night of the raid I was removed to Cortigan House, Mallow, for safety. I spent a fortnight there under the care of Dr. Vaughan before being discharged.

During the period up to February, 1921, I was engaged on the routine activities of training, scouting and arranging guards for the columns in the area.

On the evening of February 14th, 1921, I received instructions from the Company O/C (Jack Sullivan) to arrange

for the mobilisation of the Greenhill section of Burnfort Company at Regan's, Greenhill, at about 8 p.m. I mobilised the section as instructed. When we arrived at Regan's we found some members of the Battalion Column there; amongst them were Joe Morgan, Jerh. Daly, "Congo" Moloney, Jack Cunningham (Column O/C), Mick Nagle and Denis Mulcahy. The other sections of Burnfort Company were also mobilised and came to Regan's. Between 4 a.m. and 5 a.m. on the morning of February 15th, 1921, the whole party moved off to the Abbey Cross on the Mallow-Cork road, where I got orders from Jack Cunningham (Column O/C) to select seven men from Burnfort Company and to find a position on the eastern side of the Mallow-Cork road. The orders I got were "Take this guy alive if possible". The individual to be captured "alive if possible" was O/C British forces at Buttevant who was to travel to a meeting of staff officers in Cork. My party were armed with shotguns and Mills bombs, and included Maurice Walsh, Jim Sullivan, Paddy Sullivan, Denis Lenihan, Jack Fitzgerald, Mick Curtin and myself. I also carried a .45 Colt revolver.

I moved with my party in a northerly direction along the main road and selected a position on rising ground about 300 yards from the cross and east of the road. My party took up a position behind a bank about 30 yards from the road. The remainder of the Burnfort Company, except for the men delegated to block the road and a few scouts, took up positions with the column on the western side of the Mallow-Cork road. It was now about 6 a.m. When we had been in position about an hour I noticed Tadhg Looney moving in the field to the rear of our position. I instructed him to take up a position with our section. He was not armed.

Sometime after 10 a.m. I noticed that one of the scouts - Mick Dinan - who was in position on Barrett's Castle on the western side of the road, was sending a signal by morse. I read the signal as follows: "Enemy approaching in large numbers". There was nothing to indicate from what direction or how transported. I left my position to investigate and found that our party was surrounded by several parties of British military to the south east. I immediately decided to evacuate the position and to withdraw in a north easterly direction towards Knockaroura. This line of retreat involved crossing the Cork-Mallow railway line by Connell's Bridge, which was about 500 yards north of Sheehan's Bridge - on the same line - on which one of the British parties was posted. Having crossed the railway line we had fairly good cover for a distance of about 600 yards while moving north. We rested at this stage and decided to dump our arms and ammunition. We hid the guns in the fences under cover of which we had been retreating. Due to the activities of an enemy party operating directly to the north on our line of retreat, we were forced to change the line of our withdrawal and move eastward. When we began to move on our new line we were seen by the enemy party which forced the change and they opened fire on us. Two brothers (Creedon) who were working in a field nearby began to run when the firing started and one of them was shot. We now found that we were between two enemy parties - one to the north and the other to the south. The party to the north was about 30 yards from us and the other section was about 300 yards away. We were under intermittent fire from the latter party for a considerable time before we succeeded in getting outside the encircling ring. This fire prevented

the party to the north (who were much closer to us) from moving in, and meantime we were making the best of our way in an easterly direction. We continued on for about 500 yards when we found cover in a "cummer" - a dry river bed, along which we moved for about 100 yards. At this stage we held a conference and decided to disperse. With Maurice Walsh I went towards Knockbrack (north), while the others moved in the direction of Fiddane (north east). With my companion (Maurice Walsh) I reached my home about 1 p.m. We then washed, changed our clothes and had our dinner. Later in the evening we moved round the district to ascertain who was missing and to establish the I.R.A. casualties, if any. We learned that a number of I.R.A. men were missing and in order to satisfy the anxiety of the relatives I went to Mallow barracks next morning to identify the casualties. The men killed were Paddy Dorgan, Paddy Flynn and Ned Creedon. Mick Looney died of wounds. Two men who had been captured (Thomas Mulcahy and Paddy Ronayne) were tried by drumhead courtmartial for levying war and were executed.

Sometime early in March, 1921, the members of the local companies - Analeentha and Burnfort - with some members of the Battalion Column took up positions in the vicinity of Mourne Abbey railway station at dusk, but although they remained in position throughout the night there was no appearance of the enemy. In the intervening period to the Truce on July 11th, 1921, all available members of the company were engaged practically every night on blocking roads, demolishing bridges and cutting enemy lines of communication. During this period I was engaged full-time on I.R.A. activities.

Rank at the Truce - 1st Lieutenant, Burnfort
Company, Mallow Battalion, Cork IV Brigade. The strength
of the company was about 70.

After the Truce I spent about a fortnight in a
Battalion Training Camp at Ballyclough. The Camp O/C was
Jack Cunningham. At this camp there was a strong
representation from the officers of all companies in the
battalion. The training covered the care and use of arms,
field exercises, the use of cover, scouting and the
selection of ambush positions. Following the termination
of this camp I returned home, where I remained until the
Mallow military barracks was taken over from the British
in January, 1922. I took up duty in Mallow in connection
with the strike at Mallow mills which was taken over by
the workers. I served in Mallow until the outbreak of the
Civil War, when I returned home.

Signed:

John Ronayne
(John Ronayne)

Date:

24-9-55

27.9.55

Witness:

P. O'Donnell (P. O'Donnell)
(Investigator)

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