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**ORIGINAL**

BUREAU OF MILITARY HISTORY 1913-21  
BURO STAIRE MILEATA 1913-21  
No. W.S. 1,353

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BUREAU OF MILITARY HISTORY, 1913-21.

STATEMENT BY WITNESS.

DOCUMENT NO. **W.S.**.....1,353.....

**Witness**

Denis O'Brien,  
Adamstown,  
Ballinhassig,  
Co. Cork.

**Identity.**

Lieut. Kilbrittain Company Bandon Batt'n.  
Cork III Brigade;

Member Cork III Brigade Column.

**Subject.**

Kilbrittain Company Irish Volunteers,  
Bandon Batt'n. Cork III Brigade,  
1914-1921.

**Conditions, if any, Stipulated by Witness.**

Nil

File No. **S.2672**.....

Form B.S.M. 2

# ORIGINAL

BUREAU OF MILITARY HISTORY 1913-21

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STATEMENT BY DENIS O'BRIEN

Adamstown, Ballinhassig, Co. Cork.

I was born at Clonbuig, Kilbrittain, Co. Cork, on 6th January, 1902. I was educated at Kilbrittain National School until I reached the age of 15 years.

I joined na Fianna in Kilbrittain in the summer of 1914. At this time our unit was a section of Ballinadee unit of na Fianna Eireann. Other members of the unit, who were all older than I, were:- Con Crowley, Paddy Crowley, John Fitzgerald, Jerh. O'Neill, Michael and John O'Brien, John Barrett, James Barrett, Brian O'Driscoll and John O'Leary.

The only training carried out was close-order foot drill. We also marched to various areas on Sunday evenings on organising trips. This was the only type of activity carried on up to Easter 1916.

On Easter Sunday 1916, all members of our section (Kilbrittain) with the exception of Jerh. O'Neill and myself who were now the only Fianna boys, marched to Macroom. The section returned from Macroom on Easter Sunday night and there was no activity in Kilbrittain area during Easter Week.

Some days after the surrender in Dublin, two members of the unit - John and James Barrett - were arrested and deported to England.

When the Irish Volunteers were reorganised in Kilbrittain early in 1917, the strength of the unit was about 25. The O/C. was Brian O'Driscoll. Some members were:- Paddy Crowley, Jack Fitzgerald, Jerh. O'Neill, Michael O'Brien, Denis O'Brien, (witness), Con Crowley, John Barrett, James Barrett, Jack O'Leary. Kilbrittain unit was attached to Bandon Battalion, Cork Brigade.

The only training carried out was close order foot-drill which took place in the fields in the district. The only arms held by the unit in the early stages were a few shotguns, which were the property of the members.

There was very little change in the position and no unusual activity until the spring of 1918, when the British threatened to enforce conscription. There was, then, a big influx of new recruits and the strength of the unit reached about 40. Nearly every young man in the parish of Kilbrittain joined up. During this period all shotguns in the area were collected and dumped in a timber box fitted into the centre of a large double bank. The charges of shot were removed from all available cartridges and replaced by buckshot. The officers of the Kilbrittain Company, at this time, were: O/C. Brian O'Driscoll; 1st Lieut. Jack Fitzgerald; 2nd Lieut. James O'Mahony.

When the conscription threat had passed, the majority of the new recruits faded out and the strength of the unit fell to about 30.

Training went on as usual during 1918, and new recruits were being selected and invited to join the Irish Volunteers. The section was slowly growing in strength. There were no activities in the area in connection with the General Election of December 1918.

The usual training continued throughout 1919, during which period I was engaged with other members of the unit on the collection of the first Dáil Éireann Loan.

During the summer of 1919 the company O/C. (Brian O'Driscoll) went to U.S.A. This led to a change in the officers of Kilbrittain Company who now were: O/C. James O'Mahony; 1st Lieut. Jack Fitzgerald; 2nd Lieut. Ml. O'Brien.

The strength of the unit at this time was about 45.

The first activity of a military nature in which I was engaged was an attack on Timoleague R.I.C. Barracks on 25th February 1920. This was a battalion operation, and Sean Hales, who was O/C. Bandon Battalion, was in charge. Several men from Timoleague, Ballinadee, Kilbrittain and Barryroe units took part in this engagement. Amongst those from Kilbrittain who took part were: James Barrett, John Barrett, Denis O'Brien (witness), John O'Brien, Jack O'Neill, Jim O'Mahoney, Jack Fitzgerald. There were also a number of others whose names I cannot recollect. I was one of a party, armed with shotguns, who were in position in a house opposite the barracks. There were other parties in position at a number of points in the street, while a section was detailed to place a mine against the gable of the building. The mine failed to explode. Intermittent fire was then opened by all covering sections. This continued for about 3 hours when all sections were ordered to withdraw. With the other men from Kilbrittain company I returned home.

About this time there was a further change in the officers of the Kilbrittain company as the O/C. (James O'Mahony) was appointed adjutant, Bandon Battalion. The officers of the company now were:- O/C. Jack Fitzgerald; 1st Lieut. Michael O'Brien; 2nd Lieut. Jack O'Neill. The officers of Bandon Battalion, at this time, were, I think: O/C. Sean Hales; Vice O/C. Charlie Hurley; Adjutant James O'Mahoney; Q.M. - I cannot recollect.

When the evacuated R.I.C. Barracks at Ballinspittle was destroyed at Easter 1920, nearly all members of the Kilbrittain Company were engaged on the operation. On this occasion I was on outpost duty on the Ballinspittle-

Kilbrittain road with two others - Jerh. O'Neill and John Cunningham. We were armed with shotguns. The demolition of the barracks was carried out by the main body of the company, using picks and crowbars.

There were several raids on the local mails during the summer of 1920, but I did not take part in any of these raids.

About the first week in July 1920, I took part with about ten other members of Kilbrittain Company, under Jack Fitzgerald, in a raid on Howe's Strand Coastguard Station. In this raid we captured nine rifles with a considerable amount of ammunition and equipment. The raid was carried out in broad daylight, about 12 noon. The whole party strolled towards the Coastguard Station and on the way met one of the coastguards. He was held up and questioned. He informed us that two members of the Service were out boating and that one other man was on duty. He also told us where the rifles and ammunition were stored. I was then placed in charge of this man who was held prisoner while the other members of the I.R.A. party went on to the Coastguard Station, where they found the military stores and removed them. I detained my prisoner until the others returned to us with the captured stores. He was then released. Our party then moved across country to Clonbuig where we dumped the captured arms. Amongst those who took part in this raid were:- Jack Fitzgerald, Jerh. O'Neill, Dave Sullivan, Paddy Sullivan, Jack O'Neill, John O'Leary and Denis O'Brien (witness).

The staff at the Coastguard Station was increased following this raid and a fresh supply of arms and ammunition was made available. Before the end of July 1920, it was

decided to attempt to capture the station for the second time. On this occasion, Charlie Hurley, who was Vice O/C., Bandon Battalion, was in charge. The operation was carried out by the members of Kilbrittain Company assisted by a few men from Ballinadee and Timoleague companies.

The Coastguard Station was situated on high ground on the edge of a cliff. It was standing on its own grounds. There were two entrance doors on the front of the building. It was decided on this occasion to carry out the attack about midnight. Two men were detailed to break down the doors with sledge-hammers. The main attacking party was divided into two sections - one to dash through each doorway when the door had been forced. One doorway - that attacked by Denis Manning (Kilbrittain Company) - was smashed in and the attacking party, at this point, dashed into the building. The second door, which was being smashed by Con Lehane (Timoleague Coy), withstood the attempt for a short time and the occupants of the station opened fire. However, the entrance of our men through the other door took the defenders by surprise and, when called upon to surrender, they laid down their arms. In this case, we captured, I think, 25 rifles together with a large supply of ammunition and equipment. In order to remove the captured stores on this occasion we had to utilise a horse and cart. All arms were then removed to the dumps in Ballinadee and Clonbuig areas. Amongst those who took part in this operation were:- Charlie Hurley, Jack Fitzgerald, Denis Manning, Jerh. O'Neill, John O'Leary, Con O'Leary, Dave and Paddy Sullivan, Jack O'Neill, Michael McGrath, Denis O'Brien (witness), - all from Kilbrittain - Con Lehane (Timoleague), Tim Crowley, Jim Crowley, John and James Barrett (Ballinadee). There were no casualties.

Towards the end of September 1920, a training camp for selected men from Cork III Brigade was established at Clonbuig in Kilbriittain Company area. Tom Barry was in charge of this camp and set up his H.Q. in my home. The Camp Q.M. (Tadhg Sullivan) was also billeted there. There were about 40 officers in attendance at the Camp which was carried on for about a week. During this period I was engaged on full time scouting throughout daylight hours. All available members of Kilbriittain Company were similarly engaged as this was the duty allocated to them by the Camp O/C., Tom Barry. Guard duty at night was undertaken by the officers at the camp.

On the night of 31st December 1920, and again about mid-January 1921, Kilbriittain R.I.C. barracks was attacked, but, on each occasion, the attack proved abortive as the mines failed to explode. On the first occasion two wooden boxes, filled with gelignite and arranged for exploding by electric detonators, were placed against the wall of the barrack on either side of the porch at the main door. Sections armed with shotguns and rifles were in position at the front and sides of the building. The mines failed to explode. Intermittent fire was then opened by the shotgun and rifle men. This was continued for about an hour before the signal to withdraw was given. On the second occasion, the mine was made by filling an attaché case with gelignite with a suitable detonator and fuse. When the fuse had been lighted, this mine was thrown over the barbed wire entanglements in front of the barrack. It fell against the barrack wall and, although the fuse continued to burn for some time, there was no explosion. A few shots were then fired by the covering parties at front and sides which then withdrew, while the garrison of the barracks continued to fire for a considerable

time afterwards. The Column O/C. - Tom Barry - was in charge of both attacks. On each occasion I was a member of a rifle party which was in position behind a low fence about 20 yards from the front of the barrack.

Following the second attack on Kilbrittain R.I.C. Bks. I joined the column at Quarries Cross. There were about 70 men in the column at this time. All were armed with rifles. A few days after I joined the column, we took up a position at Mawbeg on the Bandon-Ballineen road about 6 miles from Bandon. We were in position behind the roadside fence north of the road and were extended over a distance of approximately 600 yards. Positions were taken up before daybreak, but although we remained in position until dusk, there was no appearance by the enemy. The column then withdrew to billets in the area.

Next morning the column moved towards Bandon and took up a position at Laragh, within 3 miles of the town on the Bandon-Newcestown road. A spy, who had been arrested, was executed. His body was labelled and left on the roadside in the hope that the British forces in Bandon would come out to investigate. Although we remained in position all day there was no appearance by the enemy, so the column withdrew to billets. Some time after the column had withdrawn, the British did come out and remove the body of the spy. This was, I think, January 23rd, 1921.

On the night of 24th January 1921, the column moved into Bandon to attack a military curfew patrol. On this occasion I was one of a party in charge of Charlie Hurley which took up a position on the Dunmanway road within about 100 yards of the military barracks. Our section was to act as a covering party on the barracks while the main body of the



column moved into the centre of Bandon to carry out the attack on the patrol. Our section was in position about 11 p.m. and remained there until about 3 a.m. when orders were given to open fire on the military barracks. We fired on the barracks for about 10 minutes and we were then ordered to withdraw.

When our section joined the main body some time later it was found that Dan O'Reilly, a member of the column and Kilhrittain company, was missing. It was later confirmed that he had been killed during the attack. I remember that the man who was in position beside O'Reilly stated that when he heard the signal to withdraw (3 blasts of a whistle) he told O'Reilly and, immediately moved off to the agreed meeting place. O'Reilly, however, said that he did not hear the signal and refused to move.

We next moved, on the night of 26th January 1921, to attack Innishannon R.I.C. Barracks. On this occasion I was one of a party of about 20 riflemen under Ted Sullivan (Brigade Vice O/C.) who took up a position at Brinny, a road leading from Bandon to Innishannon. We were to attack any enemy forces who might come from Bandon to the aid of the Innishannon garrison. The attack on the garrison proved abortive and the expected enemy reinforcements did not travel through our position. When the signal to withdraw was given we withdrew to billets in the area.

A few nights later, I was one of a section of the column which entered Bandon to snipe enemy posts. We withdrew after about 20 minutes, having no casualties.

At the end of January 1921, the column moved into Clonakilty Battalion area where we billeted near Ahiohill.

On the night of 1st February 1921, we were moved to Burgatia House near Roscarbery where we billeted early on the morning of February 2nd 1921. Burgatia House was owned by a loyalist named Kingston. When the column entered the house, the owner, his wife and their maid were placed under arrest. Sentries were posted and the column Q.M. (Tadhg Sullivan) arranged for a supply of food.

There was no activity until about 11 a.m. when the local postman arrived to deliver the mails to the Kingston household. He was held up by our sentries. He was taken before our O/C. (Tom Barry) and other officers. As he gave an undertaking not to disclose the presence of the column in Burgatia House, he was released.

About 4 p.m. our sentries reported that some Black and Tans were moving along the road in front of the house. Later, the presence of military lorries was reported by our scouts. All sections were immediately alerted and the next thing I heard was a shot. All members of the column then dashed from the house into the yard. We remained in the yard for some time while the movements of the encircling forces were being observed. After less than an hour, the column was divided into sections and instructions for withdrawal were given. Two covering parties were selected to hold the enemy on the eastern side, while the main body retired. When all sections had been instructed, the whole column awaited the closing of the enemy ring before opening fire. We all lay under cover in the yard of Burgatia House until the enemy forces, who were shooting intermittently, approached quite close to our position. The order to fire was then given. When the column opened fire the encircling forces retreated in all directions. Then, while a section of the column

continued to fire at the retreating enemy, the others withdrew from the area to the east. The covering party later joined the main body some distance from Burgatia and the column then withdrew to billets in Clonakilty area.

We were still moving around the area until the second week in February 1921, when arrangements were made for an attack on Drimoleague R.I.C. Barracks. In this case, the attack was, once more, a failure as the mine, although it exploded, failed to breach the wall of the barrack. On this occasion, I was a member of a party waiting to rush the breach if the mine had done its work.

On the evening of 22nd February 1921, we were billeted quite close to Bandon when we were informed that it was proposed to attack an enemy Curfew patrol in the town. The column was divided into three sections - two of about six or seven each, and the main body of about 30. I was a member of one of the smaller sections under John Lordan. Other members of this section were: Tim Warren (Ballineen), Jack Roche, Jack O'Neill (Kilbrittain), and Pat Callaghan (Newcestown). Our section - armed with rifles and revolvers - moved into Bandon from Dunmanway road about 8.30 p.m. Our instructions were to take any enemy forces we met prisoners and to hold them until the main body had opened the attack on the Curfew patrol. As our section moved into town we picked up two members of the Essex Regiment and a Naval wireless operator. When shooting broke out in the centre of the town we shot the two members of the Essex Regiment as a reprisal for the conduct of the members of the regiment who had shot several unarmed I.R.A. prisoners. Jack O'Neill then wrote a note for the O/C. British troops in Bandon and handed it to the wireless operator for delivery. The note informed the British O/C. that the shootings were reprisals

for the conduct of the men of his regiment. Some time about 10 p.m. - when shooting ceased - our section returned to billets in Newcestown.

At this stage I was demobbed from the column with a number of others. I returned to my home area where I continued to operate with the Kilbrittain company on blocking roads, cutting lines of communication and generally impeding enemy activities.

I again reported to the column about the second week in March 1921. At this time, the strength of the column had been increased to about 100. We were moving around the area in the neighbourhood of Bandon until the evening of March 16th, 1921, when <sup>we</sup> were in the vicinity of Shippool, about seven miles from Kinsale on the Kinsale-Bandon road. We were now informed that it was proposed to take up positions next morning. Early on the morning of 17th March 1921, the column moved into position behind a stone wall adjoining the road. We were extended over a distance of about 500/600 yards. All were armed with rifles. Positions were taken up before daybreak, but, although we remained until darkness set in, the expected enemy convoy did not arrive. The column was then withdrawn to billets in the area where we remained next day.

During the night of 18th March 1921, the column moved across the main Cork-Bandon road to Ballyhandle in Crossbarry area where we billeted. I was billeted with a number of others in Beasley's farmhouse. It was now after midnight. Sentries were posted and scouts were sent out. About 2.30 a.m. all sections of the column were alerted. We were then paraded by the O/C. (Tom Barry), who informed us that large enemy forces were raiding the area and that

we were taking up ambush positions on the old Cork-Bandon road at Crossbarry. The column was divided into a number of sections and allocated to positions. The section commanders were:- Sean Hales, John Lordan, Mick Crowley, Pete Kearney, Denis Lordan, Tom Kelleher, Christy O'Connell. All positions were north of the road.

I was a member of the section under Sean Hales which was allocated to a post at the western end of the selected ambush position. We took up our position behind the roadside fence. Some members of this section were: Tom McCarthy (Schull), Tim Allen (Schull), Con McCarthy (Bandon), Con Flynn (Ballinadee), Jack Corkerry (Ballinadee), Bob Hales (Ballinadee), Denis O'Brien (witness) (Kilbrittain). There were six or seven others in the section, but I cannot remember their names. There were three other sections in somewhat similar positions extended over a distance of about half a mile to the east. In addition, flanking sections of the same strength were in position on both flanks (east and west). There was also a section under Tom Kelleher on the high ground to the rear to cover off possible enemy approach from that direction. Two mines were also laid in the road - one at the extreme eastern end of the position, and the second just to the east of the position occupied by my section under Sean Hales. All positions were occupied about 5 a.m. and we awaited the next move by the enemy.

About 8 a.m. the leading lorry in an enemy convoy moved into the ambush position as far as our section where it stopped. The second and third lorries in the convoy also halted at the same time. There was a distance of about 40/50 yards between each lorry. From our

position we were unable to observe whether the other lorries in the convoy halted simultaneously. Immediately the leading lorry stopped, our section opened fire on the first and second lorries. The occupants of these lorries, who were not killed or wounded by the opening fire, decamped across country to the south. The occupants of the other lorries in the convoy did likewise. Immediately firing opened, Florrie Begley - a member of the brigade staff - began to play warlike tunes on the bagpipes. He was to the rear of the centre of the main position in Beasley's and Harold's farmyards where the O/C. (Tom Barry) had also established his H.Q. I should have mentioned that, following the opening burst of fire, a man scrambled over the fence into our position shouting that he was a prisoner. As there was no reply by the enemy forces who had decamped, the sections in the centre and western ends of the position were moved on to the roadway by Tom Barry, and collected the arms and equipment left behind by the enemy. The booty included a number of rifles and a Lewis gun with a supply of ammunition. The two leading lorries in the convoy were now set on fire.

While we were collecting the spoils on the roadway, shooting suddenly broke out to the east and, with the other sections on the road we retired up a breen leading to the north, at the extreme western end of the position. We had travelled some distance along this breen when a party of enemy troops were seen to the east. The O/C. (Tom Barry) now ordered the whole party to line the fence of the breen and to open fire on this enemy party. After about three rounds had been fired by each man, the enemy disappeared. We continued to withdraw until we reached Crosspound where we were joined by all the other sections of the column.

A check on our casualties now revealed that we had lost three dead (Peter Monahan, Con Daly and Jerh. O'Leary), while two (Dan Corcoran, Newcestown, and Jim Crowley, Kilbrittain) were seriously wounded. The wounded were now attended to by Con Lucey and 'Nudge' Callanan. The column was then drawn up in column of route and marched off to billets in Gurraneigh, about 18 miles away. We reached billets in the early morning of 20th March 1921.

As far as I can recollect, it was during the evening of 20th March that we learned of the death in action of our Brigade O/C. (Charlie Hurley). He had been billeted in a house in Ballyhandle area on the morning of 19th March 1921, when it was surrounded by a strong force of enemy troops. He made an effort to fight his way through the enemy cordon, but was killed in the attempt. His body was taken into Bandon by the military and was thrown into the morgue. It was taken away to his home area (Clogagh) by the Cumann na mBan from Kilbrittain. Our officers decided to give Charlie Hurley a military funeral, so we paraded again on the evening of 20th March and began a long march to Clogagh, which we reached about 2 a.m. next morning. The local priest was called and the coffin containing the remains of Charlie was carried on the shoulders of his comrades to the grave. The members of the column with arms reversed marched behind the coffin. When the grave had been closed, Tom Barry delivered a short oration and fired three revolver shots over the grave. The sentries, which had been posted during the burial, were now called in and the column marched away to billets in Ahiohill, which was reached about 8 a.m.

Between the burial of Charlie Hurley and the end of March I was moving around the area with the column. On the

night of 30th March 1921, we were within a few miles of Rosscarbery when we were informed that we were to move in to attack the R.I.C. Barracks there next morning. The column was again divided into a number of sections:

- (a) a storming party of 10 men to lay a mine and rush the breach;
- (b) a following group of 10 men <sup>CARRYING TORCHES</sup> to be lighted when the party at (a) had broken into the barracks;
- (c) three groups of five men each to cut communications on all roads leading to Rosscarbery;
- (d) twelve men to occupy positions north and east of barracks to prevent occupants breaking out;
- (e) twelve men, divided into 3 groups of 4 each, to hold the roads in the vicinity of the town;
- (f) ten riflemen to act as a reserve.

All sections moved into their positions about midnight.

I was a member of the section referred to at (d), but there was no action at our position as the enemy did not make an attempt to break out. The mine, on this occasion, was a partial success as it damaged the barrack door and blew steel shutters from two ground floor windows. Our parties as at (a) and (b) above eventually succeeded in forcing the garrison to evacuate the ground floor of which they took possession. After about four hours fighting the garrison were eventually forced to surrender. Two members of the garrison were killed and nine wounded. There were no casualties amongst the members of the column. When the garrison had surrendered, the column was assembled and, after a short delay, we moved off to billets in Rossmore area about daybreak.

Some days after the attack on Rosscarbery, the main body of the column was disbanded and the majority of the



men returned to their home areas. I returned to Kilbrittain area where I engaged in all operations of the local company which, at the time, was engaged on a campaign of cutting enemy lines of communication, and continually harassing the enemy forces in the area. When the general order for the attack on enemy posts and forces as a reprisal for the execution of I.R.A. prisoners was issued, I took part in an attack on Kilbrittain R.I.C. Barracks on 14th May 1921. Two Black and Tans were wounded.

The work of harassing and impeding enemy forces went on continually up to the Truce and hardly a day passed that, with other members of the Kilbrittain company, I was not engaged in sniping enemy posts or patrols. In addition, guards had to be provided for the men engaged on the demolition of bridges, the cutting of trenches and blocking of roads.

Rank at the Truce:- 1st Lieutenant, Kilbrittain  
Company, Bandon Battalion,  
Cork III Brigade.

Strength of Company: Approximately 60.

Signed: Denis O'Brien  
(Denis O'Brien)

Date: 16 - 2 - 1956

16.2.1956

Witness: P. O'Donnell  
(P. O'Donnell)

