

ORIGINAL

BUREAU OF MILITARY HISTORY 1913-21

BURO STAIRÉ MILEATA 1913-21

No. W.S. 1308

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COSANTA.

BUREAU OF MILITARY HISTORY, 1913-21.

STATEMENT BY WITNESS.

DOCUMENT NO. W.S. 1,308

Witness

Henry O'Brien,
54 St. Francis Terrace,
Athlone,
Co. Westmeath.

Identity.

Captain Cossan Company, 1st Battalion,
Athlone Brigade;
Member of A.S.U. Flying Column do.

Subject.

Irish Volunteer activities, Athlone area,
1913-1921.

Conditions, if any, Stipulated by Witness.

Nil

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STATEMENT BY MR. HENRY O'BRIEN

54 St. Francis Terrace, Athlone, Co. Westmeath.

I was born at Ballykeeran, Co. Westmeath, near Ballymahon, Co. Longford, and went to school there at the local national schools. I could not say that my schooldays had any bearing on my actions in after life as there was nothing of national importance in the school curriculum as taught at that time.

In 1913 a company of the then Irish Volunteers was started in Ballykeeran and I joined this company. Companies of Irish Volunteers were being formed all over the country at this time and were a counter movement to the organisation of the Ulster Volunteers in the north by Sir Edward Carson and his followers. When I joined the Ballykeeran Company it was about 30 or so in strength. My brother, Seamus, was in charge of the company. For drill instructors we had the services of some ex-British army men. We had no arms and used sticks to act as rifles for drill purposes.

When John Redmond made his famous speech at Woodenbridge, Co. Wicklow, in which he offered the Volunteers to the British Government thereby causing a split in the ranks, the majority of our men took sides with the Redmond cause and formed what became known as the National Volunteers. Only about fifteen members remained loyal to the Irish Volunteers and this few included my brother and myself. My brother continued to be in charge of what was left of the Irish Volunteers and we continued to train ourselves as best we could.

Liam Mellows from headquarters in Dublin and the Malones from Tyrrellspass visited us a few times prior to the Rebellion in 1916. We had five or six .38 revolvers

around the 1915 period and early 1916 which we got from headquarters in Dublin. About a week or so before the Rebellion Father O'Reilly procured arms for the Tang section of our company. This armament consisted of about 12 rifles - service pattern long Lee Enfields, and some .303 ammunition which was the service ammunition for such rifles.

Prior to Holy Week 1916, we were aware that there was something serious afoot although we were not fully aware of what that was going to be. On Easter Sunday morning we mobilised about 30 strong. This included Drumraney section or company along with our own. Our first task was to cut the railway and telegraph and telephone wires outside Athlone at Clonboney and Glanworth and then go on to Shannon Bridge. The rifles and shotguns had been sent on there, early on Easter Sunday morning, in a horse and trap. The main body of our mobilisation had also left for Shannon Bridge on foot, only the party detailed for the demolition work on the railways remained. At Shannon Bridge we were to be met by Liam Mellows or his representative who would issue further instructions.

At about 2.30 p.m., while waiting to start work on the railways - I understand that zero hour was 6 or 7 p.m. - we received a message that the whole affair was off. I do not know who came with this message from Dublin, but I understand it was some lady. We were then told to disperse but to hold ourselves in readiness for recall. I went with Peadar Malinn to Drumraney where we put up in McCormack's. I remained there all that week, but no further call came. Early the following week we learned that the Rebellion was over in Dublin and that our men had surrendered there.

On the Saturday following the surrender in Dublin, my brother and I were arrested by a detachment of the Sherwood Foresters and the Notts and Derby Regiment. A number of others around the area were also arrested, and we were all taken

to the military barracks in Athlone. That evening, about 4 p.m., I was released as also were some of the others.

I cannot say why I was released - perhaps it was because I looked so young. I was around 21 years at the time, but always looked much younger. I now returned home. Mr. Chapman, who owned the printing works in Athlone, and one of the friars from the Abbey acted as liaison officers between the R.I.C. and British authorities, and the Volunteers and, as well as I can remember, through them the rifles and ammunition were surrendered to the British authorities.

After this the Volunteers ceased to exist in the area and there were no activities except the collecting of monies to help to provide comforts for the men who were interned in England. After the release of the internees in 1917 things began to take shape again and the Volunteers were reorganised in the area. Athlone and the surrounding countryside was organised as one company area and our area became a section of that company. Nearly all our old members became active again.

Sean Hurley of Athlone was officer in charge of the company or area. We held regular parades for drill, in secret of course. We had no arms and each member paid a small subscription towards a fund for the purchase of arms. Concerts, dances and so forth to get funds were run with the assistance of the Cumann na mBan.

Nothing of any great importance took place until the threat of conscription loomed up in the latter end of 1917 and early 1918. There was a great influx into our ranks now and our strength went up by leaps and bounds. Drilling and parading was now carried on openly as we were anxious to demonstrate our determination to fight conscription. Funds were collected for the national collection to fight the menace

and everyone signed the anti-conscription pledge. Other than this little was done to meet the situation. When the danger died down, nearly all of our new members became inactive again and, with the exception of a few, we were back where we started in 1917. The organisation still remained the Athlone company.

In the end of 1918 a general election was held throughout the country and Sinn Féin, which had become fairly well organised throughout the land, decided to contest every seat. The election threw a huge amount of work on the Volunteers in the way of canvassing voters on behalf of Sinn Féin, collecting for the election fund, checking registers of voters and arranging for transport to take our supporters to the polling stations. This was really the work of the Sinn Féin organisation, but they and the Volunteers were so inter-mixed - the Volunteers were generally also members of Sinn Féin - and having a properly disciplined organisation, the Volunteers were better fitted for this work. The Volunteers attended at all meetings of the Sinn Féin candidates for their protection; but, generally, there was very little trouble.

In the Irishtown area in Athlone there was a big crowd who were openly hostile to Sinn Féin. This party was comprised of the wives and families of men who were serving in the British army and who were drawing separation monies from the British Government. Athlone had always been a British garrison town and such places always housed a large portion of 'hangers-on' or camp followers of that force. On polling day the Volunteers did duty on the different polling stations and provided a guard or escort for the boxes containing the votes until the counting was completed.

The result of the election was an overwhelming victory

for Sinn Féin and early in 1919 the first Dáil met in Dublin as the government of the Irish Republic. The Dáil now took over the Volunteers as the established army of the Republic and all members of the force were required to take an oath of allegiance to the Dáil as the Government of the Republic. The oath was duly taken by all our members except a few who had a conscientious objection to doing so. We were now the I.R.A. The Dáil now floated a loan and the Volunteers were active in pushing this and collecting subscriptions towards it and a good sum was realised.

In the latter part of 1919, a general raid for arms was carried out on the instructions of General Headquarters. This was to forestall the R.I.C. who were about to take up all the arms in the country. In most cases it was only a matter of asking for the weapons, but in a few instances force, or a show of force, had to be used to convince the owners to part with them. We collected a large amount of shotguns and cartridges both single and double barrel type and a few .22 sporting rifles. Also a few small type revolvers. We got no service weapons whatsoever. Fortunately all the raiding was finished successfully without any shooting affairs. We must have collected about 40 shotguns all told, which were now hidden in dumps constructed in stone walls and so forth.

In the autumn of 1919 an attempt was made to capture Streamstown R.I.C. Barracks on a Sunday morning. This barracks contained a garrison of about five police including a sergeant. Two of this number usually went to Mass in Togher, the others remaining in barracks. The barrack door was always kept locked and the windows had steel sheets on them. There were no windows on the back of the barracks or on the gable ends. The barracks lay close to the railway

line. The plan to capture the barracks envisaged a party of our men mixing with the people going to Mass on Sunday morning and capturing and disarming the two policemen on their way to Mass. The policemen were then to be taken to a selected house and stripped of their uniforms. Thomas Costello and Brian Mulvihill, specially selected on account of their physique, were then to dress in the uniforms and proceed to the barrack door. Posing as policemen from another station, they were to gain admission to the barracks. Meanwhile, another party of ours would be lying in wait close to the barracks door but concealed, and when the door was opened to admit Costello and Mulvihill they would rush the barracks and overpower the remainder of the garrison. After the arms were collected, the barracks would be destroyed by burning it.

In case this plan did not work, it was then planned to take the barracks by assault. A mine of the cart ^{wheel} box type was to be placed in a hole made in the wall of the gable end of the barracks which, it was estimated, would blow a large breach in that wall. Ladders and tins of petrol and some small bombs were also to be available and holes made in the roof from the back which had no windows. Through these holes the bombs and petrol were to be put in and the place set on fire compelling the garrison to surrender.

About 40 men were mobilised for this operation which would include scouting on the roads leading to Streamstown. For armament we had 8 or 9 revolvers of different type with a limited supply of ammunition and four or five Lee Enfield ^{service} / rifles with a fair supply of .303 ammunition. Most of the remainder of our party were armed with shotguns. No blocking of roads was carried out as far as I know.

The two policemen were held up as planned, and Costello and Mulvihill dressed in their uniforms after they had been deprived of same. In the meantime a party had got into a covering position behind the railway line in front of the barracks, while other men armed with revolvers were concealed around the barracks ready to rush it. I was one of the 'rushing' party. While we were waiting for our two bogus policemen to come up and get the door opened, the police in the barracks started fixing the steel sheets on the windows in position, This indicated that they were aware inside that something was afoot and our hopes of taking the place by surprise began to fade. Costello and Mulvihill arrived at the barrack door and entered into conversation with some member of the garrison inside, but failed to get the door opened. We now opened fire on the barracks and the garrison replied with rifle fire and pushed out a hand grenade or two through the loopholes in the steel sheets.

Our men now came up with the mine against the gable end of the barracks, but the mine failed to explode. These things were most unreliable. I don't know if any attempt was made to get on the roof by the ladder or not, but, as the mine failed to operate, all hope of taking the place had now vanished and we were ordered to withdraw and disperse for home, bringing our arms with us. The garrison were withdrawn that day to Mullingar when reinforcements came out from there, and David Daly from Faheeran mobilised some men that night and went back to Streamstown and burned the place.

Subsequent to the attempted capture of Streamstown Barracks, the R.I.C. evacuated a number of their barracks in the area, withdrawing the police to bigger stations, principally in the towns. Brawny Barracks in Irishtown,

Athlone; Cregan on the Moate Road, Glasson, Bealnamulla and Clonark were evacuated. The Brawny Barracks, Cregan and Bealnamulla were destroyed by burning them on Easter Saturday night 1920. I don't know when the others were destroyed. I was at the burning of Brawny Barracks. There were no mishaps during this operation and none of our men was injured. This was a nation-wide operation and it was good to read about it in the daily newspapers of the following week. On the same night we raided the Excise Office in Athlone. We knocked on the door of these premises and the caretaker opened it. He was immediately covered and put out of the way. We then removed all the records, books and correspondence from the office to the yard and, having made a pile of them, set them alight. They were totally destroyed. All got away safely.

The withdrawal of the police from the country stations was a great boon as it gave the Volunteers practically unrestricted movement in the area. It also gave greater freedom to persons who were inclined to take advantage of the situation, to rob their neighbours and disturb the peace in many other ways. This situation could not be allowed to develop and the Volunteers had now to take on the duty of policing the country and maintaining law and order. This they did right well, even in the towns where the R.I.C. were still active. This activity also had another purpose; it acted as a demonstration that a native government acting under very adverse circumstances could maintain law and order.

The Sinn Féin Courts were now organised and operating in the area and the people quickly gained confidence in them and brought their cases to them. The British Courts and the R.I.C., so to speak, were out of employment and were only supported by the few loyalists in the area. The duty of

policing the countryside threw a huge amount of work on the Volunteers who could only devote their spare time to such work, but with the co-operation of the people they entered wholeheartedly into the work and made a great success of it. An advantage gained from this duty was that it gave the Volunteers work to do and made them realise they were a useful force, and so improved their morale.

On the whole the area was a peaceful, law-abiding one and the Volunteers were only obliged to make about 7 or 8 arrests. A place of detention was fixed up in Coosan and there was another one, out beyond Glasson, and the Volunteers provided guards for prisoners held in those places. The arrests were for local petty robberies and land troubles and suchlike. I cannot remember who acted as judges in the Sinn Fein Courts, but they were all men of good local standing.

A battalion organisation was now in existence for some time. Our area - Athlone - was the 1st Battalion. David Daly of Faheeran, Moate, was the battalion O/C. Joseph Kennedy was battalion adjutant, and Frank Fitzpatrick was battalion quartermaster. I think James Martin was vice-commandant of the battalion. The companies comprising the battalion were: A - Coosan of which I was company captain; B - Mounttemple, captain James Shortall; C - Kiltoom, captain Brian Lenehan; D - Athlone, captain James Fox; E - Moate, Captain Hugh Sheerin; F - Faheevan, Captain Tom Claffey. The strength of the companies was generally low. My own - Coosan - was by far the biggest, being about 80. The others generally run about 40 or 50 men, with Mounttemple and Kiltoom as low as around 20 to 25.

A brigade organisation for the area was also in being. James O'Mara was the brigade O/C., George Adamson the Vice O/C.

George Manning the adjutant, and Patrick Macken the Q.M. The brigade consisted of three battalions:- Athlone Battalion with David Daly as O/C. and known as the 1st Battalion. Drumraney was the 2nd Battalion area. Richard Borthles was O/C. of this battalion. The 3rd Battalion comprised the Summerhill area, west of the Shannon, and the battalion was commanded by Barney Gaffey. Both Gaffey and Borthles are now dead.

The armament of the battalions - our's at least - consisted solely of shotguns procured in the raid for arms and a few revolvers of different types held by the battalion and company officers. What rifles there were, and I understand there were a few which had been purchased from soldiers of the British garrison in Athlone - were held under brigade control.

About September 1920, a flying column, or active service unit, was organised for the brigade area, and I joined this column on its formation. Initially the column comprised about 12 men. Most of its members were either brigade, battalion or company officers who were on the run. Amongst the members of the column and ranking as ordinary Volunteers as such was the brigade O/C., vice O/C, adjutant and Quartermaster. This was an arrangement which allowed the officers to come and go on their brigade duties as required, whereas if they held appointments in the column they could not do so. They did not interfere in the running or administration of the column, but took their orders as ordinary volunteers. James Tormey from the Moate area was in charge of the column. Tormey had served in the British army and was a man with military experience. He was a man of fine physique and of a commanding disposition.

For armament the column had ten service rifles with

about 20 rounds per rifle and the remainder were armed with shotguns and cartridges filled with buckshot. The column's first billet was at Tobber, in stables belonging to Father McGee. After doing some preliminary training there for a few days, the column moved to Parkwood on the main Dublin/Athlone road and occupied an ambush position there.

We expected to get a lorry load of police who usually travelled that road from Athlone to Dublin. We moved into position at 3 o'clock in the morning and occupied positions on the high ground on the west side of the road. Two men were put in position on the east side to deal with any police who might try to get out on to that side of the road. Two men equipped with whistles were placed on high ground on the Dublin side where they could observe the approach of the lorry and give us warning of its approach. No blocking of the road was attempted as this was not feasible owing to the amount of traffic on that road and we had no exploder to operate a mine. It was hoped to shoot the driver of the lorry and bring it to a halt in the position.

We were in the position until about 1 p.m. keeping low and resting, but alert for a whistle blast, when, to our amazement, a lorry load of police (Tans) drove through and were out of range before we could do anything about it. We had not heard any warning whistle from our lookout men. We were just in the act of leaving our positions to find out why our lookout men had not warned us when we heard the whistles being sounded and, almost immediately, another lorry of police drove into our position. We opened fire on this, killing the driver and bringing the vehicle to a standstill on the side of the road into which it had run. The lorry, when it ran off the road, had turned into the grass margin underneath our position and was now hidden

from our view.

Almost immediately two more lorries crowded with police drove up and halted. The police jumped from the lorries and began firing wildly, mostly in the air. We realised quickly that we had hit up against something that we had not bargained for and that we were very much outnumbered, so we pulled out and retreated towards Tobber. Here we commandeered a lorry belonging to Goodbody's of Clara, which was stopped at a house, and we all parked ourselves on this and drove to Doon. At Doon we dismounted and proceeded on foot to the Shannon where we got boats and crossed over to the Roscommon side arriving at Clonown which is some miles south of Athlone. We went into billets there. We had no one wounded or injured in the affair.

We afterwards learned that the driver of the police lorry was killed outright and that two or three more were wounded. What we had hit up against was actually a convoy of Tans who were being posted out from Gormanston Camp, Co. Meath, their headquarters, to centres in Co. Galway. Had we been prepared for such an eventuality, and had sufficient force, I am sure we could have captured or wiped out the lot, as they seemed to be of a very poor fighting quality. When they ran into the bit of trouble they jumped wildly from the lorries and seemed utterly confused and scattered around the place, firing their rifles wildly as they did so. On hearing the firing, a large number of cattle which were in a field stampeded towards the noise and this, I am sure, added to the Tans' confusion, as they would be mostly town and city men from England. Had they kept cool and had some good leaders, it is very doubtful if we could have got away and, certainly, not without a good few casualties. They made no attempt to pursue us as they were too disorganised to do so.

From Clonown we proceeded around the western side of Athlone and crossed the Shannon again to our own side at Coosan, again using boats to do so. Coosan is some miles on the north side of Athlone. We moved on then to near Ballymahon where we went into billets, being accommodated by the local people, some in beds in the houses and others in outoffices. The local people provided us with food and the local Volunteers did guard duty for us. From there we moved around to different places in that area in similar manner and eventually to the Coosan area where the people were always very good.

While we were in Coosan area, the O/C. - Tormey - asked me to accompany him into Athlone as he wanted to do some business in the town and I did so. We both carried service pattern revolvers in our pockets and walked into the town. We went into the Royal Hotel and had some tea. While we were there a large force of auxiliary police arrived. They were, I think, returning from the destruction of Granard, Co. Longford, and were generally the worse for drink. They seemed to be going to put up in the hotel and, seeing this, Tormey and I got out the back way, but the Auxies must have spotted us and proceeded to follow us - at least five or six of them did so. Tormey had a fine military appearance and he seemed to have attracted their attention particularly. We proceeded along the street in a north or north easterly direction and parallel to the Main St. By the time we reached the corner where Maguire's grocery shop and bar was situated, the Auxies had closed up on us and, just as we were at the door or entrance to the shop which was a double one, one of the Auxies tapped Tormey on the shoulder from the rear, saying: "We want you, big fellow". Tormey dived in the door into the shop before the Auxie could act further. As he did so, one of the Auxies

went to the side door or bar entrance. I had a short Webley in my pocket and, although at the moment they did not seem interested in me, I knew it would be a matter of seconds until they would. I pulled the revolver from my inside breast pocket and fired two shots in succession at the Auxie at the Bar door, dropping him. I then ran down a side road on to the Moate road, the Auxies firing at me and everyone else on the street. I got safely away and down around the south side of the town and crossed the Shannon again to Clonown by boat. I found a few of our column men there.

Tormey, on slipping into the shop, went through to the yard at the rear, but could not get any further as the Auxies had surrounded the place. He hid his gun, I believe, in the toilet and concealed himself somehow from the Auxies who quickly swarmed into the place. Having failed to find Tormey, the Auxies started to burn the premises and Tormey, seizing his opportunity, mixed with the assistants and others who were by now carrying out goods such as sides of bacon and so forth. In this way he managed to slip through the Auxies somehow and made good his escape. He went up to North Westmeath for some time and then returned again, but I never saw him again after the affair at Maguire's. Not very long afterwards he was killed.

I understand I did not kill the Auxiliary I fired at, at Maguire's door. Although I fired two shots in quick succession without any deliberate realignment of the revolver and estimated that my two shots should have hit in the same place, actually one bullet entered his shoulder, while the second entered his hip. This man was, after his hospital period, stationed in Moate.

The column was now broken up into three or more parties

to operate independently in the different battalion areas. I was with a party which was down at Thomas St. on the Ballinasloe-Athlone road. There, and assisted by the local Volunteers, we laid ambush for a party of Black and Tans but they never turned up. While on our way back to the Coosan area we called at a house to get some tea, Tormey was asleep in bed in this house, but I did not wake him up, as I expected to see him in Coosan within a few days. A day or two after that Tormey and some of the local Volunteers were crossing the Ballinasloe Road at Summerhill when they spotted a pair of Black and Tans cycling towards Clonark from Athlone. This was really the first pair of a bigger formation, but Tormey did not perceive that. He lay down behind some cover and when the first pair came along he fired on them with a rifle he was carrying. The remainder of the Tans, on hearing the shooting, dismounted and took cover in a lane which ran at right angles to the main road and from there one of them shot Tormey through the head, killing him instantly. His comrades got away safely. The Tans were apparently unaware that they had shot Tormey and did not make any effort to search the area. Tormey's body was recovered that night by the local Volunteers and it was taken to the old graveyard at Clonmacnoise and buried there. The Tans somehow got to know about this and they went to Clonmacnoise and disinterred Tormey's body and took it to the military barracks in Athlone. There the British authorities went through the formality of holding an inquest or some form of inquiry. Tormey's remains were then handed over to his relatives and he was buried properly in the graveyard at Mount Temple.

One day subsequent to this some of the column, including myself, were in the Coosan area. I heard that four soldiers were breaking up a boat house and firing shots in Coosan and

and generally behaving in a rowdy manner. I got one of my pals from the column and, armed with revolvers, we proceeded to the scene. We waited until the four soldiers had got into their boat in which they had come up the river and then held them up. One of them was armed with a Webley/revolver, but had no ammunition left, having apparently used it all up in amusing himself. Having taken the revolver off them, we let them proceed back to barracks in their boat. This soldier was a batman to an officer in the Military Barracks, Athlone, and had taken the officer's revolver.

The Black and Tans had burned a number of houses in the Coosan area as a reprisal for the shooting of General Lambert. They acted very callously in doing so, not even allowing the inhabitants to get dressed when they took them out of their beds, or to collect any of their belongings. An order was received from headquarters that a similar number of houses belonging to loyalists or British supporters were to be burned by us as a counter-reprisal. Brigade headquarters, however, decided to burn Moydrum Castle instead of a number of smaller houses, considering that more effective. Moydrum Castle was the residence of Lord and Lady Castlemaine. Lord Castlemaine was a member of the British House of Lords and was always an opponent of Irish National aspirations. Lady Castlemaine and her daughter were in residence in the Castle at this time. There was also a large staff of servants employed there. British officers from the garrison in Athlone and the neighbouring towns were regular visitors to the Castle and, as we might encounter a party of them there, we had to be prepared to fight when undertaking this operation.

For the purpose of the operation, all the column possible and a number of local Volunteers were mustered and

armed with rifles, shotguns and revolvers. Tom Costello, the brigade O/C., who had taken over command of the column after Tormey's death, was in charge. We proceeded to the Castle at night time and, having disposed men for security purposes, knocked on the main door of the buildings, Admission was refused. This had been anticipated and sledge hammers had been procured to break in the doors. With the hammers the door was broken and admission gained, and Lady Castlemaine was informed that the place was about to be destroyed. She pleaded for time to collect some valuables and this was agreed to by our O/C. who detailed a party of men to help in this work. Meanwhile, the staff of the Castle were rounded up and put in a safe place. The place was then liberally sprinkled with petrol and paraffin, holes being made in the floors and ceilings to give the flames ventilation. A check of our men was now carried out to ensure that everyone was accounted for and then the place was set alight and we took our departure satisfied that the place would be totally destroyed, which it was.

In the spring of 1919 we raided the oil depot at Athlone for petrol. Petrol at this time was supplied in two-gallon tins, there being no petrol pump then. There was no guard of any sort on the store and we had no trouble in gaining admission to it. We removed a large amount of petrol from this stores, at least a couple of hundred gallons. This was loaded on to a horse-drawn cart and conveyed to the Coosan area where it was concealed by being buried in the ground. It was some of this petrol that was afterwards used in the burning of Moydrum Castle.

In the autumn of 1919 we planned to capture a quantity of explosives which was being conveyed to the railway quarries

at Lecarrow on the Roscommon side of the Shannon. We had received information that the escort would arrive at the quarries at a certain hour. Usually, supplies were left there on the same day each week. Sean O'Mara, the then brigade O/C., took charge of this affair and we had about twelve men armed with shotguns and a few revolvers. We planned to conceal ourselves in the quarries and surprise them on their arrival there. We procured a motor boat and got into the quarries, concealing ourselves, and awaited the arrival of the escort. The men were working in the quarry as usual and were awaiting the arrival of the explosives. Although we waited from ten in the morning until most of the day was spent, the escort never turned up. I don't know why they failed to come, but it looked as if they had been warned.

Some time before the Truce in 1921 an attempt was made to ambush a British military lorry at Tubbrit on the Ferbane-Athlone road. This lorry, filled with soldiers, was in the habit of travelling that road on the same day each week and I understand were conveying supplies to a post the enemy had in the Ferbane area. We planned to attack it at Tubbrit on its return journey to Athlone, as the ground was more favourable for ambush on vehicles coming from that direction. Tubbrit was near the border of the 2nd Offaly Brigade. A section of the column, assisted by local Volunteers, moved into the Tubbrit area and, having learned that the lorry had gone down as usual, we waited its return. We had a few riflemen belonging to the column and the rest were armed with shotguns. We again did not block the road, depending on shooting the driver and bringing the vehicle to a halt. We took up position on the sides of the road. It was not an ideal position by any means, but it gave us a good view of the road to observe the approach of the enemy. It was time

for the lorry to return and an air of expectancy had hold of us. Then we heard firing in the direction of Ferbane. We remained in our position and eventually a soldier on a cycle was seen approaching from the Ferbane direction. When the soldier came into the ambush area he was called on to halt, but did not do so and was fired on by one of our men with a shotgun. He was hit and fell off his cycle. He was only slightly wounded. He informed us that the lorry was held up on the road some distance back towards Ferbane by a tree which had been felled across the road, and that he was proceeding to Athlone to report. He was sent back to join his comrades. That was the end of our ambush dream and we pulled out and returned to our billets.

I was afterwards informed - I don't know with what truth - that the headquarters of the 2nd Offaly Brigade was quite close to Tubbrit where we had planned our ambush, and that they did not want to bring down enemy activity on this area. They, therefore, prevented the lorry from returning and being ambushed by us. I also understand that they had been warned of our intentions on the previous day.

After the burning of Moydrum Castle, Tom Costello, the brigade O/C. and I crossed the Shannon to the Roscommon side. I was having tea in a house and was sitting at a table doing so. I had a revolver stuck in under a body belt I was wearing. This gun was loaded in all chambers except the one opposite the hammer, which was our instructions at the time. This was a safety precaution so that if the gun was let fall and the hammer came into contact with something while falling it would not discharge a round. As I stood up from the table the revolver dropped from my belt and fell to the floor discharging a round which grazed my knee, causing a flesh wound for over an inch or more. The bullet then entered the

seam of my coat near my thigh and came out at the shoulder and lodged in the ceiling of the room without inflicting any further injury to me. Dr. McDonnell came out from Athlone and fixed up my wound and I was put to bed in the house where I was. I was confined to bed for a few weeks, being shifted to other houses in the meantime as a precaution. This happened a week or so before the Truce and I was still on the sick list when that event occurred.

In 1921, two men named Johnston and Blagriff were shot as spies in the 1st Battalion area. I was engaged in the shooting of Johnston. I have no knowledge of Johnston's guilt and was just one of a party who were ordered to execute him. Johnston was a Protestant in religion and lived in a place called Bealen, Mount Temple. We went to his house, but he was not at home. A local boy told us that he was in the house of a neighbour. We went to this house and asked for him. When he heard his name being mentioned he made an attempt to get out by the back door of the house, but one of our fellows grabbed him before he could get out of the kitchen. He struggled violently, tearing one of our men's coats right off him and fought like a tiger. It was apparent that he realised he was for it and he fought with all his power to get away. We were compelled to shoot him in the kitchen of the house where he was. We took his body some distance from the house and having put the usual label, as was done in some cases, on it, left him there. Contrary to our expectations, the enemy forces did not do any searching or carry out any reprisals in the area in which Johnston was shot.

Blagriff was a workman in the Coosan area and was an ex-British soldier. I have no definite knowledge of his guilt or otherwise, but I understand that he talked to his employer and told him about the work he was doing for the British.

I was also told at the time that the employer of Blagriff had found some papers belonging to him which incriminated him. I had no part in his execution.

The advent of the Truce found us in none too good a position. Arms of the service type were few and, worse still, the supply of ammunition was none too good. The column, principally because of enemy pressure, was broken up into small groups and was scattered over the area. From the outset the column had not been the success that we hoped it would. We had not a lot of luck in our engagements with the enemy and had not made any big captures of arms or ammunition to augment our supplies. As stated previously, the column consisted mainly of officers from the brigade area who were on the run and they were not as easy to handle or as amenable to discipline as would, say, a column of ordinary Volunteers. They could not forget that they were officers and were wont to absent themselves from the column without permission from the officer in charge of it, so that it was never a very compact unit at any time. They were not prepared to undergo the severe hardship and privations which service with such a unit would entail, such as long periods of hunger, bad billeting positions and so forth. I think the formation of a brigade column was a mistake from the start and that it would have been far more effective to have formed small active unit squads in each battalion area. Such units would be under the control of the battalion O/C. concerned and could be used by him for minor operations. The battalion units could, without any great trouble, be brought together to form a brigade unit for any major operation when the circumstances so required. Furthermore, the battalion unit formation would allow each battalion to have a certain amount of serviceable weapons in each battalion area and not strip them completely

of such weapons as it did, and therefore rendered them impotent to carry out any operations against the enemy which entailed the use of service armament.

Other than filling cartridges with buckshot and the making of mines or bombs of the cart ^{wheel} box type, nothing was done in the area in the way of producing any munitions of war and we were dependant on what we could get from our own headquarters or what we could capture or scrounge from our enemies. There were a number of men in the Athlone area who were in touch with the members of the military garrison in Athlone and were able to purchase a limited amount of arms and ammunition from them. Bill Ramsay, Thomas Dulles, myself and some others were engaged in this work and a few rifles and quite a good amount of ammunition was procured in this way. When the situation became hot and ambushing and shooting affairs became more frequent, this source almost dried up.

I have no knowledge of how our intelligence system in the area was worked other than that we were all supposed to be intelligence agents and to report everything we observed and heard about the enemy forces.

I joined the I.R.B. early in 1914. My brother was then head of the local circle. There were very few members in the circle then, but in later years, principally around 1920, quite a big number of members were taken into the circle. All of the members were Volunteers. Meetings were usually held monthly and we paid a small subscription per month also. The business contracted at the meetings was usually of a very routine nature, followed by a discussion on the military situation and suggestions for intensifying the war against the enemy. On the whole, the organisation did not seem to serve any very useful purpose, but it may have acted as a

stiffener for the Volunteer force. When the military situation developed to the point when things became really hot and communications became impossible, the organisation kind of faded out and became inactive. It was revived again in 1921 after the Truce.

After Tormey's death, either Tom Costello or Seamus O'Mara took charge of the flying column. A few months before the Truce, I think in February of that year, Simon Donnelly, who had just escaped from Kilmainham Jail, came to the Athlone area and held an investigation into the affairs of the brigade. As a result of this O'Mara was relieved of the command of the brigade and Tom Costello was appointed in his place, with Adamson as Vice O/C. There had been discontent in the brigade that O'Mara was not active enough in pursuing the fight against the enemy.

Signed: Harry O'Brien
(Harry O'Brien)

Date: 6th December 1955
6th December 1955.

Witness:

Matthew Barry Comd't.

(Matthew Barry) Comd't.

