

ORIGINAL

BUREAU OF MILITARY HISTORY 1913-21

BURO STAIRE MILEATA 1913-21

No. W.S. 1,319

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BUREAU OF MILITARY HISTORY, 1913-21

STATEMENT BY WITNESS

DOCUMENT NO. W.S. 1,319

Witness

Matthew Kelleher,
South Horsemount,
Kilcorney,
Banteer,
Co. Cork.

Identity.

Second Lieut. Kilcorney Coy. Millstreet Btn.
Cork IV Brigade;

O/C. do.

Subject.

National activities,
Kilcorney, Co. Cork, 1909-1921.

Conditions, if any, Stipulated by Witness.

Nil

File No S.2605

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No. W.S. 1,319

STATEMENT BY MATTHEW KELLEHER,

South Horsemount, Kilcorney, Banteer, Co. Cork.

I was born here on March 1st, 1890. My parents were farmers. I was educated at Kilcorney National School until I reached the age of 16, when I went to Kanturk to serve my time as a hardware assistant at Cronin's, Hardware Merchants, there. Having spent four years in Kanturk, I returned home to work on the land with my parents.

My first connection with any national organisation was when I joined the Gaelic League at Kilcorney in 1909. There were about 20 members in the branch - the pioneers being Dan Harmon and Tim Riordan. The teachers and organisers were Seán Ó Murchadha and Liam Buckley. Classes were held once a week in Kilcorney National School.

In or about the outbreak of the Great War in August, 1914, the political position in Ireland was, to say the least of it, very uncertain. For forty years the Home Rule question was, it could be said, the burning question. The Irish Parliamentary Party, led by the late John Redmond, held the balance of power in the English House of Commons, and some Irishmen, in fact the majority of them, made out that the whole question was all but accomplished. However, it seems that a bombshell burst on them when they read of the "Ulster Gun-running". What were the guns for? they asked at first. Then it dawned on them that they were to be used by the Orangemen to fight against any measure of self-government for this country. Still the people and the politicians looked to Westminster for redress and the prevention of gun-running, but the next sensation was the

Curragh Mutiny. Surely they will put a stop to all law-breaking now. was the feeling of the people, but nothing was done to the mutineers or those engaged in the gun-running.

Then all over the country sprang up the Irish Volunteers - different groups and different outlooks - but still the Volunteers. Forty years of peaceful methods were thrown aside. The gun was now the weapon. Some of the older men in the political parties (Redmond's and O'Brien's) saw in the Irish Volunteers the end of peaceful methods. They tried at the last moment to do something to stop the tide by trying to get a certain representation on the Irish Volunteer Executive, but then came the war. Mr. Redmond pledged the Irish Volunteers to the defence of the coast of Ireland against the Germans. But there was a new party to come now actively on the scene - the Sinn Féin party - new but old. This party naturally asked the question - why any Irish Volunteers should defend the shores of Ireland for England. Why not defend them for Ireland alone? What had we got from England that we should help her? Where now is Home Rule? Where now is the fairness of England's laws? - one law for the North and another for the South. Only a few weeks after the Ulster gun-running the Irish Volunteers landed a cargo of arms at Howth, but some of the Volunteers on their way into Dublin were fired on by the English military and some civilians were shot, while nothing had happened to the gun-runners in the North. The commonsense of the argument made many think and, as a result, they joined Sinn Féin and the Irish Volunteers.

This was the position in Kilcorney late in 1915 when I was approached by Jerry Sheehan, Musher's Company,

Cork Brigade, Irish Volunteers, and asked to form a company in Kilcorney. I formed a unit of about ten members. Pioneer members were: Neil Barrett, Jerry Burke, Tim Kiely, Paddy Sheehan, Paddy O'Shea, John O'Shea and Matt Kelleher (witness). There was no one with any military training or experience in the area and I cannot say that, beyond forming the unit, anything else was done. I was O/C of the unit.

There was no activity in the area at Easter, 1916, but following the execution of the leaders there was a slight re-awakening of the national spirit in the district. The members of the unit still kept together, but it was not until the general reorganisation of the Irish Volunteers early in 1917 that Kilcorney Company became firmly established. At the time the strength was about 20. It increased steadily until towards the end of the year the strength reached 30/35. The officers of the company were:

O/C - Paddy Healy.

1st Lt.- John O'Shea.

2nd Lt. -Matt Kelleher (witness).

The company was a unit of Millstreet Battalion of Cork Brigade. Other units in the battalion were: Musherah, Millstreet, Dooneen, Rathduane, Rathcoole, Derrynagree, Drishane and Cullen. The battalion officers were:

O/C - Con J. Meaney (Sonny)

Vice O/C - Denis O'Brien

Adjt.- Jerh. Crowley

Q/M - Denis Kelleher.

During 1917 all Volunteers were busy organising the political wing of the Republican movement - Sinn Féin. At this time this organisation was mainly composed of Volunteers and members of their families. The pioneers of Sinn Féin in the area were: John Horgan, Chairman; Tim Horgan, John Kiely, Tim Kiely, Dan Harmon and Tim Riordan.

The only drill carried out in the early stages was ordinary close order foot drill. Training was usually carried out in the fields and at crossroads. The only arms held by the unit were about a dozen shotguns and 150 rounds of ammunition for same.

There was a big increase in membership when the British threatened to enforce conscription early in 1918. The strength of the company increased to 84. There was no change in officers. All shotguns not already held by Volunteers were collected at this time. They were surrendered voluntarily in all cases. We now had about 30 shotguns and 300/400 cartridges. When the threat of conscription had passed, a number of the new recruits dropped out and the strength of the company fell to 60.

The next activity of note was the general election of December, 1918. All Volunteers were active on the political side, but as the Sinn Féin candidate for the area - Terry MacSwiney - was returned unopposed, we were not as busy as the Volunteers of other districts where contests took place. The success of Sinn Féin in the election gave a general boost to Republican activities, and the general public became more interested in the activities of the Volunteers.

It was early in 1919 that Cork Brigade, which was made up of about 20 battalions distributed over the whole country, was divided into three brigades. Our battalion (Millstreet) became a unit of Cork 11 Brigade, which embraced the area of North Cork from Fermoy to Millstreet. There were seven battalions in the new brigade as follows: Millstreet, Mallow, Fermoy, Kanturk, Newmarket, Charleville and Castletownroche. Our battalion was the 7th Battalion. The officers of the new brigade were:

O/C - Liam Lynch, Fermoy.

Vice O/C - Dan Hegarty, Mallow.

Adjt.- Tom Barry, Glanworth.

Q/M - George Power, Fermoy.

Normal training went on during 1919 and nothing unusual took place in the area until November 17th, when officers of the Munster and Leinster Bank at Millstreet were held up on their way to Knocknagree fair with cash to pay for the transactions there. The amount taken was something in the region of £1,800. Within a few days the R.I.C. in the district, in the course of their investigations, were questioning I.R.A. men in connection with the matter. Soon the rumour got round that the robbery was the work of the I.R.A. When this was reported to Brigade H.Q., the O/C (Liam Lynch) ordered a special investigation of the case, in which he himself took a leading part. As a result, seven men from the Millstreet area were arrested in a round-up by the men of the Millstreet and Mallow Battalions of the I.R.A. in the spring of 1920. They were detained for about one week in Drishane and a few days in Laught area before being handed over for trial by members of the Brigade Staff in

Mourne Abbey area. All the men arrested were sentenced to deportation.

Early in 1920 Denis O'Brien retired from the position of Battalion Vice O/C owing to ill-health. He was replaced by Paddy Healy, O/C Kilcorney Company. I was then appointed to take charge of the company. The officers of Kilcorney Company now were:

O/C - Matt Kelleher (witness)

1st Lt.- Michael Healy

2nd Lt.- Humphrey O'Sullivan

Adj't. - Tim Kiely

Q/M - Denis Twomey.

When the general order for the ^{destruction} ~~deportation~~ of evacuated enemy posts was received at Easter, 1920, all members of the Kilcorney Company, under their own officers, were engaged either in the destruction of Rathcoole R.I.C. barracks or on scouting and outpost duty in connection with the operation. This was the only evacuated enemy post in our section of the battalion.

In November, 1920, the newly formed Brigade Flying Column, which had been in action at Mallow (capture of military barracks) and Ballydrochane (ambush of party of British military), came into the battalion area. While there, the members of Kilcorney Company took turns at guard duty. When the Brigade Column left the area following the attack on Millstreet in which Paddy McCarthy (a member of the column) was killed on November 22nd, 1920, there was nothing beyond routine activity until early in February, 1921. The routine activities involved the demolition of bridges, cutting of trenches on various roads

and cutting of telegraph wires in order to impede enemy movements. This work engaged the full-time attention of the majority of the members of the company during this period.

I should have mentioned that a Battalion Flying Column was formed just after the Millstreet fight at the end of November, 1920. This column was composed of a number of men from the battalion who had taken part in the scrap mainly as scouts and outposts. The members of this column, as far as I can recollect, were: Wm. O'Riordan, Mick O'Riordan, Jimmie Hickey, Con Meaney, "Neilus" Healy, "Miah" Galvin, Denis Hickey and Con Meaney (Sonny).

This column were billeted in the area for a great portion of the period to February, 1921. Their presence required the attention of the local Volunteers, who were engaged on guard duty both by night and day.

After the ambush of a party of British military on the evening train to Killarney on the night of February 11th, 1921, by the Battalion Column, the latter withdrew with the captured arms and material to Kilcorney area, where they billeted at Crinaloo at Burke's, Toohy's, Horgan's and Sullivan's. The members of the local company were engaged on guard and scouting duty for the column following the engagement. With the other officers, I was responsible for ensuring the safety of the column at this time.

Towards the end of February, 1921, a prisoner was handed over to Kilcorney Company by members of Macroom Battalion of Cork 1 Brigade. He was held prisoner in the area for about a week before he was tried as a spy and executed. He was tried by members of Cork 1 Brigade

but I am unable to furnish any further details.

I think that the name of the prisoner was Dan Lucey.

This was during the week prior to the ambush at Clonbanin Cross.

The Battalion Column were in the area on the night of March 5th, 1921, when they received orders to be at Clonbanin Cross next morning. Transport was arranged by the Kilcorney Company and the column reached its destination in good time. The column left the area sometime after midnight on March 5th, 1921. I was not at Clonbanin.

When the British failed to round-up Brigade H.Q. and two Battalion Columns (Mallow and Kanturk) at Nadd on, I think, March 10th, 1921, these units retired into our area, where arrangements were made by me for their billets and guards for some days. All members of Kilcorney Company were engaged on guard and scouting duties night and day during this period.

The Brigade O/C, Liam Lynch, was in the area for some days following the round-up at Nadd until, I think, St. Patrick's Day, 1921. I recollect that during his stay I had to go to Tim O'Shea's, Liscarrigane - in Cork 11 Brigade area - to collect despatches. Some of the despatches were for Liam Lynch and the remainder were for the Kerry brigades. I left the latter messages at Finnegan's, Lackadota, where they were to be collected by despatch riders from Kerry 11 Brigade.

It was about this time that an Active Service Unit was formed in the company (Kilcorney). The members were: Neil Barrett, Dan P. Sheehan, Tim Kelleher, John Burke,

"Neilus" Cronin, Mick Healy, John P. Kelleher, Tim Kiely, Paddy O'Shea, Maurice Burke and Matt Kelleher (witness). These men were specially trained and were always available to reinforce the Battalion Column on demand.

When the 1st Southern Division was formed at the end of April, 1921, Liam Lynch, who was appointed Divisional O/C, moved into Kilcorney area. He was billeted with some of his staff at Ivale House, Kilcorney. While Divisional H.Q. was in the area an elaborate system of guards was established in the surrounding area. At night, men carrying electric torches (flashlights) were posted at a number of points - some of them were over three miles away. Signals flashed by torches from the guard at Ivale House were to be answered at half-hourly intervals by each of the guards at the outposts. In this way it was not possible for enemy troops to get within some miles of Divisional H.Q. without being observed and their presence reported to the main guard. At this time, also, another signalling system was installed throughout the battalion. Two posts were erected at the highest point in each company area. Torches or inflammable material of some kind were affixed to the top of the poles. When enemy forces came into any company area at night, the torches were lighted to indicate their presence.

Early in May, 1921, all members of our company (Kilcorney) were engaged with representatives from Rathcoole and Coole Cross Companies in the destruction of the railway lines between Rathcoole and Millstreet. About this time a strong body of enemy troops moved into the area to take part in a round-up at Clydagh, south west

of Millstreet. This party were sniped while in the area by the members of the Company A.S.U. and were delayed for about 3 hours. As a result, they were late to close the ring, which was intended to encircle Clydagh Mountain where some of the Battalion Column and the Battalion Staff were billeted. Amongst those who took part in the sniping were: Dan Sheehan, Jack Burke, Neil Barrett and Matt Kelleher (witness).

On May 18th, 1921, several members of Kilcorney Company, including the members of the Company A.S.U. (Dan Sheehan, Tim Kelleher, Neilus Cronin, Neil Barrett, Jack Burke, Mick Healy, John Kelleher, Tim Kiely, Paddy O'Shea and Matt Kelleher) went into Millstreet to shoot up any enemy forces to be seen on the street, but there were no members of the British forces to be seen. This was in accordance with a general order issued following the execution of I.R.A. men in Cork for being in possession of arms. Having fired a few shots, the I.R.A. party withdrew to their home districts.

There was no unusual activity now until the night of June 15th, 1921, when the Millstreet Battalion Column and the columns from Mallow, Kanturk, Newmarket and Charleville Battalions were mobilised at Rathcoole Wood for an ambush of the Auxiliaries stationed at Millstreet next day. At this time, it had been established from Intelligence reports that a convoy of Auxiliaries travelled from Millstreet to Banteer on a couple of occasions each Friday. The convoy usually consisted of 3 to 5 lorries. When the combined columns were assembled in Rathcoole Wood on June 16th, 1921, there were about 150 men on parade. About 100 were armed with rifles and the remainder with shotguns. There was, in addition, one

machine-gun manned by Leo O'Callaghan (Mallow Battalion) and crew. Paddy O'Brien (Bde. O/C) was in charge of the whole party, which was divided into sections of varying strengths. There were also flanking parties and scouts. Mines (six, I think) were laid in the road in the early morning. They were spaced at the estimated distance between lorries travelling in convoy and extended over about 1,500 yards. When the mines had been laid and all positions selected, the whole party retired into Rathcoole Wood. It was then about 8 a.m.

About 10 a.m. four lorries passed through on their way to Banteer. These lorries returned and were allowed through to Millstreet sometime about noon. During this period the column, except for scouts, were under cover in Rathcoole Wood. It was about 3 p.m. when the enemy convoy of four lorries passed through to Banteer on the second trip. The various sections then left the wood and moved to their selected positions. I was detailed to scout the sections to the eastern side of the ambush position to their posts. Having done so, I returned to the position occupied by the O/C (Paddy O'Brien). He instructed me to go and see about a barricade which was to be erected on a by-road beyond the eastern end of the position. This road led to Kilcorney area and would enable the enemy to take the I.R.A. party in the rear if left open. When I reached the spot selected for the erection of the barricade I found nobody there. I immediately set about making a barricade with three carts which I took from a farmyard close at hand. When I had blocked the roadway with the carts, I chained them together to make sure that they could not be moved too easily. I then returned to report to Paddy O'Brien

but he had left his base for another position. Before I could trace him the enemy convoy had re-entered the ambush position on its way back from Banteer and the fight was on. While still searching for the O/C, I came across the section in charge of Jerh. Crowley (Bn. Adj. Millstreet and Column Leader), who handed me his own rifle. He was not well that day but he remained with the section. I remained with this section until the order to withdraw was given when the fight had been going on for about two hours. Before I reached Jerh. Crowley's section, which was covering the second last mine at the western end of the position, this mine had been exploded. There were five or six in this section but the only one I can remember is Tom Lucey. Our section, as well as all other sections south of the road, kept a regular fire on the enemy, but the failure to get the enemy lorries into positions from which the mines could be effectively exploded left the enemy with too strong a force - armed with automatic weapons - for us to handle. When the signal to withdraw was given, all sections retired to the rear of Rathcoole Wood and then withdrew to their home areas. There were no I.R.A. casualties and there is no record of enemy losses, although rumours circulating at the time put their losses between dead and wounded at from 20 to 30. On the night of the fight I returned to the scene of the ambush with Neil Barrett to collect a mine and some wire which had been dumped in the wood.

On June 24th, 1921, a large force of military, Auxiliaries and Black and Tans surrounded Kilcorney area where the Divisional O/C (Liam Lynch) and the ^{Vice}O/C Cork 11 Brigade (Paddy O'Brien) were billeted at the time. As a result of good Intelligence work and efficient

scouting, we were able to get these officers safely outside the enemy ring within a matter of hours. During this round-up Mick Dineen - a member of Kilcorney Company - was shot by the enemy and about six members of the company were taken prisoners and later interned in Spike Island.

About the end of June or early July, 1921, I moved with the Battalion Column to West Limerick Brigade area, where we joined up with columns from Charleville and Newmarket Battalions. We lay in ambush on two occasions but the enemy did not turn up. The members of this column were: Wm. O'Riordan, Jimmie Hickey, Jerh, Philpott, Wm. Kelleher (Kaiser), Con Meaney and Jack Taffee.

Just prior to the Truce Cork 11 Brigade was divided into 2 brigades - No. 2 and No. 4. Our battalion (Millstreet) became a unit of the new Brigade IV. The other battalions in this brigade were: Mallow, Kanturk, Newmarket and Charleville. The officers of the new Cork IV Brigade were:

O/C - Paddy O'Brien.

Vice O/C - Ned Murphy.

Adjt.- Eugene McCarthy.

Q/M - Mick O'Connell.

There was no further activity to the Truce. Rank at Truce - O/C Kilcorney Coy., Millstreet Battalion, Cork IV Brigade. Strength of the company - about 60.

Signed:

Matthew Kelleher
(Matthew Kelleher)

Date:

18th December 1921

Witness:

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

18th December 1955.

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