

ORIGINAL

BUREAU OF MILITARY HISTORY 1913-21

BURO STAIRÉ MILEATA 1913-21

No. W.S. 1355

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BUREAU OF MILITARY HISTORY, 1913-21.

STATEMENT BY WITNESS.

DOCUMENT NO. W.S. 1,355

Witness

John Riordan,
1 St. Brigid's Terrace,
Dungarvan,
Co. Waterford.

Identity.

Training Officer

West Waterford Brigade, 1919-1921.

Subject.

West Waterford Brigade,
1919-1921.

Conditions, if any, Stipulated by Witness.

Nil

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STATEMENT BY JOHN RIORDAN,

1, St. Brigid's Tce., Dungarvan, Co. Waterford.

I am a native of Dungarvan, Co. Waterford. At the age of 17 I joined the British Army. My regiment was the Eighteenth Royal Irish. In that regiment were many men from the southern counties of Ireland. When the 1914-18 war broke out I was drafted to Flanders and fought at the battles of Mons and Ypres. As well as being a rifleman, I also fought with a machine-gun section. I was wounded at La Bassée in Belgium and invalided back to England. When I recovered I was sent with the Royal Irish to Syria and Egypt. In Egypt our regiment was engaged, with other Irish regiments, in putting down a rebellion in that country. I was demobbed from the British Army early in 1919 and returned to Dungarvan in June of that year.

I was not very long home when I joined the Volunteers in Dungarvan. I was attached to no particular company. Pax Whelan, the Brigade O/C, decided that I should be attached to the Brigade Staff as Brigade Training Officer, probably because of my military training with the British Army and the fact that I had been in a lot of fighting during the Great War. So far as I can now remember, the following men were members of the West Waterford Brigade Staff at the time I joined, i.e., about August, 1919:

Brigade O/C - Pax Whelan
Brigade Vice O/C - George Lennon
Brigade Adjt. - Benny McCarthy
Brigade Q/M - Joe Vize
Brigade Trans. Ofr. - Eddie Spratt.

During the remainder of the year 1919 and the greater part of 1920, all my time was taken up in training work with the various companies in the brigade. I helped in drilling, field manoeuvres, and taught methods of attack and defence. The men were instructed in the use and care of revolvers and rifles and fighting tactics in general.

Piltown ambush:

My first active engagement with the Volunteers occurred on 1st November, 1920, when an ambush of British troops took place at Piltown Cross, a crossroads on the main Dungarvan-Youghal road about four miles east of Youghal. Before the ambush took place I went with George Lennon, the Brigade Vice Commandant, to the Piltown area to select the most suitable place for the proposed attack. I decided that the ground in the neighbourhood of Piltown Cross was the most likely spot from our point of view. Thick hedges bounded the main road here and the ground inside the hedges was slightly higher than the road. At the cross itself was a field which sloped up from the cross and had also cover for a firing party to engage the enemy in the front as he came along the road from Youghal.

The placings of our men that night were as follows: about a dozen men with four or five rifles and the remainder with shotguns occupied the high ground overlooking Piltown Cross and facing westwards to Youghal. About ten shotgun men were inside the hedge on the west side of the road and about twenty to forty yards from the cross on the Youghal side. I was with the riflemen. I remember quite well that the rifle I had was what was known as a Mexican rifle. I had about twenty rounds of ammunition. We took up our position

at about ten or eleven o'clock on the night of the ambush. It was a dark night. The plan was that some Volunteers would go in to Ardmore village, four miles to the east, and start a fake attack on the R.I.C. barracks there. The police would be sure to send up Verey lights to summon assistance from the military in Youghal, about five miles away to the west of Ardmore. To get to Ardmore any military coming out from Youghal would have to pass our position at Piltown Cross, where we would ambush them.

A couple of our lads - 'Pakeen' Whelan of Dungarvan and Pat Keating of Comeragh, Co. Waterford - went in to Ardmore earlier in the night to put on the feint attack on the barracks. The Ardmore Company were to keep on sniping at the barracks when these two men had left. 'Pakeen' and Pat chucked a few grenades into the R.I.C. barracks and then "the balloon went up". From Piltown Cross we could see the Verey lights going up in Ardmore and knew that we might expect something soon.

It would be somewhere about eleven o'clock or so when scouts posted on high ground reported that the military were on their way out from Youghal, and it was not long when a lorry load of soldiers came along the road as we expected and ran into the ambush position. Just as the lorry reached the cross we opened fire on it and the shotgunmen inside the hedge on the roadside did the same. At the first burst of fire the lorry stopped, the driver having been killed. As far as I know, the British got no chance to reply to our fire. The suddenness of the attack seemed to have taken the wind out of their sails. We fired a few more volleys and then jumped out on to the roadway, calling on the military to surrender. They surrendered without a

murmur. The officer of the British party, who looked so young that he appeared to be only a boy, had jumped out of the lorry and in over the ditch right amongst our shotgunmen. He was disarmed and taken prisoner. Two R.I.C. men from Youghal were also captured and disarmed. They were apparently acting as guides for the British.

So far as I can remember, we got about eighteen rifles that night. We also captured a few revolvers, some grenades and about two thousand rounds of ammunition. I cannot say with any certainty now what the British casualties were, but I think they lost two killed and about a half dozen wounded. The wounded soldiers were taken care of by men of the local Volunteer Company before being sent back to Youghal. We suffered no casualties at all.

In my party that night were men of the West Waterford Flying Column which I had joined a month or so previously when the column was formed. Amongst those in the fight at Piltown that night were:

George Lennon - Column O/C
 Mick Mansfield - Column Vice O/C
 Mick Shalloe
 Jim Prendergast
 Pakeen Whelan
 Pat Keating
 - Kirby
 - Lundigan
 Jim Mansfield, Comdt. 3rd Battn.

After the ambush we piled all the captured stuff into an old Ford car we had and it was taken to the Comeragh district in the mountains.

I retired with the column that night into hilly country at Ballymalla, about six miles west of Piltown, where we billeted in farmers' houses. The following day

I returned to Dungarvan. I did not go 'on the run' at any time, as I reckoned that, being an ex British soldier, would throw any suspicion away from me.

Shooting of R.I.C. man at Cappoquin.

It wasn't very long after the Piltown ambush when I went by motor one day into Cappoquin with Mick Mansfield and Kirby. 'Nipper' McCarthy of Dungarvan drove us. We were all armed with revolvers. I am not now too certain of what exactly we went for, but I think it was to shoot a couple of Black and Tans who were stationed with the R.I.C. in Cappoquin. At any rate, when we arrived in Cappoquin and were driving slowly through it, we spotted two R.I.C. men on the street. It was most likely that they spotted us too and knew we were strangers and up to something. We opened fire on them with revolvers and they replied, also with revolvers. One of the R.I.C. men dropped. We later heard he was killed in the exchange of shots. 'Nipper' McCarthy then put on speed and drove us quickly out of town and towards Dungarvan, where we left the car.

Tramore ambush.

The next item of any importance happened on 7th January, 1921, when I went with three carloads of lads from the Flying Column to Tramore, Co. Waterford, to help out the East Waterford I.R.A. in an ambush laid near the town. Pax Whelan, O/C of the West Waterford Brigade, and George Lennon, the Column O/C, were the officers in charge of our party that night. We met a few miles outside Dungarvan, about fifteen of us altogether. We were armed with rifles.

'Nipper' McCarthy drove the car I was in and we reached the appointed place about 9 p.m. and took up positions on what is known as The Glen Road on the Tramore side of the railway bridge called The Metal Bridge, which is about a mile east of Tramore town on the main Waterford-Tramore road. The East Waterford lads held positions on the Waterford City side of the Metal Bridge. Their O/C was Paddy Paul. So far as I can remember now, the plan was something similar to ours at Piltown Cross the previous November. A feint attack on Tramore R.I.C. bks. was to be made. This would draw the military out from Waterford, and the latter were to be ambushed in front by us as they came under the Metal Bridge and up to a barricade on the main road right underneath our position on The Glen Road. When we opened the attack the East Waterford men would attack the British from the rear. A few men were detailed to go in to Tramore and fire a few shots at the R.I.C. barracks. They did this, and soon the usual Verey lights could be seen going up from the barracks. The time would be about eleven o'clock.

It did not seem very long after this when the sound of lorries could be heard approaching from Waterford City, eight miles to the west. From our position we could see nothing of these lorries as our view of the road on the Waterford side of the Metal Bridge was completely blocked by the railway line and bridge itself. As the noise of the lorries drew closer we prepared to open fire when they ran up to the barricade, I have previously referred to. To our surprise, shooting started before the British cars came up to the bridge and it then appeared as if the military had pulled up before coming to the bridge and were heavily engaging the East Waterford lads. We were at a loss to know

what exactly had happened. We heard plenty of shooting but could see nothing. The night was dark but starry. To try and find out what was going on, Pax Whelan fired a Verey light and by the light of it we saw one military lorry pulled up at the Metal Bridge. It had not, however, run on to our side of the bridge. We opened fire on this lorry. I think there was one soldier in front, possibly the driver. I cannot say whether we hit him or not, but we certainly saw no other military in that lorry.

After this incident we held our fire for the very good reason that we saw nothing to shoot at. We were all puzzled with the turn of events, but one thing was pretty plain and it was that our planned attack had gone all wrong. We remained in position on The Glen Road for at least half an hour, during which firing continued on the far side of the Metal Bridge to us. We were 'in the dark' in every sense of the word. Nobody seemed to know what exactly was happening. Then came the order to pull out and make for our cars about a quarter of a mile further north on The Glen Road. We moved in that direction; then it was reported that British troops were in that area and we were in danger of encirclement. The order was then given to abandon the cars and move westwards. This was easier said than done, as we were all strangers in the locality and didn't know that particular bit of country at all. However, my British Army training came in handy here, as I was able to take my bearings from the stars and guide the party safely to the west without contacting any enemy forces. We finally reached Glen, Stradbally, about ten or twelve miles to the west, after slogging across country. We went into billets there early in the morning of January 8th, 1921.

After a rest the column moved northwards to the Comeragh Mountains in the neighbourhood of Kilrossanty and Comeragh, where I remained with it until sometime about the end of January, 1921.

I returned to Dungarvan at the latter end of January, 1921, and was in the house of my sister with 'Pakeen' Whelan, another column man, when the house was raided by a party of soldiers from the regiment known as The Buffs. Both of us were arrested and brought to Dungarvan barracks. When the military were in the house I showed them my British Army papers, but they told me they knew I was an I.R.A. man. In Dungarvan barracks I asked to be tried by a judge and jury, but I was laughed at. It was only a bit of bluff on my part.

After a day or two I was brought by lorry with other prisoners to Kilworth military camp, Co. Cork. The prisoners were handcuffed in pairs under a heavy escort. I remember the officer telling a soldier sitting opposite me in the lorry that I was to be shot if any ambush occurred en route to Kilworth. From Kilworth I was brought with others to Cork, and from there, after a few weeks, we were put on a British gunboat and landed at Belfast. There were nearly a hundred prisoners on that boat, and when we left it in Belfast we were attacked by mobs of Belfast shipyard workers, who threw iron bolts and rivets at us. Eventually I found myself in Ballykinlar internment camp, Co. Down.

When in Ballykinlar I made an attempt to escape and almost succeeded. One night I cut my way out through the barbed wire almost under the nose of a sentry. Before I started on this I arranged with three other prisoners to follow on after me when a certain time had elapsed. The

names of these men were Lawless and Seamus Brennan of Dublin and Sheehy from Laoighis. I cut my way out alright and was about thirty or forty yards outside the camp waiting for the others to come along, when the escape warning signal went off. It appears that my comrades were caught in the beam of a revolving searchlight when trying to crawl through the opening in the wire I had cut. They were, of course, taken away by military guard.

Meanwhile, I was lying hidden in long grass hoping to escape any search parties. I was unlucky. Along came what turned out to be a Major and a few Tommies. The Major didn't know where I was until he actually walked on me. I knew the game was up then. The soldiers wanted to bayonet me, but, to his credit, the Major wouldn't permit them. In fact, he said I was a brave man to attempt to escape.

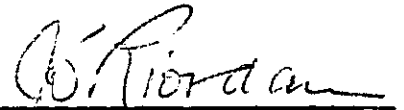
I was brought back to a hut in the camp and searched. I happened to have in my possession my Mons medal and British service medal. The officer who was questioning me wanted to make out that I had killed a soldier sometime or other and taken his medals. I had a lot of trouble trying to convince him that the medals were in fact my own. I got twenty-eight days bread and water in cells for trying to escape.

One of the warders over me was a pal named Penny from the old Royal Irish regiment. We had soldiered together in France and Egypt but he had remained on in the army and was now with an English regiment. I asked Penny if he could get hold of a couple of army uniforms, and if he could he would be well paid. The two prisoners

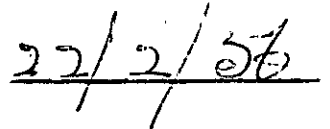
for whom I wanted the uniforms to help them escape were Joe McGrath, the present Director of Irish Hospital Sweepstakes, and a man named (I think) Paddy Colgan of Dublin. Penny got the uniforms alright and was paid for them. I don't know who paid him; I know I did not. The uniforms were passed to McGrath and Colgan, who slipped them on and, in broad daylight, walked out of the camp along with Tommies going on leave. The two escaped men got as far south as the Border, when they must have become a bit careless having got so far without being spotted. At any rate, they were held up and questioned and, as a result, wound up by doing a stretch in Belfast gaol.

I was released from Ballykinlar with the general release of prisoners in December, 1921, and returned to Dungarvan, Co. Waterford, where I resumed my training activities with the West Waterford Brigade. I fought on the republican side during the Civil War and returned back home when it was all over.

Signed:



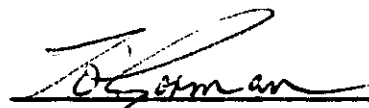
Date:



(J. O'Riordan)

22/2/56

Witness:


(Investigator)

(T. O'Gorman)

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