

ORIGINAL

BUREAU OF MILITARY HISTORY 1913-21

BURO STAIRÉ MILÉATA 1913-21

No. W.S. 1,336

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BUREAU OF MILITARY HISTORY, 1913-21.

STATEMENT BY WITNESS.

DOCUMENT NO. W.S. 1,336

Witness

Patrick Lennon,
Summerhill,
Athlone,
Co. Westmeath.

Identity.

Member of Irish Volunteers,
Summerhill, Athlone, 1917 - .

Subject.

Summerhill Company Irish Volunteers,
Co. Westmeath, 1917-1921.

Conditions, if any, Stipulated by Witness.

Nil

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ORIGINAL

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BURO STAIRS *W.S. 1336*No. W.S. *1,336*STATEMENT OF PATRICK LENNONSummerhill, Athlone, Co. Westmeath.

I was born in the Summerhill district, Athlone, and went to the local school there. My schooldays had nothing to do with my later activities as there were no particular leanings towards nationalism in the school I attended in those days. Mr. Fitzpatrick, one of our teachers, was very keen on the Irish language and insisted on teaching it to us.

Around June 1917, a local club of the Sinn Fein organisation was started in the Summerhill area and I joined that. My brother Thomas, now deceased, was president of this club which had about 25 members. Regular meetings of this club were held and nearly all the members were busily engaged during the Plunkett elections in Roscommon.

About the end of 1917 I joined the local company of Volunteers. John Harney was the captain of the company at this time, which was about 60 strong approximately. Except for a few shotguns belonging to some of our members and three old type revolvers - more ornamental than ^{of} use, arms for the company did not exist. There was about 50 rounds of assorted ammunition available for the revolvers. The company captain did what military instruction we got. Parades were held almost nightly. On joining, we took some form of oath which I cannot remember now. This is not to be confused with the oath which we took later in 1919. There was no battalion or higher formation at this time that I know of, just companies or sections in different areas. Companies existed in Summerhill, Clonown, Bealnamulla, Moore, Taughmacconnell and Drum.

At a later stage, this area was organised into a battalion

area. Things went on quietly until the threat of conscription overshadowed the country. Big anti-conscription meetings were addressed by Harry Boland, Larry Ginnell, Owen Sweeney and others. The local clergy took a big part in this protest against the attempt of the British Government to conscript our young men into their forces. Rev. Father Kane of Summerhill was outstanding in this respect. There was a big influx into the Volunteer force now and our strength went up by leaps and bounds inside a few days. Drilling was now carried out openly and the Volunteers paraded to all meetings. I think that Volunteer H.Q. in Dublin were anxious to display our strength and determination to resist conscription. The Volunteers went around the houses and got the people to sign the anti-conscription pledge and, at the same time, they collected subscriptions for the anti-conscription fund.

Other than drilling, nothing was done to prepare to fight conscription and the arms position was still the same bad way. There were quite a few shotguns held by people in the area and these would have been available to us had the crisis broken. Pikeheads were made by William J. Byrne of Connaught St., Athlone, for us, and we cut and shaped handles for these from ash and other woods which we cut from the fences around.

When the crisis was over, the vast majority of the men who had joined up in our company became inactive again and thereby ceased to be members, and we were back in the same position as we were before it started. Some of these men did rejoin at a later stage. Some time between the conscription crisis and the General Election of 1918, a battalion was organised in the area. The late Barney Gaffey was appointed officer commanding. Michael Cunniffe of Monkland was battalion adjutant and his brother Edward was battalion quartermaster.

Patrick Watson was vice-commandant. The companies comprising the battalion were:- A - Summerhill, Captain John Harney; B - Drum, Captain John Killian; C - Bealnamulla, Captain William Fallon; D - Clonown, Captain William Fallon, who was no relation of the captain of Bealnamulla; E - Taughmacconnell, Captain Michael O'Connell; F - Moore, Captain Patrick Flynn; G - Monkland, Captain Sean Bannon; H - Kiltoom, Captain Brian Lenihan.

The battalion was then known as the 1st Battalion, Westmeath Brigade, although all the battalion area was in South Roscommon. The battalion armament was very small - just a few revolvers and a few shotguns. There was a brigade organised in the Westmeath area at this time. Sean Hurley was brigade commander, and I think Seamus O'Mara was vice-commander. He was on the brigade staff at this time at least. I do not know who the other members of the brigade staff were.

In the general election at the end of 1918, the Volunteers put in a huge amount of work in connection with the elections. They were busily engaged in checking registers, canvassing voters and collecting for the election funds and fixing transport to take the supporters of Sinn Fein to the polling stations. Personation was rife in this election and we voted for everyone who was on the register who was dead or who had left the district, as well as several who were alive also. Everything went off peacefully in our area and there was no trouble of any sort. When the voting had finished, the Volunteers provided an escort for the ballot boxes.

The Dáil met in January 1919 as the elected government of the Irish Republic and the new Finance Department floated a loan and the Volunteers were active in promoting this by way of canvassing and collecting subscriptions. A large sum of money

was realised for the loan and it was surprising to see how well the people responded to the call, even those who had supported the Parliamentary Party in the elections. The battalion O/C. took charge of all the money collected. Every penny collected was accounted for and each subscriber later was forwarded an official receipt from the Department of Finance.

The Dáil now took over control of the Volunteers and each member was required to take an oath of allegiance to the Dáil as the Government of the Republic. About 10 or 15 of our members declined to take this oath. These were generally the old men of the organisation. It was not that they were not loyally disposed to Sinn Féin, but rather that they did not like taking an oath in a secret organisation.

The Volunteers now began to act as policemen and to do police work. The R.I.C. were no longer an effective force in this respect as the people had more or less ceased to co-operate with them. They had openly sided with the anti-Sinn Féin side during the election campaign. The Volunteers had the co-operation of the people and were far more effective in their police work. There was the usual disputes about land and petty robberies and so forth, and the Volunteers were compelled to make a few arrests and detain such people in 'unknown destinations'. These were special places such as old uninhabited houses in out-of-the-way places where the Volunteers kept prisoners under guard. The Volunteers soon had the situation well in hand and a great respect grew for them amongst the people. A few of our men were arrested by the R.I.C., a couple of them being caught with revolvers on their

By now, we had filled a good few cartridges for shotguns with slugs, having first emptied ordinary shot from them.

We made the slugs locally (with the aid of a mould) from pieces of old lead piping and scrap lead. An odd raid for arms was also carried out by us which provided us with some more shotguns and cartridges. In the end of 1919 a general raid for arms was ordered by headquarters. Every house in the area where shotguns and other arms were known to be or were suspected of being held was visited. We collected a large number of shotguns of different types and a few sporting rifles. One rifle was a service type which had belonged to the Redmond Volunteers. It was a single shot weapon and there were a few rounds of ammunition with it. No other service type weapons were secured. The arms collected were placed in wooden boxes and buried in a sandpit as being the driest place that could be found for them outside putting them in some buildings which would not be safe. There were no incidents during the raids and in most cases it was only a matter of asking for the guns and they were handed out to us. In others, however, we had to make forcible entry to the premises and to search for the guns. A little display of arms such as a revolver often was very persuasive in this respect.

Shortly after this the R.I.C. evacuated Bealnamulla Barracks in this area and this was destroyed by us on Easter Saturday night 1920, by burning, as was done all over the country on that night. The R.I.C. held on to their barracks at Clonark which they fortified with sandbags and barbed wire. They strengthened the garrison of this post by adding some of the men to the post that they had withdrawn from the stations they evacuated. Clonark was a strategic post in that it lay approximately halfway between Athlone and Ballinasloe, which was their next big garrison centre towards the west. Clonark Barracks was situated on high ground and hard to approach. There was no cover in the vicinity of the barracks and it was encompassed nearly on three sides by a bog. Verrey lights from this barracks would be easily visible in Athlone and Ballinasloe

The Volunteers were now doing all the police work of the country - even in the towns and other centres where the R.I.C. had held on to their barracks. Prisoners arrested by the Volunteers were kept in unknown destinations. One such place was situated at Clonown and prisoners were also kept in the Sinn Fein Hall in Summerhill. Such prisoners were made to work on the bogs and farms until their charges were disposed of either by the Sinn Fein Courts or by Volunteer Courts. The guarding and feeding of such prisoners provided a problem for the Volunteers which was only solved by the kindly help of the neighbours. A number of Scotchmen now arrived in the locality. They were supposed to be looking for employment, but everyone believed they were spies. They were arrested and brought to the Sinn Fein Hall where they were interrogated by the Volunteer officers. On giving an undertaking that they would return to Scotland or England, they were released and they left the country.

The Sinn Fein Courts were operating very successfully now and the British Courts were deserted, or almost so. Solicitors from Athlone practised at the Sinn Fein Courts including Mr. Walker and Mr. Hannon. Mr. Tully and Mr. W. Shine, who were local farmers, acted as judges at the local Courts. The people abided lawfully by the decisions of the Sinn Fein Courts and, only on rare occasions had the Volunteers to enforce the findings of the Court. The Courts were held in places which were kept a secret from everyone except those interested and were usually held at night. The R.I.C. or the British military did not make any attempt to interfere.

By now, the R.I.C. began to be reinforced by the Black and Tans who were recruited in England and in many cases from

jails there. They generally belonged to the worst elements of English society. They had no potentialities to be police and were really a military force in police uniforms. They were created to start a reign of terror in the country, which they did. Another force was also recruited by the British Government, known as Auxiliaries. This force was composed mostly of ex-British army officers who had seen service during the first Great War, and although officers are supposed to be gentlemen, certainly this force did not give that impression. They were tough, stubborn fighters with a flare for acting the blackguard also. They were dressed to terrorise and usually went around with a rifle and bandolier of ammunition and a revolver or two strapped on their legs, and a few hand grenades hanging out of their belts.

Things began to get hot now and arrests, holds-up and searches and raids became the everyday life of the people, and a general reign of terror was instituted by the British forces particularly the Tans and Auxiliaries. The R.I.C., to their shame, acted as the bloodhounds for this force and led them around to shoot their own kith and kin. Without the aid of the R.I.C. they could not have made any progress. To counteract the activities of the enemy forces, the Volunteers were now ordered to destroy communications in an effort to curtail their mobility. Bridges, principally on the main roads, were destroyed where possible and roads blocked by felling trees across them. Telegraph and telephone communications were also cut. We destroyed the bridge on the main Athlone-Ballinasloe road at Summerhill. This bridge spanned the river known as Cross. We knocked the bridge down with crowbars and pickaxes. The bridge at this time was more or less in a state of decay and it did not take a superhuman

effort to throw it down. We demolished it from end to end leaving no pass-way. While working at it we had a man armed with a shotgun some distance away on the Athlone side. This man was to fire a shot if any enemy force came along. Another man was similarly placed on the Ballinasloe side. This was the only protection we had.

The following morning a lorry of Black and Tans came along the road at great speed and would probably have run into the cutting were it not that a local clergyman stopped them. In doing so, he risked getting shot himself, as these gentlemen were very suspicious and there was no accounting for what they might do. Three or four days later the military and Tans came out from Athlone bringing with them a large number of men whom they had commandeered in the town. The commandeered men consisted of bank clerks and business men from the town, who were not used to work of this nature. The enemy also commandeered carts and horses locally and made their working party load up these with all the large stones from the local fences and fill up the broken bridge with them and, in this way, they made a pass over it. The water was able to pass through the rough stone boulders and thus no flooding was caused.

The bridge had two or more eyes or arches and we now demolished a second arch. This time we left portion of it intact to provide a pass for cyclists and pedestrians on either end, but no cars could pass over. The Tans and military came out again with their commandeered party and filled it in as before. When the enemy were filling in the second arch they publicly placed a trap mine in it so that it could not be reopened. This mine remained in the bridge until 1922 when engineers from the National Forces removed it, and the Co. Council then had the bridge repaired.

The local company captain had been arrested and got a period in jail and he was replaced by Captain Thomas Halligan. There were no other changes in the battalion and companies. Parades and training went on as usual and the principal activities were the blocking of roads and cutting of communications. About 14 or 15 men were arrested from our battalion by this time and were interned. An active service unit or flying column was started about the latter end of the summer of 1920 and a number of men from the battalion area joined this unit. The column put up in our battalion area very often and this area was kept a quiet one on that account. When the column was located in our battalion area we were required to provide security forces for them in the way of guards and scouts. We also had to find accommodation for the column and to provide food and cigarettes and clothing where necessary for the men. The Cumann na mBan were very useful in this respect.

On 2nd February 1921, an ambush was staged at Cornafulla on the Ballinasloe-Athlone road about two miles from here. Tormey, who was officer in charge of the column, and a few others including Captain Halligan ~~and~~ George Adamson, ^{and Thomas Halligan} were in the Cornafulla area. Tormey had planned to stage an ambush and had ordered a mobilisation of the local Volunteers. While waiting for the local men to mobilise, a party of Tans on cycles on patrol duty came along the road. Tormey fired on them. The Tans dismounted and returned the fire and Tormey and his comrades had to retreat. Tormey tried to cover the retreat of his comrade and while crossing a ditch he was shot through the head by some of the Tans who had got into a lane which ran at right angles to the main road and outflanked Tormey's small party. Adamson and others got safely away. That night, Tormey's body was recovered by the local Volunteers

and brought to Clonown. Some local Volunteers were waiting with a boat and they took Tormey's body in this down the Shannon to Clonmacnoise Cemetery and buried it there. The Tans discovered this somehow and they went to the cemetery and exhumed the remains and brought them to Athlone. Tormey's father identified the remains as those of his son. The body was handed over to the father and it was now taken to Mount Temple where it was re-buried in the Tormey burial ground.

After the shooting, the Tans apparently did not search the area of the shooting. They were apparently unaware that they had shot Tormey or were too frightened to search the area. The arms which Tormey was carrying were recovered. The Cornafulla and surrounding district were by now searched and raided extensively by enemy forces. They combed the area with a fine comb, so to speak, but, peculiarly, they made no arrests.

On 11th June 1921, one of our men - Michael Hunt - was arrested while taking dispatches at the railway station in Athlone from a guard or driver of the down mail train. The Tans followed him into a lavatory on the station premises and held him up and found the dispatches under his coat. The forces who arrested him were composed of military and Tans. Hunt was taken to the military barracks where he was used as a hostage on lorries going out on raids and so forth. They made him dig what they said was his own grave in the barrack grounds and he was thrown into drains and beaten in an effort to get information from him. Hunt was eventually courtmartialled and sentenced to three years penal servitude. He was released in the general release in January 1921.

Two Black and Tans were keeping company with some girls in the Carricknaughton area. These girls were from the town of Athlone. George Adamson and Gerald Davis went to

investigate this, both armed with revolvers. On contacting the Tans, Adamson's gun would not work and the Tans fired, wounding Adamson. Davis's gun operated all right, but the Tans got away with the assistance of the girls whom they left behind. The girls threw dust and clay into Gerald Davis's eyes and prevented him from firing on the Tans. Adamson was taken to a house in this area and a doctor procured for him and he was nursed back to health there.

On 1st November 1920, Constable Doyle of the R.I.C., who was stationed at Clonown, was ambushed at Kielty and wounded by the local Volunteers. Shotguns were used by them; although Doyle received a number of pellets in the head and face, none of them made any serious penetration as the powder in the cartridges was defective, probably through damp. Constable Doyle was taken to a nearby house and medical aid summoned for him. The Volunteers were really waiting for a patrol of Tans whom they expected to come that way.

The Black and Tans, drunk and sober, now swarmed into Kielty. On their way out there they stopped at my house. The only occupant of the house at this time was a dog which they duly bayoneted to death. We had evacuated the house as we were expecting trouble. They burned our house and also the Sinn Fein Hall. They also burned Michael Macken's house and a good number of outoffices in the Moore area. Constable Doyle survived and was awarded £2000 compensation. He served on in the force until it was disbanded.

A man, whose name I do not know, but who was known as 'Slickfoot', was shot as a spy in the Carrickbrien area. He had a cork leg and that was the reason he was called 'Slickfoot'. When he was shot he was thrown into the river, but the cork leg made him float, so he had to be weighted down

with sandbags. I don't know anything about his guilt except that he was shot as a result of something that was discovered in a raid on the mails.

Another man named Heary was shot near Knockcroghery for spying for the enemy. Again, I do not know the extent of his guilt or how he was caught. Heary's sisters went around with the Tans on their lorries and led them to the houses of Volunteers. As a result of this, Knockcroghery, which is a village in South Roscommon, was burned by the Black and Tans. Knockcroghery was the site of the famous clay smoking pipe factory which was also destroyed and was never restarted.

I have no idea of how intelligence work was carried out in the area except that every Volunteer reported everything he heard or saw to his company captain. Except for the filling of shotgun cartridges and the making of some bombs of the cart-wheel box type, there were no other munitions made in the area.

The Cumann na mBan had a branch of their organisation in Summerhill which co-operated with us in many ways and, in addition, collected monies and provided comforts for the men who were in jail and internment camps. Amongst the members of this branch were Nellie Galvin, Nan Halligan, Cissie Tully and Miss Connolly. They often carried dispatches for us and were able to get through hold-ups and cordons of the enemy where a man would not have a chance of doing so.

The Truce found us in good shape. We had no effective armament but were always living in hope of this becoming available. Our spirits were high and the enemy had not cowed

us with their burnings and shootings and terror tactics. We had no thoughts of quitting the fighting and we were all prepared to carry on.

Signed: Patrick Lennon
(Patrick Lennon)

Date: 15 12 55

15.12.55

Witness: Matthew Barry Comd't.
(Matthew Barry) Comd't.

