

W.S. 1,278

ORIGINAL

BUREAU OF MILITARY HISTORY 1913-21

BURO STAIRE MILEATA 1913-21

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STATEMENT BY WITNESS.

DOCUMENT NO. W.S. 1,278

Witness

John P. Brennan,
Cloonacool,
Tubbercurry,
Co. Sligo.

Identity.

Vice O/C. Third Battalion Sligo Brigade,
1920-1921;

O/C. Third Battalion do. 1921.

Subject.

Tubbercurry Company Irish volunteers,
Co. Sligo, 1918-1921.

Conditions, if any, Stipulated by Witness.

Nil

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STATEMENT BY JOHN P. BRENNAN,

Cloonacool, Tubbercurry, County Sligo.

There was no local Volunteer organisation in Cloonacool before the year 1918. The Volunteers were organised in the town of Tubbercurry, Sligo, and many other places pre-1916. In Tubbercurry the Volunteers cut telegraph wires in Easter Week.

I joined the Volunteers early in 1918.

I am not sure as I cannot remember exactly who initiated the organisation of the Volunteers locally.

During the anti-conscription scare a great influx of recruits came into the Cloonacool Company ranks and the number at this period of members of the Company reached a peak of about 60.

I had no connection with the I.R.B. up to about the Truce period and cannot now state why I didn't join earlier as the I.R.B. organisation was in existence locally. It may have been that I had an early distaste for secret organisations.

After the conscription scare the Volunteer organisation dwindled and in some areas became practically extinct until nearing the early part of 1920.

In early 1920 we had a reorganisation in our company area and similar reorganisations were carried out all over the battalion area and the county generally.

Before the reorganisation took place we carried out raids for arms in the company area about February, 1920.

In one instance when raiding a house the owner opened fire on us and wounded Robert Nicholson. At the time of the reorganisation Nicholson was appointed Company Captain in Cloonacool Company, this, despite the fact that he was in hospital all the time.

When the battalion was reorganised Mick O'Hara was appointed Battalion O/C. I was appointed Vice O/C. We had companies at the following places: Tubbercurry, Clounaghill, Cully, Curry, Cashill, Cloonacool, Tourlestrane, Adare, Mulinabreena, Achonry and an outpost at Glenesk.

We had practically no arms in the battalion in the early 1920 period except six Martini rifles which were purchased by four elderly men from Tubbercurry. These men purchased the rifles for the Volunteers. Their names were Pat Nicholson, Luke Armstrong, James Connolly and Patrick Sweeney. Associated with these four old men were Patrick Durkin and Seamus Marron who were young men at the time. The four old men whose names I mentioned had been bred in the Fenian traditions so that when an opportunity to purchase rifles came, although men of over 60 years of age, they availed of the chance and purchased the rifles in the hope that other younger men would be available to use them.

Before the battalion was reorganised I was in Sligo and there I met some of the brigade officers. We discussed among ourselves the movements of Judge Wakely who on the following Monday was to travel by train from Sligo to Tubbercurry to attend the Session Court in the Courthouse. I cannot now remember getting a distinct order from the brigade officers to burn Tubbercurry Courthouse but I must have got agreement in so far as the suggestion was made that

it would be a good thing to have the Courthouse destroyed when Wakely arrived in the town. The Courthouse in Tubbercurry is situated close to the police barrack. The barrack was the headquarters of the D.I. and had a Head Constable and two Sergeants and probably 15 R.I.C. men.

On Sunday night we arrived at the Courthouse and we placed 10 or 12 armed men opposite the barracks to prevent interference from the police. We placed another section of the men on the roof of the house adjoining the Courthouse to cut the roof. Another party was selected to go into the building and place the Courthouse papers and records on the floors in the Courthouse^{and} saturate them with a mixture of paraffin oil and petrol. The zero hour in this operation was after midnight when all the local residents were off the streets. All the primary preparations were carried out in a quiet manner until the time came for the breaking of the roof. The noise created by smashing the roof clearly called for some action by the police but as soon as the roof destruction commenced we who were opposite the barracks opened fire on the barrack windows. The police returned our fire but made no attempt to leave the barrack. The police authorities apparently took a poor view of the attitude of the police that night as the Head Constable was asked for his resignation about a week later. The place having been properly prepared and doped with inflammable material, it was set on fire and was completely destroyed.

No serious repercussions took place on the part of the R.I.C. or the British authorities for the burning of the Courthouse. The burning, however, created a favourable impression on the civilian population as the job was carried out in an efficient manner and all records of the Court

such as decrees and fines imposed and papers dealing with dog licences etc. were destroyed. This operation had a fine moral effect on the Volunteers who carried out the job and also on the other Volunteers who had not been mobilised for it.

Frank Carty was arrested in February, 1920, and in June, 1920, a rescue of Carty from Sligo gaol was organised and carried out. "Billy" Pilkington (now Rev. William Pilkington, C.S.S.R.) was in charge. The party from Tubbercurry comprised about 10 men. We travelled to Sligo by two motor cars driven by the Durcan brothers. We arrived at Sligo town cemetery and there met the Sligo and North Sligo men who had been also mobilised for the job. We proceeded to the entrance of the gaol and the O/C asked for Volunteers from the country district who would not be so easily identified by the prison warders. These Volunteers were immediately available and the party selected for the job of entering the prison were to cross the prison wall and the positions they were to take up were laid out for them. I and a number of others crossed the enclosing wall of the prison by an extending wooden ladder from the outside and a specially made rope ladder on the inside. A part of the rescue force were detailed to proceed to the Governor's residence within the gaol and get the keys of the cells from him. This party succeeded in obtaining the keys without very much trouble. Carty was then taken out of his cell by unlocking the cell door. The main door leading into the prison yard had to be broken down with sledges and pickaxes.

After we had rescued Carty the O/C gave orders to take him with us to our Cloonacool district as he considered it to be one of the safest places in the brigade area.

The next thing of major importance was an operation in which I did not personally participate but of which I have accurate knowledge and about which it will be difficult to get information as there are now very few, if any, witnesses who took part in it available.

Frank Carty took three men to a position quite close to Tubbercurry barracks on a night in August, 1920, and a party opened fire on the barracks. Carty's object was to cause a reduction in police activity in the town. As a result of this firing the police maintained a continual hail of firing from barrack windows for practically the whole night.

The following week a police patrol, four in number, were ambushed when cycling from Bunninadden to Tubbercurry. The I.R.A. who attacked them were concealed behind a small hedge on an elevated bank at a steep incline on the road where it was expected that the police would have to dismount from their cycles to travel up the hill. When the police arrived the attacking party pounced on them and relieved them of one rifle with ammunition, a shotgun, a Webley revolver and a bomb. Four bicycles and four tunics were also taken from the police. Carty was in charge of this operation together with Mick O'Hara, M.J. Marron and some other Ballymote and Tubbercurry men.

Shortly after the above disarming six or seven of the Cully Company surprised a patrol of three policemen and took from them arms, cycles and tunics.

Some nights after this the R.I.C. in Tubbercurry were making things unpleasant for the people of the town. Carty and the three men mentioned above went into Tubbercurry,

fired on a police patrol on the streets of the town and wounded two Constables.

About this time the merchants in Tubbercurry and other centres were asked for contributions for the purchase of arms. Money received as a result of this collection was sent to Dublin and early in September, 1920, a consignment of six rifles, 1,000 rounds of .303, 12 hand grenades and a quantity of gelignite arrived at Tubbercurry station consigned to a local merchant. This consignment was removed from the station by the I.R.A. the night following its arrival by train. Some of the railway staff facilitated the I.R.A. as they knew that the stuff coming under the particular merchant's name was intended for I.R.A. All the station workers in Tubbercurry at this time were members of the I.R.A.

Chaffpool ambush - 30th September, 1920:

After the brigade had received a consignment of arms from G.H.Q. it was decided to carry out an ambush in the battalion area at Chaffpool. In order to cause enemy activity and get enemy patrols on to the roads we raided a mail car in the early morning of the 1st September. Frank Carty took charge of the men who took up position at Chaffpool. The number of men in Carty's party, including himself, was 10. All were armed with Service rifles. After waiting the whole day in position, towards evening a Crossley tender approached containing a load of police. The police officer in charge of the Crossley was District Inspector Brady who had been in the area only a short time and whose advent in Tubbercurry initiated British activities against the I.R.A. Brady was sitting with the driver of the car and the rest of the police were in the body of the lorry. As the lorry came opposite

the position occupied by our men, fire was opened on them. D.I. Brady received five bullet wounds which proved fatal a few hours later. Head Constable O'Hara was severely wounded and a Constable Browne was also wounded. The driver of the tender was able to get the tender through and to reach Tubbercurry safely. None of Carty's men was injured by the exchange of fire from the police in the lorry.

We heard afterwards that a military officer who had inspected the scene of the ambush after the ambush took place paid a compliment to the military intelligence displayed by the I.R.A. officer who had selected the position and had so efficiently placed his men for the ambush. A representative of an English paper gave a write-up of this engagement and he quoted the officer's appreciation of the leadership displayed by the I.R.A. officer in charge. This was a well-deserved tribute to Frank Carty's leadership in this operation.

On the night following Chaffpool ambush every available armed man in the battalion area was ordered to report at Tubbercurry to defend the town against British reprisals. About 11.30 p.m. all the positions selected by the I.R.A. for the defence of the town were manned. Shortly afterwards lorries of enemy forces arrived from Sligo town direction. On their arrival at the R.I.C. barracks fire was opened on them from a position to the south-west where Charles Gildea was in charge. The enemy then retreated on foot towards the direction of the Square, a distance of about 200 yards. They came to Cook's drapery establishment and were about to set fire to it when fire was opened on them from the chapel yard position where Frank Carty was in charge of a group of men. At this point

the British forces returned the fire and after about 15 minutes firing the I.R.A. party retreated. This party of police who were engaged with our men were acting as an outpost for the men who were actually engaged in burning Cook's premises which was a very large concern. Later, the men engaged in Cook's joined up with the party outside who were engaged with our men and our men were forced to retreat as there was danger that they would be cut off as the police had apparently accurate knowledge of where fire was coming from. We retreated towards the north side of the town.

The Tans burned a number of houses in the town after we vacated it. A party of the A.S.U., armed with shotguns and revolvers, fired on the British Forces who were engaged in the burning of Rathscanlon Creamery but failed to prevent them from burning it.

The British Forces returning from the burning of Rathscanlon Creamery proceeded to set fire to Achonry Creamery. They were again attacked by the A.S.U. and, although greatly outnumbered, the A.S.U. kept up a continuous fire and finally forced the British Forces to withdraw without damaging the creamery.

On the day following three men from the A.S.U. fired on a lorry load of British Forces at Mulkelty Wood. The British Forces returned the fire but kept moving.

Shortly after this a party of R.I.C. were attacked in Tubbercurry. Immediately afterwards a number of men from my battalion area were ordered by Frank Carty to mobilise under arms at Coolooney. All the available men and rifles in the South Sligo area assembled at Carrignagat (on the Sligo road outside Collooney) on a night in November, 1920,

and took up positions in the early hours of the following morning. Frank Carty was the officer in charge of the operation. The plan was to attack three lorry loads of R.I.C. or two lorry loads of military, whichever came into the ambush position.

Orders were issued by Frank Carty, who was very definite in his instructions, that the signal for attack was on hearing his shots. We were in the ambush position for some time when four lorry loads of British Forces came along but no signal to attack was given and the British Force was allowed to pass unmolested. In all, the A.S.U. held five separate positions. Having got no order to attack they later withdrew to a pre-arranged mobilisation point.

In January, 1921, a Brigade A.S.U. was formed so as to be in a position to carry out attacks on a large scale, but due to sickness amongst the members it was found necessary to disperse to our own battalion and company areas.

Frank Carty was arrested shortly after this, together with 3 or 4 other senior officers of the brigade.

Also in January, 1921, a party of the A.S.U. from the Tubbercurry Battalion attacked a patrol of R.I.C. in the town of Tubbercurry, wounding two of the patrol.

M.J. O'Hara was arrested in November, 1920. He was then O/C of Tubbercurry Battalion. I was proposed for the position but, being an only son, had too much on hands to accept the added responsibility. As Charles Gildea had lost his position on the railway due to his I.R.A. activities, leaving him a free lance, I insisted on his appointment. Charles Gildea was arrested in February, 1921. I then took charge of the battalion.

On receipt of information that a party of British Forces would travel on the Dublin - Sligo goods train to prevent interference with Belfast goods (then under boycott), we decided to attack the escort. The A.S.U. took up positions under cover from view at Carrowmore railway station. To give the signal to the men at the station if there was an escort on the train, it was necessary to travel on the train. I arranged travel by procuring a ticket checker's uniform. I repeated this operation for at least five successive days, but no British escort travelled.

I took part in the spring, 1921, in an attack on a party of 12 R.I.C. at Cully, Co. Sligo. The A.S.U. was armed only with revolvers and shotguns. An exchange of shots on each side for 10 or 15 minutes resulted in no casualties on either side.

The biggest engagement I took part in afterwards was in June, 1921, when I went with members of the Tubbercurry A.S.U. to assist in the rescue of Frank O'Beirne, Sligo, Charles Gildes, Tubbercurry, and Tom Duignan, Riverstown, from Sligo Jail. These were all Battalion O/Cs and were sorely needed in their respective battalion areas.

At this time a strong guard of British Forces was posted within the jail. As an indication of the alertness of the guard, it was reported that a sentry had seen what appeared to be a man's head over the main wall and he had fired. On investigation the following morning a dead cat was found outside. It took us three nights watching and waiting for the opportune moment before making the final attempt.

Our party had secured keys (duplicate) to the jail some years previous (about 1919) when Frank Pilkington was a prisoner there. Although a number of I.R.A. were imprisoned in the jail before this no attempt was made to use the keys. It was decided to use them only for the attempted release of members of the I.R.A. under death sentence or an officer of primary importance.

Acting with members of the Sligo Company we finally succeeded in effecting the rescue. Brigadier Frank Pilkington, Tom Scanlon and Peadar Glynn scaled the outer wall by means of wooden and rope ladders, then using the keys in their possession brought the three prisoners mentioned to safety and freedom.

An amusing incident occurred at the time the party were about to scale the wall. One of the men about to climb the ladder had breeches and leggings. He found the leggings were making, what appeared to him, an unholy noise against the ladder and he removed them. This left part of his leg uncovered and showing up some in the nightlight. One of the party engaged remarked to him: "If you don't cover your legs there will be two cats shot to-night". "No", came the reply, "it will be two calves this time".

In June, 1921, myself and two members of the Active Service Unit from Cloonacool went into the North Mayo Brigade area to assist in an operation against the British Forces at Culleens. The plan was to stage a robbery of a grocer who would be sure to report to the R.I.C. The ruse worked. The R.I.C. came on bicycles in extended formation to investigate. The ambush was a success; about 2 R.I.C. were killed and two wounded, the remainder being disarmed. The A.S.U. were retiring to the hills when they found

themselves practically surrounded by reinforcements, but finally succeeded in breaking contact and retiring safely.

Immediately after that I returned to my home area, which happened to be without warning the centre of a big round-up and comb out by British Forces. I was saved from arrest and possible death by the presence of mind of a girl named Miss Cunleen.

After the Culleens ambush we knew that the British Forces would be raiding in the Enniscrone area coming from Tubbercurry. We consequently went into an ambush position on the Lough Talt road and remained there for several days, but no enemy forces travelled our way.

This concluded my military operations against the British Forces in Ireland and brings us to the Truce on July 11th, 1921.

One other matter I would like to have recorded is: Thomas Anthony Cook of New York City, a native of Cloonacool parish, was instrumental in collecting a sum of £400 in America for members of the I.R.A. at home. This money he sent to his brother, the late Martin Cook, with instructions as to its distribution to members of the I.R.A. I was offered the money by Martin Cook. I refused to accept it and suggested it would be given to the White Cross fund.

Signed: *John P. Brennan*

(John P. Brennan)

Date: *24th Oct 55.*

24th Oct. 1955.

Witness: *James Conway* (James J. Conway)
(Investigator)

