

W.S. 1,307

ORIGINAL

BUREAU OF MILITARY HISTORY 1913-21
BURO STAIRÉ MILEATA 1913-21
No. W.S. 1307

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BUREAU OF MILITARY HISTORY, 1913-21.

STATEMENT BY WITNESS.

DOCUMENT NO. W.S. 1,307

Witness

Major Geoffrey Ibberson,
Parsonage Mead,
Winterbourne Earls,
Salisbury,
England,

Identity.

Lieutenant, The Border Regiment,
1921.

Subject.

The Tourmakeady ambush, Co. Mayo,
3rd May, 1921.

Conditions, if any, Stipulated by Witness.

Not to be published until after the
death of the Witness.

File No. S.2655

Form B.S.M. 2

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307

PREAMBLE TO REPORT ON THE TOURMAKEADY

AFFAIR ON 3rd MAY, 1921.

One day about Mid-May, 1921 whilst I, then Lieutenant Geoffrey Ibberson, was in King George V. Hospital, Dublin, recovering from wounds received near Tourmakeady, the General Officer Commanding, 5th Division, visited the hospital. He asked me about my experiences on 3rd May and, after hearing some of them, ordered me to make a report. I did so and kept a copy.

About a month later an officer of 5th Division came to hospital and showed me a copy of a document which had been captured. This document, which was addressed to "A.G., G.H.Q." and was from "O/C. Mayo South" and dated 4/6/21 contained a report on the Tourmakeady ambush and the fighting in the Partry Hills which followed and in which I was wounded. I was allowed to take a copy. This report tied up with my own in the matter of actual contact, but the extravagant claims made in it were a source of amusement to us at the time knowing, as we did that apart from the R.I.C., I was the only other casualty inflicted that day by the Column commanded by O/C., Mayo South. Furthermore, instead of the great number of soldiers he imagined surrounding his Column in the Partry Hills, there was, to my knowledge, a maximum of two officers, including myself, and twenty other ranks who ~~never~~ ^{ever} even saw the Column or knew where it was until after all the other troops had been withdrawn in preparation for the "drive" planned to take place in County Galway early the following morning.

Only recently - it is now 1955 - a Mr. J.R.W. Goulden, who is a son of one of the members of the R.I.C. stationed in Ballinrobe in 1921, has, with some difficulty, searched me out on account of an error in my name. He has brought to my notice that accounts of the Tourmakeady fighting have appeared in print in two books, namely, "War by the Irish", by John McCann on pages 194/195 and "The Red Path of Glory", published by Kerryman Ltd. on pages 211-213. In this latter an article by Edward Gallagher is headed, "Thirty I.R.A. men defied six hundred British Troops at Tourmakeady". I am referred to as Lieutenant Emmerson and my Regiment, The Border Regiment, is mentioned. In consequence, I have agreed that Mr. Goulden should have an account of my experiences on 3rd May, 1921, that he ^{may} ~~pay~~ ^{G.L.} pass copies, if he so wishes, to the Bureau of Military History, Dublin, the Trinity College Library and the Royal Irish Academy Library with the proviso that it should not be published until after my death.

Although decorated for my part in the fighting, (not promoted as Mr. Gallagher says) believe me, I realize that what ruled my actions that afternoon was anger and desire for revenge, (this latter, in any case, being an unpraiseworthy quality) at seeing the bodies of those simple men of the R.I.C. loyal to their uniforms, stretched out on the ground at Tourmakeady. There was, however, one thing to my credit, to wit, physical fitness which, coupled with anger, made the endurance possible.

There is a strange sympathetic understanding between men who fight one another - not illogical, I suppose, when we come to think of it. Many boys at school are enemies only until they fight it out.

In any case when my future father-in-law Mr. F.J.S. Turnly of Lisloughry, Cong, (He was Lord Iveagh's agent for Ashford Estate) wrote to me saying that Tom Maguire's old father had been to see him about his son and could I help, I had little hesitation in doing what I could. It was about September, 1922, when I was back with my Regiment in Marlborough Barracks, Dublin. (When we English left in December the name of the barracks was quickly changed to something else!) The Irish struggle was then, of course, between the Free State ^{forces G.L.} and the I.R.A. Tom Maguire, having continued with the I.R.A., had eventually been captured by Free State Forces - in bed, I seem to remember, by one of his former officers, McNally, near Shrute! ^{G.L.} + Maguire's name, with others, had been published as a Black List by order of the Free State and appeared in some Dublin newspapers. I recall seeing it in either the "Irish Independent" or the "Freeman's Journal". The order was in the form of a threat decreeing that were the I.R.A. to continue their activities in the areas of those on the Black List these hostages would be executed.

I had liked Maguire's father and it was said that at one time he had helped to save my life. In consequence, without the authority of my Commanding Officer, (who might have found it difficult to give it), I wrote to General Mulcahy, then, I think, at Portobello Barracks, Dublin, and put in a good word for Maguire and asked him, Mulcahy, for an interview so that I could press the point. I received an acknowledgment of this letter but that was as far as it got. I never met Mulcahy.

(Signed) G. J. J. J. J.
 Date: 2 Dec. 1955

(1)

ACCOUNT IN SOME DETAIL OF THE EXPERIENCES OF
GEOFFREY IBBERSON, THE BORDER REGIMENT ON 3 MAY, 1921,
WRITTEN AT THE REQUEST OF Mr. J. R. W. GOULDEN OF
DUBLIN IN 1955.

In May 1921, 2nd Battalion, The Border Regiment was stationed in County Mayo in the West of Ireland. "C" Company was quartered in the Military Barracks at Ballinrobe.

In early March of that year Captain H. L. Chatfield, the O.C. "C" Company had been wounded near Partry whilst travelling in a Military Lorry on duty from Ballinrobe to Castlebar, the Headquarters of the Battalion. In consequence I, as senior subaltern of "C" Company was commanding on 3rd May. The Battalion was part of the Galway Brigade.

The Brigade was to carry out a "Drive", i.e. an attempt to round up Sinn Feiners in North Galway, beginning in the early hours of the next day, 4th May, so that on 3rd the Battalion, which was to play a large part in the "Drive" was busy with its preparations. On the previous day, 2nd May, A Company, then commanded by Major ~~W.~~^{CA} Munby, had arrived from Castlebar in Ballinrobe Barracks to take part in the "drive".

During luncheon, on 3rd May, in the Officers' Mess mention was made of some noise of firing during the morning from the direction of Loch Mask.

Shortly after the meal, i.e. about 13.45 hours, this was explained by the arrival of a message to say that a Police Car patrol en route

from Ballinrobe to Derry Park Police Station had been ambushed at Tourmakeady. As Tourmakeady was in "C" Company's area of responsibility and I personally knew the country fairly well, Major Munby agreed that I should take action with "C" Company personnel.

At this point I may mention that, as part of the training of "C" Company, I had selected about a dozen soldiers, mostly Lance Corporals, and had exercised them in hill climbing and other endurance training. We had climbed above Derry Park and above Gortbunacullin but not actually in the hills above Tourmakeady. Unfortunately, only two of these soldiers, Lance Corporal Bickley and another, were available on 3rd May to go with me.

However, having a good general knowledge of the ground, I was able to make a quick plan. In any case a glance at the map would have shown that the most likely "get away" from Tourmakeady by the Sinn Feiners would be in a westerly direction into the Partry Mountains thus avoiding Derry Park Police Station and Srah.

The transport available consisted of two Crossley Tenders each able to carry nine personnel besides the driver and one 3-ton lorry able to accommodate twenty to twenty-five.

Two Officers, Lieutenants Smith and Craig, were with me and available for duty.

My plan was as follows :-

- i. The two Crossleys, the first commanded by Lieutenant Smith, the second by myself, to move via Srah and to halt half a mile south of, i.e. beyond, Tourmakeady. The two patrols from these vehicles then to move, at 300 yards interval, west up the Partry Mountains. When at the summit these patrols to wheel right, i.e.

north and inwards towards the 3-ton lorry party. All ranks to carry rifles and bandoliers.

ii. The party in the 3-ton lorry commanded by Lieutenant Craig with approximately twenty soldiers and two Lewis guns to proceed to Srah about three miles north of Tourmakeady. The party from this vehicle then to move in a westerly direction up the Partry Mountains to the Cortbunacullin area and then to wheel south and try to contact the patrols from the Crossleys.

It will be understood that this plan entailed a limited pincer movement in the area of the most likely line of enemy retreat.

Whilst Lieutenants Smith and Craig mustered the troops I hurried to the Ballinrobe Post Office where information about the ambush had been received and also to dispatch telegrams. There I was told that the story had come over the telephone from the Post Office at Tourmakeady. The wires, therefore, had not been cut.

I dispatched the following telegrams :-

(a) To O.C., Military Barracks, Castlebar.

Hellfire Tourmakeady AAA Ballinrobe Srah Tourmakeady
AAA Castlebar Killavally Bohaun Bohaun Ravine Tourmakeady
AAA.

From: Military Ballinrobe.

(b) To: O.C., R.I.C. Barracks Westport.

Hellfire Tourmakeady AAA Ballinrobe Srah Tourmakeady
AAA Westport Winding Valley Tourmakeady AAA.

From: Military Ballinrobe.

Explanation of Telegrams:

(a) Hellfire Tourmakeady = Ambush at Tourmakeady.

Ballinrobe Srah Tourmakeady = the route by which the senders of the telegram, i.e. ourselves were to proceed to the scene of the ambush.

Castlebar Killavally Bohaun Bohaun Ravine Tourmakeady = the route by which recipients of the telegram should proceed to the scene of the ambush.

(b) Similar to the above.

It might seem presumptuous, to say the least, that I, a subaltern, should give directions to my Commanding Officer at Castlebar! It was then, however, the military practice that the first to receive information about the enemy should carry out such procedure. Action taken by the recipients of these telegrams is made the subject of comments at the end of this account.

At about 14.30 hours Lieutenant Smith and I, with our patrols in the two Crossleys, set off for Tourmakeady. When near Srah Bridge my Crossley had a puncture. The wheel, however, was speedily changed. It was a glorious day and hot for early May. The scent of the gorse where we had our breakdown was, I recall, intoxicating.

On arrival at Tourmakeady we halted for information. There I saw Captain Poccocke, the District Inspector of the R.I.C. at Ballinrobe, who had arrived before us. He was unable to say in which direction the Sinn Féiners had withdrawn. So Smith and I saw no reason to deviate from our original plan. We saw one or two bodies of Constables with whom we had worked and whom we respected and I personally was filled with feelings of vengeance. It was confirmed later that four had been killed and two wounded.

We went on a little way in the Crossleys, debussed and ordered the drivers to report back to Captain Poccocke. Smith led his patrol

forward 300 yards and we moved west towards the mountains. My patrol had to pass through what I took to be the southern part of Tourmakeady Lodge Estate. Previously we had found and arrested Sinn Feiners hiding in similar places and so, foolishly, I extended the patrol in this thickly wooded country being myself on the right and a Sergeant on the left.

On emerging into open country I saw Smith's patrol well ahead on the left and beginning to climb the bare hills. Only two men, Lance Corporal Bickley and another, were with me. I sounded the rally on my whistle as a signal to the rest of my patrol but without success. I fired twice into the air to attract their attention, again with no response. After wasting a few minutes I decided to continue without them as we were losing touch with Smith's patrol. I hoped that, as we advanced, we would see them emerge from the wood and that I could signal them up. We never, however, regained touch with them.

Very soon after resuming our advance we saw a man leading a farm cart moving across our front to the left at about 400 yards range. Thinking it wise to search this I first shouted out orders to halt and, no notice being taken, I fired a couple of shots "across its ^{bows} ~~base~~". This had the desired effect and we went up to search it. The cart contained only a little girl who was frightened and whom we tried to comfort for a few moments.

The sun was unusually hot so after climbing some distance we three took off our jackets and puttees and slung our two bandoliers over our shoulders. I had my .32 automatic pistol in my right hand breeches pocket. The military uniform of those days was a handicap to free movement.

On arrival at the summit of the climb we could see great distances to the west and south west but were unable to locate Smith's patrol. It was learned later that they had sighted two Sinn Feiners, had chased and captured them in Winding Valley, one of them being in possession of a shot gun.

We turned right, i.e. North near the mountain crest. The ground was bare and boggy in parts and flat-going at first. We were rather exhausted after the climb but I had a premonition that at last we were to come to grips with our evasive enemy.

After advancing a short distance in this direction a group of four men appeared ahead of us moving to our left, i.e. West. Some were carrying weapons. They had not noticed us and we were able to find a reasonable fire position from which we opened fire with 300 yards on our sights. They immediately vanished from view. We pushed on vigorously and on reaching the place where the men had been seen we found that it was a gully. From here we could see to the north and east, i.e. along the crest contour and down towards Loch Mask and the Srah-Tourmakeady road.

First we noticed the four men scampering away north across another gully and then to the north-east below and in front of us we saw a large number of men seemingly in flight. At first they appeared to be rather a rabble but eventually they adopted some formation. It appeared to me to be four groups of men in single file. At the time I estimated that the total number was about 60, but it is easy to exaggerate in such circumstances and 40 was probably nearer the correct figure.

The leader of the column was in a controlling position apart from the groups and, therefore, easy to pick out.

Phillside G.I.

The ~~high~~ side was open and they were moving towards Gortbunacullin where Lieutenant Craig and his Lewis guns had been directed. This was all very satisfactory from our point of view.

Soon, however, it became clear that the Column was changing direction to the north-west, would avoid Gortbunacullin and escape over the mountains towards Bohaun unless something was done about it. To prevent this it was necessary to reach a position above their line of advance and try to force them to continue towards Gortbunacullin. The matter was urgent. We had been gaining on their advance but now it was essential that our pace be fast. The Column was then perhaps 600 yards ahead of us but down the hillside.

It soon became clear that Lance Corporal Bickley and the other man were unable to keep up the necessary pace so I ordered them to follow as fast as they could.

Not having yet revisited the ground but referring to the 6-inch Map Sheet 109 of County Mayo, I estimate that I ran about a mile near the 1,000-foot contour across Drumcoggy Mountain and reached a point about 300 yards west of a ring contour marked 700. From this point I was able to overlook the Sinn Féin Column which, if my map reading is correct, was crossing this ring contour feature. After firing three or four rounds ^{at the leader he G.I.} we fell on the slope facing my position, whereupon the whole Column took cover. After about a minute a man came forward from cover. I fired one round at him before realizing that he had come to the aid of the wounded leader. He helped his leader back under cover and then came back to collect a weapon left where the leader had fallen.

I got up to look for Lance Corporal Bickley and the other man but could not locate them. Shortly after a few bullets fell fairly near me. I had seen three or four men on a feature to the south which I now take to be the ring contour marked 800 some seven hundred yards south of my position and the shots appeared to come from that direction. Then, to my great joy, a Lewis gun opened up from the direction of Gortbunacullin. I could see bullet strikes about the enemy position. After a few bursts I rose, waved my arms, signalled "enemy in sight" with my rifle and shouted "Is that you, Borders?" I thought they answered but the distance was great. All firing then ceased.

After a short while, seeing no sight of movement at the enemy position, I feared that they might be withdrawing east down the hillside. In consequence I decided to reconnoitre the feature. To do this I did a right flank move coming up to the feature from the south and crawling the last few yards.

On arrival at a viewpoint I saw about a dozen men in a small saucer of ground and about twenty yards away. A man was attending to the wounded leader. I looked to my rifle and found the magazine empty! As quietly as possible I charged with five rounds and then somewhat nervously added another three from another charger! Deciding to try to bluff them into surrender in the vain hope of disarming them and marching them to Gortbunacullin, I first shot one of the men. Then jumping up and moving forward I shouted "Come my Borders; Hands Up, Surrender". Several I could see did put up their hands. They had been surprised a second time, in this case at close quarters. The man, however, who was attending to the wounded leader picked up his rifle and had a ^{snub G.I.} shot at me. I dropped and he missed me. I then shot him and he rolled over. I again

rose and was about to repeat the order when I was shot from the left through both arms and in the chest. Thus incapacitated I turned and set off down the hillside. After about twenty yards a bullet struck my left thigh. This tripped me and I fell amongst another group of Sinn Feiners who were flat on the ground. Scrambling up I had to pick my way in one place amongst them as they were so close together. Fortunately for me I was being shot at and these were taking cover, or maybe they thought the position was being overrun by British soldiers. In any case I got clear and, trying to avoid further injury, ran zig zag down the hillside. The Lewis gun fire opened up again.

After about a mile I came to stone walls. My useless arms and hands made these difficult to cross. In two cases I recall having to take a running jump, land on my middle and roll over. Eventually I reached a lane (boreen) which runs north to south nearly parallel to the Srah-Tourmakeady road. On the way down I had seen what I took to be Craig's three-tonner beside the road south of Srah. With this objective in mind I turned left in the lane but then came near to collapse.

Seeing a farm cottage on the right of the lane with a jaunting car in the yard and also a horse tied I entered the cottage. As I went in a scowling youth walked out. Inside were an old man and woman. I ordered the old man to harness up and take me to the main road in the car, and then sat down. He argued that the mare had only recently foaled and was unfit for harness. Then began my most trying experience of the day, and it seemed a long time before the old man was persuaded to take me. The fact that my automatic was in my pocket but that it was impossible to remove it to threaten him made it all the more aggravating.

The old woman, who thought and said I was dying, knelt beside me and prayed for my soul to the Virgin.

These old folk were in a difficult position. To help me was likely to prove unpopular with Sinn Féin and for me to die on their hands would be equally unpopular with the Military. I think it was the old woman who influenced the man to take me.

There was some difficulty in getting me up on to the car - always awkward affairs for the unathletic - and I was now in a weak state through loss of blood. At this the old lady helped and I hope that I adequately expressed my thanks.

So the old man and I started off in the jaunting car for the lorry on the road beside the Loch. Again referring to the 6-inch to 1-mile map Mayo, Sheet 109, the cottage of my good samaritans may well have been that almost half a mile and almost due west of Drimcoggy Lodge. If this is correct then I asked the old man to stop at a cottage about 500 yards further north on the west side of the lane. There were some people at the door of the cottage whom I asked for a drink but this was refused. Eventually the old man brought me to the lorry. This turned out to be that of Craig's party as I had hoped.

The strong arms of the Sergeant in charge of the lorry who helped me down from the car were an enormous comfort. I realized that I'd got through. There was also a soldier with a Lewis gun in position near the roadside. I was disappointed at seeing this as it would have been of greater service up at Gortburacullin.

I told the Sergeant to take me to Tourmakeady so that I could report on the enemy's position. He, however, fearful of my life, insisted on taking me to barracks at once. Cold by now they wrapped me in a blanket and we drove to barracks with all speed.

Some Argyle and Sutherland Highlanders had arrived in barracks from Claremorris for the "drive" next morning and an officer friend of that regiment with whom I had served in the R.A.F. actually helped me from the lorry.

I was, of course, adamant that information should be sent to Tourmakeady as to the whereabouts of the enemy column, and hoped that troops could be sent out from Ballinrobe to reinforce Craig. All this would have been easy but for the "drive" due to begin in a matter of nine hours.

I spent the night in my quarter in Barracks with Doctor Daly visiting me often, a shot near my heart causing him concern. Archdeacon Traynor also spent some time with me. My batman spent the night at my bedside and escorted me by train to Dublin and King George V. Hospital next day. There Sir William Taylor, the famous surgeon, took charge. A swan slug was removed from my chest and later the ulnar nerve, left arm, was sutured with unusual success for those days. The wound in the left thigh, which had just missed the femoral artery, left no permanent damage nor did the four shots which passed through the right arm.

COMMENTS:

To the military man there are, I consider, some interesting tactical lessons to be learned from this story. Here, however, I do not propose to enlarge on such matters but to leave that to the reader.

What, may be wondered, happened to the rest of my patrol? The Sergeant, (who had recently been posted to us from another regiment) and five men became lost in the woods and returned to Tourmakeady.

So I was informed G.A.

Later this N.C.O. (the Sergeant) was courtmartialled on a civil charge and dismissed the Service. This may account for the mention of a Courtmartial in the report by O/C., Mayo South. Lance Corporal Bickley and the other man with him, I was informed, contacted Lieutenant Craig's party near Gortbunacullin.

It should, however, be stressed that the great factor which limited the Battalion's success that day - apart from my own blunders - was that it was engaged in preparation for action the next day in the early morning in another county.

The troops dispatched from Castlebar following the receipt of our telegram had orders to return there by 19.00 hours so as to give them a few hours rest before setting off for the operation in County Galway. In consequence the O/C. judged that there was insufficient time to climb over the hills via Bohaun Ravine to Tourmakeady. The Column, therefore, motored direct to Tourmakeady. So apparently did the police despatched from Westport. It must be realised that during the preceding months troops of the Battalion had been called out on several occasions with little result, the enemy having fled and dispersed.

G.A.

Some success, however, was achieved. The next day - 4th May - a party of police under Mr. Goulden's father searched the area of the fighting and collected the following weapons left by the Sinn Féin Column :-

Seven German Rifles near to the body of Brigade Adjutant Michael O'Brien
Twenty assorted shot guns,
one rifle and one revolver which had been captured in the ambush from Sergeant Regan who was killed.

Secondly the Sinn Féin Column never fought again.

Signed: G. Ibberson (G. Ibberson)

Date: 2 Dec. 1955

Witness: [Signature]

2nd Dec. 1955.

