

W.S. 1358

ORIGINAL

BUREAU OF MILITARY HISTORY 1913-21
BURO STAIRE MILEATA 1913-21
NO. W.S. 1358

ROINN  COSANTA.

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

DOCUMENT NO. W.S. 1,358

Witness

Michael Reilly,  
Ballyturn,  
Gort,  
Co. Galway.

Identity.

Member of Irish Volunteers, Kilbecanty,  
Co. Galway, 1917- ;  
Captain and Battalion Adjutant later.

Subject.

Kilbecanty Company Irish Volunteers  
Gort, Co. Galway, 1917-1921.

Conditions, if any, Stipulated by Witness.

Nil

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STATEMENT BY MICHAEL REILLY,  
Ballyturn, Gort, Co. Galway.

I was born on the 7th September, 1897, at Derreen in the parish of Kilbecanty near Gort, Co. Galway. I attended Ballyturn national school until I reached the age of fourteen years. I left school when my father died and went to work on our farm of land.

I joined the Irish Volunteers about September, 1917. The name of the company was Kilbecanty and the Company Captain was John Coen. Daniel Ryan, afterwards Brigade Q/M, Galway South West Brigade, was 1st Lieutenant, and, as far as I can remember, the 2nd Lieutenant was Martin Coen, a brother of the Captain. The strength of the company was about thirty men.

In October or November, 1917, I joined the Irish Republican Brotherhood. I was sworn in by Padraig Fahy of Ballycahalan, who was an organiser for the Brotherhood. He was a great friend of Liam Mellows and had been sentenced to penal servitude immediately after Easter Week, 1916. He was arrested while mobilising the Kinvara Company of the Irish Volunteers during that week. Shortly after having been sworn into the Brotherhood I was appointed Parish Centre for Kilbecanty parish. I attended meetings of the I.R.B. at Thomas Stephenson's, The Square, Gort. Meetings were held monthly and sometimes fortnightly if there was anything important to be discussed.

The Centre at our meetings in Gort was Patrick Ruane, afterwards Brigade Police Officer, Galway South West Brigade. He emigrated to America after the Civil War. The general

idea of the I.R.B., as far as I know, was to continue the fight for freedom until it was brought to a successful conclusion. It endeavoured to fill all important positions in the Irish Volunteers with its own members. I think that all the staff of the Gort Battalion were members of the I.R.B. Some of its meetings were in connection with the division of land. Pressure was brought on the landlords to compel them to give some of their acres to the Land Commission for division amongst the tenants.

In this connection I remember that a local landlord - Baggot of Ballyturn - was compelled as a result of agitation by the I.R.B. to go into the Sinn Féin Land Court sitting in Loughrea in the year 1919. The agitation included boycotting. I remember that the late Patrick Hogan, afterwards Minister for Agriculture, was solicitor for the tenants in the Dáil Éireann Courts. A humorous thing about the Dáil Éireann Court was that landlord Baggot, who was compelled to have an R.I.C. escort at the time, went to a good deal of trouble to attend the Court in Loughrea unknown to his escort.

Parades of the Kilbecanty Company were held once a week, after working hours as a general rule. There was a roll call at each parade, after which simple drill was taught for about an hour and a half. No arms were carried on parade. The drill included falling in, dressing, right and left turns, about turn, forming fours, reforming two deep, keeping step on the march and simple exercises in extended formation.

I think it was in 1917 that a Sinn Féin club was first started in Kilbecanty parish. The club members met at John Keeley's of Kilcrimble. The great majority of the members of the Kilbecanty Company of the Irish Volunteers

were also members of the Sinn Féin club. There were members in the club who were not Volunteers. These were men who were considered too old to join the Volunteers. The club sold patriotic newspapers, the names of which I now forget. Apart from that, there was little activity until the general election of 1918. At that time I canvassed the parish of Kilbecanty on behalf of the late Frank Fahy, Sinn Féin candidate, who was elected and afterwards became Ceann Comhairle of Dáil Éireann. I remember that Daniel Ryan, whom I have already mentioned, and Patrick Glynn, afterwards a battalion staff officer of Gort Battalion, took part in the canvass on behalf of the late Mr. Frank Fahy. The people in the parish of Kilbecanty parish, excepting the landlords and their families and close adherents, were almost to a man in favour of the Sinn Féin candidate. Michael Fahy, a brother of Pádraig Fahy whom I have already mentioned, was president of the Sinn Féin club, and Brian O'Connor of Ballycahalan was secretary. Brian O'Connor was also a member of the Kilbecanty Company of the Volunteers. Michael Fahy was fairly elderly at the time.

I think it was in the harvest of 1919 that the Kilbecanty Company commenced raiding for arms. Friendly people offered us shotguns, which we accepted and handed over to Brian O'Connor, who was Company Q/M as well as being secretary to the Sinn Féin club. He put them in dumps and looked after them well. We raided for arms the homes of three families who were not friendly disposed to us. In those raids we took a .22 rifle from a Mr. Donnellan who lived at Chevy Chase House. Mr. Donnellan was a Scotch overseer for a Scotch timber firm. We took two shotguns from Mr. Persse's gamekeeper, who also lived in Chevy Chase

House. Chevy Chase was a big house of about forty rooms. There was a dance in it that night of the raid. All the dancers put up their hands and offered no resistance.

We took a good deal of mixed ammunition at Baggot's of Ballyturn, as well as one or two shotguns. Mr. Baggot was a landlord who owned about seven hundred acres in and around Ballyturn. We met with no resistance there.

Our last raid for arms took place at Lough Cutra at the residence of Lord Gough's gamekeeper, a Scotch man named Houston. Houston was very wary because of a previous attempt to raid his place for arms. This attempted raid was carried out by direction of the battalion officers. It failed because Houston caught sight of the approaching raiders and put up steel shutters which he had for the windows. The raid was abandoned. Houston was reputed to be a very daring man who would shoot without hesitation in case of a raid on his house. The Kilbecanty Company, notwithstanding the previous abortive raid, decided to carry out another raid on our own initiative.

Seven members of the company, armed with shotguns and revolvers, approached Houston's house about 11 p.m. We brought a supply of paraffin oil along with us to burn the house in case we were otherwise unable to get the arms. We had no scruples about burning the house if we failed to get the arms by other means, as Houston was very hostile and openly helped the British authorities. We decided to get Houston out of the house by a ruse. We knew that he was a great horse doctor and that he was very friendly with a publican named Canny from the adjoining part of Co. Clare. Volunteer Patrick Glynn and I posed as Claremen and neighbours of Canny. It was decided that I would do the

talking as I was able to mimic the Clare accent. While Glynn and I approached the house the remaining five remained about twenty yards away concealed in bushes.

Glynn and I approached the back entrance to the house and we encountered a brother of Houston's in the yard. He inquired what we wanted. I said that I had a horse that was dying with the gripes and that Mr. Canny advised me to ask Mr. Houston to go and see the animal. He said that it was very unlikely that Mr. Houston would see us at that hour of the night. I begged him to tell Mr. Houston about the horse and he reluctantly agreed. When he had entered the house the two of us followed into a back kitchen. A daughter of Houston was in the kitchen and she screamed when she saw us. We left hurriedly and went to the front of the house. Houston mustn't have heard the girl's scream as he opened the hall door. He had a lighted candle in one hand and a revolver in the other. I spoke at once, saying "Good night, Mr. Houston". "What took ye in here?" he said. I told him our "business" and who advised us to come to him. He said "Get out at once" and immediately after asked me how we got in. I told him that a man at the Castle directed me through the yard. He was about ten yards from Glynn and me during this conversation and he told us not to approach any nearer than that. I asked him to show me the way out, making profuse apologies for troubling him. He told me to come back in the morning if the horse wasn't dead by then. I thanked him and asked him to hold the candle while we got over the wall on to the main (Ennis) road. He came down the steps from the hall door holding the candle high above over his head. We had to pass him to get

over the wall. When I was within three or four yards of him I made a spring to catch his right hand in which he still held the gun. He was partly off guard, believing us to be genuine, and luckily I got him by the right wrist. He was powerfully strong and attempted to throw me over his leg. I was very active at the time and he failed to throw me. I shouted "help" as I thought he might get the barrel of the gun pointed at my body. Glynn caught hold of him and the remainder of our party opened fire over our heads from their shotguns. Still he did not give up the struggle, but I was able to keep the barrel of the gun pointed away from my body until I whipped it out of his hand with a twist. He said "I'm beaten".

We searched the house and found boxes of mixed ammunition but no arms. Houston told us that he had handed up his guns to the R.I.C. at Gort barracks. We did not believe this and threatened to shoot him. We put him against a wall and told him to say an Act of Contrition. He stood to attention and said "My God, I am sorry for the past. Shoot away now". We then took his word that the guns had been handed up and let him go.

I remember that Kilbecanty R.I.C. barrack was evacuated about April, 1920. It was burned about a week after its evacuation. The R.I.C. from Gort came out to it every day until it was destroyed. They stayed about an hour or so on each visit. It was a one-storey double hut with brick walls and roof of galvanised iron painted red. We filled it with hay which we then sprinkled with petrol and paraffin oil. I remember that there was a big explosion when a match was thrown into the building. It was burned to the ground. John Coen, Company Captain,

was in charge of the party who destroyed it. Between then and the summer of 1920 I cannot recall anything worthy of note except that weekly parades of the company were held regularly.

I think it was in mid-summer 1920 that I was mobilised for an attack on a party of R.I.C. at Blackwater, three-quarter of a mile from Gort on the road to Ennis. The R.I.C. were in the habit of patrolling the road from Gort to Blackwater every evening about 5 p.m. They always travelled out from Gort by the main (Ennis) road. The evening we were mobilised to attack them they travelled a different road. They went out of the town by Church St. along the Tubber road to Cannahowan crossroad, where they wheeled to the left. We had scouts on the main road but the change of route by the R.I.C. caused us to be out of position when they arrived at Blackwater. We were just getting into positions when they saw us and opened fire. The R.I.C. numbered four as well as I can remember, and they had at least two rifles and two revolvers.

We took cover along a wall about thirty yards from the main road and returned the fire. We had intended to take up positions along the wall of the main (Ennis) road but our plan was upset owing to the change of route by the R.I.C. As soon as the R.I.C. opened fire they began to retreat in the direction of Gort as fast as they could. By the time we got down to the wall of the main road they were almost out of range of our shotguns. I heard afterwards that one of them was wounded. None of the I.R.A. was hit. Joseph Stanford, Captain of the Gort Company, was in charge. He afterwards became O/C of the Galway South West Brigade. Others who took part were



John Coen, Captain of Kilbecanty Company; Daniel Ryan, 1st Lieutenant, Kilbecanty Company, afterwards Brigade Q/M Galway South West Brigade; Volunteer Patrick Glynn, Kilbecanty Company, afterwards Vice Commandant, Gort Battalion; and Volunteer Thomas Keeley, Kilbecanty Company, afterwards Battalion Engineer, Gort Battalion. There were a few from Beagh Company, including Volunteers John Quinn, Martin Nealon and one or two I cannot remember.

As well as I can now remember, it was towards the end of October, 1920, that Lieutenant Daniel Ryan told me that there was to be an attack on R.I.C. at Kilmacduagh about three miles to the south of Gort. Six from the company went there. They were Captain John Coen, Lieutenant Daniel Ryan and Volunteers Patrick Glynn, Thomas Keeley, Peter Burke, Jerome Deeley and myself, that is seven in all - not six as I said at first. We travelled the six miles cross country from our own company area to Kilmacduagh after nightfall and put up in a barn for the night when we got there. Men were mobilised there from Ardahan, Peterswell, Kilmacduagh, Gort and Beagh Companies, with Battalion O/C Thomas McInerney and Vice Commandant Peter Howley in charge. The following morning at daybreak we took up positions just inside both fences of the road. We were in four sections with about forty yards between each section. There were nine or ten men in each section. We remained there until about midday, and as the R.I.C. usually came the way long before this time we then withdrew and returned to our own company areas.

Before we left Kilmacduagh we got instructions from the Battalion O/C, Thomas McInerney, to be at Capard House in the Peterswell Company area the following night or maybe

the night after that. We were also instructed to go there fully armed. The same men from Kilbecanty Company who were at Kilmacduagh turned up at Capard House as instructed. We were there by midnight. All the men from the various companies of the battalion who had been at Kilmacduagh turned up at Capard House, which was then unoccupied. It then belonged to a publican from Peterswell named Patrick Hayes who had bought it from a landlord.

At daybreak we left Capard House and went down the mountain and fields to within about two hundred yards of Castledaly Church, which is on the main road from Loughrea to Gort and about six miles from Gort. We had tea there; I do not know who supplied the tea. About 11 a.m. I saw five or six R.I.C. men on bicycles going towards Gort from the direction of Loughrea. I remember that scouts were sent out to try and find out if the R.I.C. would return by the same road. We were then put into positions by Commandant McInerney and Vice Commandant Peter Howley right inside the wall of the road opposite Castledaly Church. We occupied positions from the crossroads on the Loughrea side of the church to about ten or twenty yards on the Gort side of the church. I remember that I was in position near the crossroads on the Loughrea side and that Volunteer John Nilan, Ardrahan Company, and Volunteers Peter Burke and Patrick Glynn, both of Kilbecanty, were beside me.

We were in position for perhaps three-quarters of an hour when the R.I.C. came cycling from the Gort direction. I remember well that the two leading R.I.C. men cycling abreast came to within about twenty yards of my position when we opened fire on them. They immediately jumped off

their bicycles and made for the wall of the church. One of them had his rifle with him. I cannot say for certain if the second took his rifle from his bicycle. When we fired again one of the two fell in over the wall of the church. The other fell on the road. One of those two was killed outright and the other got away across the fields. I am certain that he was wounded. Some of the I.R.A. in position nearer the Gort side followed up the remaining R.I.C. who ran away across the fields on the church side. We took all the bicycles (five) belonging to the R.I.C. and, I think, three rifles. I was just about to rush out on to the road to get one of the rifles but Volunteer Patrick Glynn got there before me and secured the rifle.

Reprisals by the R.I.C. followed the Castledaly ambush. They burned three or four dwelling houses but I forget the names of the families as Castledaly was about twelve miles away from my native townland. A few days later Mrs. Quinn of Kiltartan, a young married woman, was shot dead by R.I.C. while standing at her own gate with a young baby in her arms.

Towards the end of November, 1920, two brothers named Patrick and Harry Loughnan were arrested by R.I.C. at their own home in Shanaglish. Their bodies, very badly mutilated and partly burned, were found about a week later in the Kinvara Company area. One of the brothers - Patrick - was a Lieutenant in Beagh Company and had taken part in the attack on the R.I.C. at Castledaly. I remember that instead of waiting for darkness he went straight home to Beagh Company area in broad daylight. Many people thought he was seen going home from the ambush and that the R.I.C. got to hear of it. This is one explanation of why he and his brother were so brutally murdered. If it is correct

that the R.I.C. learned that he took part in the attack on them at Castledaly it is very likely that he and his brother were tortured by the R.I.C. in an endeavour to get from them the names of the other officers and Volunteers who took part.

I had to go "on the run" after the Castledaly ambush. It was not safe for me to sleep at home. My house was raided several times after the ambush at Castledaly. During the remainder of the winter of 1920/1921 I slept in a canvas tent and an odd time in neighbouring houses. From about the 1st November, 1920, to the truce of July, 1921, a number of men slept and remained together day and night. They included Joseph Stanford, Captain, Gort Company, and Brigade O/C, Galway South West Brigade; Daniel Ryan, Lieutenant, Kilbecanty Company, and afterwards Brigade Q/M, Galway South West Brigade; Volunteer Patrick Glynn, afterwards Vice Commandant, Gort Battalion; Thomas Keeley, afterwards Battalion Engineer, Gort Battalion; John Coen, Captain, Kilbecanty Company; Volunteer Thomas Craven of the North Galway Brigade, who was residing with relatives in our area, and myself. I cannot remember anything outstanding in the first few months of 1921.

About April, 1921, there was a reorganisation of the Gort Battalion. The reorganisation was carried out under the direction of Michael Brennan, O/C East Clare Brigade. The Gort Battalion up to this was comprised of ten companies, viz. Kilbecanty, Gort, Derrybrien, Peterswell, Beagh, Kinvara, Kilmacduagh, Kiltartan, Ardrahan and Ballinderreen. After the reorganisation the new Gort Battalion was comprised of five companies, namely, Gort, Derrybrien, Peterswell, Beagh and Kilbecanty. John Fahy, Captain of Peterswell Company, was appointed O/C Gort Battalion. The other

battalion officers then appointed were: Q/M, Thomas Fahy of Peterswell Company, a brother of the O/C; Vice Commandant,, Patrick Glynn of Kilbecanty Company; Battalion Engineer, Thomas Keeley of Kilbecanty Company; Battalion Adjutant, myself. Prior to my appointment as Battalion Adjutant I had been Captain of Kilbecanty Company for a few months.

Shortly after this the Ballyturn ambush took place. It happened on a Sunday in the middle of May, 1921. I remember that I got word to be at Keeley's of Kilcrimple at 2 p.m. I was there at the appointed time but I missed the ambush at Ballyturn owing to a change of time, which came about in this way. The funeral of a sister of Padraig Fahy of Ballycahalan was taking place on that Sunday from Ballycahalan to Kilbecanty. Brigadier Joseph Stanford and Brigade Quartermaster Daniel Ryan thought that Inspector Blake of the R.I.C. would come to Ballyturn an hour earlier in order to raid the funeral after his visit to Ballyturn. They figured that Blake would raid the funeral in the hopes of catching Padraig Fahy and other much wanted men. They changed the time from 2 p.m. to 1 p.m. I did not know of the change and so I missed this engagement. I went to Kilcrimple at the appointed time but the others had been there and had left for Ballyturn. As no instruction had been left for me I did not like to go on to Ballyturn in case it would upset any arrangements made by the Brigade officers. District Inspector Blake, or Captain Blake as he was called, was killed at Ballyturn as well as two officers of the Lancers stationed at Gort. Their names were Captain Cornwallis and Lieutenant McCreary.

After the Ballyturn ambush, raiding by the British forces and R.I.C. became more frequent and big numbers of

them were engaged. A small flying column was formed of the following officers: Joseph Stanford, Daniel Ryan, John Fahy, Battalion O/C; Martin Fahy, Brigade Engineer, Galway South West Brigade; Patrick Glynn, Thomas Keeley, John Coen, Captain Kilbecanty Company; John Quinn of Beagh Company and myself. We stayed together day and night and slept in canvas tents in Gortacornane Wood. From then to the truce of July, 1921, the R.I.C. and British forces came out from Gort only on a few occasions when they were so strong in numbers that it was out of the question to attack them. On one occasion they came about four hundred strong, and on the occasion of a big round-up in June they numbered about eleven hundred. Our chief aim at that time was to keep out of their encircling movements. We succeeded in this aim.

A day or two before the truce of the 11th July, 1921, I got word that there was to be a big attack at Blackwater - about three-quarters of a mile from Gort - on three lorries of British forces and R.I.C. expected to be travelling from Gort towards Ennis on the morning of the 11th July. The flying column I have mentioned assembled there with about thirty-five to forty other men from all five companies of the battalion. In addition there were some Volunteers from East Clare Brigade in charge of Patrick Houlihan of the East Clare Flying Column. I would say that about half the I.R.A. there were armed with rifles. The majority had also Mills hand grenades. It is very difficult to say who was in charge of the whole party; I think David Reynolds was. It could have been a joint command between him and Joseph Stanford. Reynolds seemed to be looking on while Stanford was placing the men in position. I think that maybe

Reynolds was an organiser appointed by Michael Brennan. We went into position about 8 a.m. and remained there to about 2 p.m. It was only then that we heard of the truce. The British forces and R.I.C. did not pass the way as expected. The truce was very likely/<sup>what</sup>upset their plans.

The following is a list of company captains of the Gort Battalion as well as I can remember them:

Derrybrien - Paddy Flynn  
 Peterswell - John Fahy to April, 1921, when he became Battalion O/C.  
                   Thomas Fahy from April, 1921, to the truce.  
 Gort - John Hayes from 1917 to 1918.  
           Joseph Stanford from 1918 to the truce  
           There was no company captain appointed after Joseph Stanford became Brigade O/C. He held both commands.  
 Beagh - John Flaherty.  
 Kilbecanty - John Coen to the end of 1920.  
                   Michael Reilly (myself) to May, 1921.  
                   John Keeley to the truce.

I remember the Dáil Éireann or Sinn Féin Courts. The parish court was held in a barn belonging to John Ward of Ballyturn. The parish court clerk was Brian O'Connor, who was also Company Q/M, Kilbecanty Company, of the Irish Volunteers. The parish court justices were Michael Fahy of Ballycahalan and John Ford of Shanaglish. They were two fairly elderly Volunteers who were also members of the I.R.B. I remember attending the Sinn Féin Land Court in Loughrea in connection with the division of the Baggot Estate. That would have been very late in 1919 as well as I can remember. That court was held in secret in the Temperance Hall, Loughrea. There were solicitors there and barristers from Dublin. The Judge was from Dublin. I think his name was Judge Cummins. (Comyn)

Four Volunteers from each company were appointed to act as Republican Policemen in each company area. Their principal duty, as far as I remember, was the enforcement

of the licensing laws in respect of public-houses. They served civil bills also.

The people of the Gort Battalion area were very good to the Volunteers. They supported us in every way possible and put themselves to a good deal of trouble and expense on our behalf. The landlord class - a very tiny minority - hindered at first but towards the end of the struggle they were inclined to be neutral. The Dáil Éireann loan was well subscribed in the Kilbecanty parish. All except very few subscribed £1 per family.

As far as I know there was only one friendly R.I.C. man in the Gort Battalion area. He was stationed in Gort and his name was Constable Kearney. He sent out a good deal of valuable information to Brigadier Joseph Stanford through Volunteer Henry O'Shaughnessy of Gort Company. It was well known to Volunteer officers that he was about to resign from the R.I.C. but on the evening of the Ballyturn ambush he was killed by his own colleagues. We heard that he was on the first lorry of reinforcements that arrived at the scene of the ambush from Gort. We heard for certain that when the lorry arrived at Ballyturn he was ordered down off it by his own comrades and the moment he alighted he was riddled with bullets.

Signed: Michael Reilly  
(Michael Reilly)

Date: 28th February 1956  
28th February, 1956.

Witness: Con Moynihan (Con Moynihan)  
(Investigator)

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