

W. S. 1,331

ORIGINAL

BUREAU OF MILITARY HISTORY 1913-21
BURO STAIRÉ MILEATA 1913-21
No. W.S. 1,331

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BUREAU OF MILITARY HISTORY, 1913-21.  
STATEMENT BY WITNESS.

DOCUMENT NO. W.S. 1,331

Witness

John Fahy,  
Eserkelly,  
Ardrahan,  
Co. Galway.

Identity.

Vice-Commandant and later Comd't.  
Gort Battalion Co. Galway.

Subject.

Irish Volunteers, Gort, Co. Galway,  
1915-1921.

Conditions, if any, Stipulated by Witness.

Nil

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STATEMENT BY JOHN FAHY

Eserkelly, Ardrahan, Co. Galway.

I was born in the month of June 1893, at Dunally in the parish of Peterswell, Co. Galway, and attended Peterswell National School until I reached the age of 15 years.

My father and uncles were active in the Land League movement. My grandfather was evicted three times; first from his holding in Ballyiochtar in the parish of Kilbeacanty, then from Caher in the parish of Peterswell, and finally from Dunally. He got back some of the holding at Dunally, but only a very small portion of it. An uncle of my father's - Michael Fahy - spent a long term of imprisonment in Galway Jail as a result of his activities in the Land League.

I joined Ballycahalan company of the Irish Volunteers towards the end of 1915. This, I think, was one of the first companies in Galway to be organised by Liam Mellowes, who stayed some time in the area and slept in a canvas tent. Padraig Fahy, an Irish teacher, was the company captain. There was a good deal of opposition to the formation of the company in the neighbourhood and that may account for the fact that the strength was only about 20 men. Stephen Jordan and a man named Barrett, both from Athenry, often came to Ballycahalan and instructed the company in foot drill. Sometimes they stayed overnight in the camp with Liam Mellowes.

The company was not mobilised as a unit at Easter Week, 1916. Some members turned out individually and assembled with the Ardrahan company at Early's Wood. I think the reason for the failure to mobilise the company at Easter Week was that the company captain, Padraig Fahy, was arrested at Kinvara.

I was not mobilised at Easter Week 1916. The Ballycahalan company ceased to function after the 1916 Rising, because in the reorganisation of the Volunteers in the following year companies, as regards area, were based on the parish. In joint parishes there were usually two companies. Often Volunteers living in the outskirts of a parish belonged for convenience to the company in the adjoining parish.

I joined Peterswell company at the reorganisation in the summer of 1917. I myself was company captain. Thomas Fahy (no relation) was 1st Lieutenant, and Michael Fallon was 2nd Lieutenant. The strength was only about 20 at the outset. At conscription time it increased to about 120 and then dwindled to between 40 and 50. There were nine other companies in the Gort battalion or brigade, as it was sometimes called. They were:- Gort, Derrybrien, Kilbecanty, Beagh, Kinvara, Ballinderreen, Ardrahan, Lilmacduagh and Kiltartan. Thomas McInerney was battalion or brigade O/C. Peter Howley was Vice-Commandant, and Patrick Piggott was adjutant, as far as I can remember. Peterswell company paraded at least once each week, always on a week night after the day's work was done. Only foot drill was taught and practised. The instruction was given by me, except on an odd occasion when Peter Howley, vice-commandant, helped. There was no arms drill and no route marches. The men turned up regularly and punctually for parades, usually in Harte's field in Peterswell, but sometimes in Dunally, three miles from Peterswell. There was no incident in 1917 worthy of noting. I took a lively interest in the Clare bye-election, as my mother came from that county.

Things remained rather quiet during the greater part of 1918. Late in that year, or perhaps in the following spring, I got word from Peter Howley that the R.I.C. were to collect all the arms in our district, so I had all the arms in my company

area collected before the R.I.C. moved in the matter. John Coen, captain of Kilbecanty company, and Lieut. Patrick Cahill of Kiltartan Company, helped in this work. One man, Larry O'Donnell of Dunally, handed over his gun to me voluntarily, and our company got a present of a double-barrelled shotgun from Thomas Coen, merchant of Gort. I cannot remember any incident of note until the general election of 1918.

A man named Martin Ryan seemed to be the principal election agent for the Sinn Fein candidate, Frank Fahy, afterwards Ceann Comhairle, Dáil Éireann. Ryan came to me in the first instance and gave me full instructions as to the best way to support Frank Fahy by way of literature and canvassing. I afterwards went to Loughrea several times to meet Mr. Ryan during the weeks immediately preceding the election. I canvassed the whole company area with Fr. Thomas Burke and Fr. Cawley. The vast majority of the people favoured the Sinn Fein candidate. The number of families opposed to him would be less than ten in my area. I cannot recall to what parishes the two priests were attached at the time, but Fr. Cawley was later P.P. of Shanaglish. It took the three of us four or five days to complete the house-to-house canvass, but the work was not heavy and the two priests were very jolly.

I remember in the course of the canvass visiting the house of a man named William Egan, who was anti-Sinn Fein. Fr. Cawley canvassed him first but failed to move him. Fr. Burke then said he'd have a try at him. Fr. Cawley was not too pleased with Egan and said to Fr. Burke "Let him alone, the good God has crippled him, but not half as much as he deserves". A little later we met a man on the road named John Gleeson who was a little unbalanced mentally. When he saw the priests he knelt on the road. Fr. Burke spoke to him and said some prayers over him.

A week later Gleeson hanged himself. Later on, Fr. Burke told me he had a letter from Fr. Cawley reminding him (Father Burke) that his prayers seemed to be less effective than his own alleged curse. He said in the letter that Egan was walking quite straight and seemed to be completely cured.

Canvassing with these two priests was a real pleasure and to add to it the Sinn Fein candidate was elected by a big majority. I and about 15 of my company escorted the ballot boxes from Peterswell and Hollymount polling booths the night of the polling. When we entered the town of Loughrea we were attacked by male and female supporters of the parliamentary candidate - Mr. William Duffy. They would have given us a very rough time only that the Craughwell company came to our assistance. We delivered the two boxes at the Town Hall, Loughrea, and travelled home by sidecar as we had come. Mr. Duffy's supporters in Loughrea attacked every small party coming into the town with ballot boxes. Four or five barrels of porter were supplied to Mr. Duffy's supporters in Loughrea on polling day, no doubt out of Mr. Duffy's election fund. The R.I.C. did not interfere with our party, but they made no attempt to render us any protection from the crowd of half-drunken hooligans who attacked us on our entry into Loughrea.

I cannot remember any military operation in 1919. Drilling went on as usual. The only thing of any importance I remember was the collection of the Dáil Éireann Loan. I am a bit hazy on it, but I think that almost every family in the company area subscribed. There was no change in the company officers from the previous two years.

In 1920, the R.I.C. became very active. I remember a Feis being held in Kilbecanty in the early summer. There was

a stage set for Irish dancing and singing competitions, and there was to be a hurling match. About 50 British military and six R.I.C. men came from Gort and ordered the people to disperse. The District Inspector of the R.I.C. read a document proclaiming the Feis. The Feis was proceeded with in spite of the proclamation. Captain John Coen of Kilbecanty company used a handsaw to cut down the pole from which the tricolour was flying to save the flag from falling into the hands of the British military and R.I.C. It could not be taken down without sawing the pole. When the pole fell, the British military and R.I.C. rushed towards it and captured the flag. They beat Captain Coen and those who went to his assistance to regain the flag, and broke up the Feis.

Later that evening, Captain Coen, Volunteers Daniel Ryan, Michael Reilly, Brian Connors from Kilbecanty Company, and I held a meeting and organised many hurling matches for the following Sunday. This was in defiance of the British ban on the Gaelic League and G.A.A. Our idea was that if matches were played in many parishes they could not all be suppressed. Matches were played the following Sunday in Peterswell, Kiltartan, Kilbecanty, Beagh, Craughwell, Kilchreest and Kinvara. Of these only the matches played at Kilchreest and Kinvara were suppressed by force, as far as I remember.

In the summer of 1920, I remember that Padraig Fahy of Ballycahalan, who had been captain of the Ballycahalan <sup>Company</sup> before Easter Week 1916, often discussed with me the chances of bringing off a successful attack on Kinvara R.I.C. Barracks. The garrison consisted of a sergeant and 6 to 8 constables. Padraig Fahy said he was arranging with the adjoining Clare Brigade to borrow from them some arms for the proposed attack. He told me that he and Padraig Kilkelly of Kinvara Company were in touch with the Clare Brigade. The attack never

materialised, and later on in the year, both Padraig Kilkelly and Padraig Fahy left Gort Battalion and joined a flying column in Mid-Clare. They had both been very disappointed that the attack on Kinvara R.I.C. Barracks had not materialised, and I think that was the reason they left their own area. It was evident to me that they had been refused permission for the attack by the O/C. Gort Battalion or Brigade, as it was then called. I had arranged with Padraig Fahy that I and about six of my company would take part in the attack.

I remember that in July 1920, Peter Howley, Vice-Comdt. of our battalion, came to me a day or two before the July Fair at Peterswell and said that a couple of R.I.C. were likely to come to the Fair and that they could be disarmed. He asked me to go to the Fair for that purpose. He had no special plan except to take the R.I.C. unawares and rush them. The four chosen for the job were:- Thomas McInerney, Peter Howley, Thomas Fahy, 1st Lieutenant Peterswell Company, and myself. The four of us met at the Fair and remained at it until it was evident that the R.I.C. would not turn up. We carried no arms at the fair.

I cycled home from the fair and, about a mile from Peterswell, I dismounted to walk down the steep hill at Crucknacruise. When I got to the bottom of the hill and was about to remount my bicycle I looked back and saw two R.I.C. men at the top of the hill dismounting from their bicycles to walk down the hill as I had done. I cycled on half a mile to Kenny's Bridge and there slowed up to see whether the R.I.C. would follow on to Dunally or take the Kilderry road. I saw them take the Kilderry road which led to Kilderry village and beyond that only to a turf bog. I knew that the R.I.C. would have to return by the same route, so I hurried home the remaining mile to Dunally and, as quickly as I could, I

collected Volunteers Martin Fahy (my brother), Patrick O'Donnell, Fred Keeley, Thomas Slattery and John Fahy. We got four shot-guns without much delay and hurried across the fields to intercept the two R.I.C. on the Kilderry road. We were just within 100 yards of the road when they passed riding their bicycles. We were disappointed and were just starting to return home when, to our surprise, they took the road to Dunally instead of taking the Peterswell road as we had expected. We waited for them at Hollymount. They came back in about a quarter of an hour. We were in position inside the fence of the road and when they came abreast of our position we gave them an order to halt and put up their hands. They obeyed, but one of the two started to move away from us with his hands up. Volunteer O'Donnell fired one shot over his head. I gave orders not to fire again. I then jumped over the fence on to the road and told the man who was still moving that I would give him one more chance to halt. He halted and we collected two .45 Webley revolvers and about 20 rounds of .45 ammunition.

We ordered the two men to strip off their tunics, which they did. They had only light sleeveless vests inside the tunics. We took their tunics and bicycles. They requested us to return the bicycles and the tunics, saying that the bicycles were their own property and that they would be laughed at without their tunics. I told them to move down the road out of earshot while we decided the matter. We decided to return the bicycles and tunics and they were very pleased. We knew one of the men - his name was Dunne. It was he who requested the return of the bicycles and tunics. He was quite cool and undisturbed about the whole business. The second man appeared to be frightened. He appeared to be very young. I think Dunne knew some of us.

Next day, my home at Dunally was raided and searched by



about 20 R.I.C. under a District Inspector from Loughrea. I was not at home at the time as I had gone to Gort. My brother Martin was at home and was closely questioned about the disarming of the two R.I.C. men the day before. The two constables who were disarmed were present, but they did not identify Martin as one of the men who did the disarming.

Shortly after this, Lieutenant Thomas Fahy, Volunteers Martin Fahy, Patrick O'Donnell, Patrick Kelleher, Thomas Slattery, Michael Fallon and Thomas Helly, all from my company, went to Kilmacduagh to attack a party of R.I.C. which was in the habit of travelling between Boston, Co. Clare, and Gort, Co. Galway. Their journey proved abortive as the R.I.C. party did not turn up as expected. I was unable to go to Kilmacduagh as I had been asked by Captain Patrick Flynn of Derrybrien Company to go there and help them in a raid for arms. About this time, too, I got word from Peter Howley, vice-commandant of the battalion, to meet him and others in the fields near Tullyra Cross to ambush a party of R.I.C. that was protecting Lord Ashtown at Drimhasnagh. I and four or five of my company went to the place arranged at Tullyra and waited there for some hours, but nobody met us. After spending at least three hours waiting there, we got word by one of Peter Howley's brothers, that the ambush was called off. The two incidents at Kilmacduagh and Drimhasnagh that I have just mentioned occurred between July and October 1920.

The next incident of importance that I remember was the Castledaly ambush which took place a day or two before All Souls Day 1920. About nine or ten days before that, Lieutenant Thos. Fahy of my own company mentioned to me that an R.I.C. patrol of six men had gone from Kilchreest to Peterssell and back every Wednesday for the four preceding weeks. I mentioned the matter

to Vice-Commandant Peter Howley and he told me that Comdt. McInerney and he were contemplating attacking a lorry load of British military at Lisatonna between Ardrahan and Gort. I suggested that it would be better to start with the smaller R.I.C. patrol between Kilchreest and Peterswell and give the men some experience without too much risk, for a start. In a few days I got word that my proposal was approved.

I was ordered to Capard House where the I.R.A. were to meet before the attack. It was left to my own discretion how many members of my company I should bring along with me. Those of my company who accompanied me to Capard House were:- Lieutenant Thomas Fahy, Lieutenant Michael Fallon and Volunteers Martin Fahy, Laurence Fahy (my brothers), Patrick O'Donnell, Fred Keeley, John Healy, Joe Madden, Patrick Keeley and Thomas Shaughnessy.

When we arrived at Capard House, the battalion commandant and vice commandant were there as well as a big muster of Volunteers. My brother Laurence, Volunteers Patrick O'Donnell, Fred Keeley and, I think, Thomas Shaughnessy were sent home as they had no arms. The remainder stayed at Capard House that night and next morning about 8 o'clock or 8.30, we went to a wood about 500 yards from the Kilchreest/Peterswell road.

We saw the patrol passing. We expected them back in a couple of hours and took up positions to await their return. We were placed in position by Thomas McInerney and Peter Howley, commandant and vice commandant respectively of the Gort battalion. We occupied positions right inside the wall of the road opposite Castledaly Catholic Church. No position was taken up on the church side of the road. There were about four or five paces between the men. I did not have

the members of my own company with me and I did not command any section of men. I acted simply as an individual. To my knowledge, there were no section commanders. Thomas McInerney and Peter Howley were in charge. We were strung out from the gate lodge leading to Daly's of Castledaly to the crossroads on the Kilchreest side of the church. There were about 30 men in all.

The plan for the commencement of the attack was that Volunteer Slattery, a native of Co. Clare, was placed with a shotgun between the gate lodge and the church. He was to fire a shot when the last of the five R.I.C. forming the patrol passed his position. He was in a good position to see and count them as they passed. He fired a shot when only three of the patrol had passed his position. The two R.I.C. men thus left outside the ambush position crossed the wall of the road surrounding the church grounds and escaped. One of them took his rifle with him but the other left his clipped to his bicycle. Of the remaining three, one was killed between the church and the crossroads, and the two others - one of whom was wounded - took to the fields. I remember that Volunteer William Thompson of Ardrahan Company was beside me. We got four rifles and five bicycles. Two of the rifles went to Kilbecanty company and two to Ardrahan company, as far as I can remember. I cannot remember how the bicycles were disposed of.

Four or five houses including our house at Dunally were burnt by the R.I.C. in reprisal for the ambush at Castledaly. Our house was raided regularly every week from that to the Truce in July 1921. Neither my brothers nor I could sleep at home. We slept in a shelter made in a haycock for a while and afterwards in a cave in the mountain, a few miles from our own home.

Early in 1921, the officers of Kilbecanty, Gort and Peterswell companies became very dissatisfied because there was so little activity. They were not satisfied that they were getting the full support of the battalion commandant and vice commandant. These two officers had ceased to pay any visits to the companies and the battalion vice-commandant had gone on the run to East Galway area. Daniel Ryan, an officer of the Kilbecanty Company, afterwards brigade Q.M., South West Galway Brigade, got in touch with Michael Brennan of Clare and asked him for assistance in men and material. Brennan came into our battalion area about March or early April 1921, and set about reorganising it. He split the battalion or brigade commanded by Thomas McInerney into two battalions. The first (Gort) battalion comprising Derrybrien, Gort, Peterswell, Kilbecanty and Beagh companies was placed under the command of Joseph Stanford, heretofore captain of Gort Company, with myself as vice-commandant.

The 2nd (Ardrahan) Battalion comprising the Kinvara, Ballinderreen, Ardrahan, Kilmacduagh and Kiltartan companies was placed under the command of Thomas McInerney with Peter Howley as vice-commandant. In less than a fortnight, the 3rd (Athenry) Battalion was added to the other two to form the Galway South West Brigade with Joseph Stanford appointed Brigade O/C. I was then appointed battalion commandant of Gort Battalion to fill the vacancy on the promotion of Joseph Stanford. Gilbert Morrissey was placed in charge of the 3rd (Athenry) Battalion. There were roughly 50 men in each of the five companies of my battalion. The company captains were:- Derrybrien - Patrick Flynn; Gort - John Hayes; Peterswell - Thomas Fahy; (Lieutenants, Michael Fallon and Patrick Carew); Kilbecanty - John Coen; Beagh - John Flaherty.

On Holy Thursday night, 1921, I went with about twenty of my battalion to meet about 20 or 30 of General Brennan's flying column at Derrybrien. General Brennan's column were nearly all armed with rifles. The majority of my men were armed with shotguns, but three or four had rifles. The Brigade O/C., Joseph Stanford, was there, and Brigade Q.M. Daniel Ryan and my brother Martin, brigade engineer. We all marched to Dalystown near Loughrea and took up ambush positions near Farrell's of Dalystown. An R.I.C. party was expected into the ambush position as a result of a raid on the mails by some of our party. I forgot to mention that on the way from Derrybrien to Dalystown we were joined by a party of I.R.A. from Galway South East Brigade under the command of Brigade O/C. Laurence Kelly. We all remained in the ambush positions from early Good Friday morning till late in the same afternoon and, as the party of R.I.C. that was expected did not turn up by then, we all withdrew and returned to Derrybrien without engaging any enemy force. We stayed in Derrybrien that night with General Brennan's column and returned to our own area the following day - Saturday.

Shortly before the Truce of July 1921, there was a large-scale round-up by British military of the area between Loughrea and a point south of Gort some miles into Co. Clare. There were hundreds of British cavalry and infantry engaged as well as a big number of R.I.C. At least one aeroplane was also used by the British. I took refuge in a cave in the mountain near our home in Dunally while the round-up was in progress in my battalion area. I spent twelve hours in the cave with my brother Martin, brigade engineer, and Volunteer Martin Coen of Kilbecanty Company. I could hear the British military talking and walking directly over our heads. I could also see them through the sods or scraws which we used for a

door in the cave. We were in the cave continuously for at least 12 hours. During that time, my sister (now Sister Gertrude of the Mercy Order of Nuns in Illinois, U.S.A.) and Miss K. Fahy kept us informed of the enemy movements as well as bringing us food. No Volunteer from the area under my command was taken prisoner in the round-up.

I think it was the day before the Truce that I went to Kilbecanty Company area to take part in an attack on a patrol that was expected from Gort to Blackwater, about a mile from Gort on the Gort/Ennis road. I received orders there from Brigadier Joseph Stanford and Brigade Q.M. Daniel Ryan to go to Loughrea battalion area to help in an attack which was planned for a party of R.I.C. at a place called the Fishpond about a mile south of Kilchreest on the Loughrea/Gort road. By the time I had got back from Kilbecanty company area I considered it too late to go and try to contact the I.R.A. party, including some members of General Brennan's column, detailed for the attack at the Fishpond. I heard that the attack occurred and that one R.I.C. man was wounded there.

The principal enemy post in my battalion area was Gort, with 60 or 70 troopers ( - Lancers) and at least 30 R.I.C. The R.I.C. barracks at Kilbecanty and Peterswell were evacuated in 1920 and destroyed by the I.R.A. at Easter of that year. About 20 R.I.C. and Tans were stationed at Ardrahan, while about 20 Auxiliaries occupied Drimhasna Castle.

There was no spy executed in the battalion area. The local people were very good to the I.R.A. We could always depend on them for food and shelter and they invariably kept watch for us while having meals or sleeping in their houses. Anything and everything they did for us was done cheerfully.

They seemed to regard helping us in any way as a great privilege. I cannot say that any of the R.I.C. in this area was well disposed towards the Volunteers or helped in any way.

Republican police were chosen from the I.R.A. In this area two were chosen from each company. Those chosen from Peterswell company were Volunteers John O'Donnell and Patrick Morgan. Hearings of cases by the Parish Court were held at Capard House. It was a big unoccupied building in an out of the way place. It was also used as a prison for prisoners detained by the I.R.A. or republican police. I cannot remember how often the Court met. The Justices of the Parish Court were Thomas O'Donnell, an elderly man, Patrick Linnane and myself. I can recollect a few cases of trespass coming before the Parish Court. My brother, Thomas Fahy, was Clerk of the Court. This was an honorary post in the sense that it carried no remuneration or reward. I remember that witnesses giving evidence before the Court were always sworn.

I remember acting as Justice in an important case in which three men were convicted of stealing a quantity of wool in Kiltartan area and a couple of clocks from Coole House in the same locality. The men were held prisoner at Capard House for a fortnight after their conviction after which they were ordered to leave the battalion area. I cannot remember if the fortnight's detention was the sentence imposed on those three men. I do remember distinctly that a fine of £40 was imposed on Thomas Spellman, merchant of Gort, for having bought the wool knowing it to have been stolen. I heard the case with William Thompson, captain of Ardrahan Company. I cannot remember the third member of the Court. I remember also that the £40 was paid by Spellman and handed over to Battalion O/C. Thomas McInerney. That would, as far

as I remember, have been in the first half of the year 1920.

I was sworn into the I.R.B. by Thomas McInerney, O/C. Gort Battalion. I cannot remember the date or even the year, nor can I remember attending any meetings of the Brotherhood.

Signed: John Fahy  
Date: 22nd December 1955

(John Fahy)

22nd December 1955.

Witness: Con Moynihan

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