

ORIGINAL

BUREAU OF MILITARY HISTORY 1913-21
DEPT. OF THE ARMY
No. W.S. 1,405

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BUREAU OF MILITARY HISTORY, 1913-21

STATEMENT BY WITNESS.

DOCUMENT NO. W.S. 1,405.

Witness

Cornelius Barrett,
Glenbeigh,
Kilcorney,
Banteer,
Co. Cork.

Identity.

Volunteer and Member of Millstreet Battalion Column,
Cork II Brigade, I.R.A.

Subject.

Activities of Kilcorney Company, Millstreet Battalion,
Cork II Brigade, 1915-1921.

Conditions, if any, Stipulated by Witness.

Nil.

File No S. 2614.

Form BSM 2

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STATEMENT BY CORNELIUS BARRETT

Glenbeigh, Kilcorney, Banteer, Co. Cork

I was born on 8th May 1895 at Horsemount, Kilcorney; I was educated at Kilcorney National School until I reached the age of 15, when I left to go to work with some of the local farmers.

The first unit of the Irish Volunteers was formed in Kilcorney area towards the end of 1915. There were about eight members including Matt Kelleher, Jerry Burke, Paddy O'Shea, Paddy Sheehan, Tim Kiely, Jack O'Shea, Neil Barrett (witness) and one or two others. The first O/C. was Matt Kelleher. He was, in fact, the pioneer member. I think that it was on his suggestion that the unit was formed. We were, I think, an independent unit of Cork Brigade. However, we were never really effective in the early stages as we had nobody with any military training or experience to help us.

This was the position in Kilcorney at Easter Week 1916. I have no recollection that we got any orders in connection with Easter Week, but, in any event, we did not have any activities during the week. Whenever we met each other at this time, we naturally discussed the happenings in Dublin and we began, before the week was out, to realise that the Irish Volunteers meant business. When following the surrender, the executions took place, we realised that we were Irish and that there was need for us to stick together. So, in the months following Easter Week to the end of 1916, the members of the unit, although not in a position to take any action of a military nature, met regularly - usually on Sunday evenings - and discussed the change in national outlook that appeared to be coming over the people. We helped to collect funds for the

National Aid Committee and generally to influence the general public to support the republican viewpoint.

When the Volunteers were being re-organised early in 1917, our unit (Kilcorney) really became effective for the first time. We now had a membership of about 20 and this was added to slowly until the end of 1917 when, I'd say, we had about 30 in the company. Each of the new recruits were 'vetted' by the officers before being invited to join, as we realised that it was necessary to ensure that, as far as possible, each member was trustworthy. The officers of the company in 1917 were:- O/C. Paddy Healy; 1st Lieut. John O'Shea; 2nd Lieut. Matt Kelleher. These officers were elected by the members of the unit.

The only drill was close order foot drill. The training was carried out by the O/C. (Paddy Healy). He had been a member of the R.I.C. for a very short time but had resigned. He was, however, a keen disciplinarian and terribly strict on time-keeping. During the summer of 1917, he suggested that we should get hold of all shotguns in the district. This was done by the members calling in twos and threes on the owners. All guns were surrendered voluntarily. We had now about 25 shotguns and 300 cartridges. This was done, as far as I can recollect, prior to the conscription scare in early 1918. Drill was carried out in the fields and at the crossroads.

In early 1918, when the British threatened to enforce conscription, there was a big increase in membership. The strength increased to about 80. There was no change in officers. I don't think that we carried out any raids for arms at this time as we had already collected all the shotguns in the district. When the conscription threat passed, a large number of the new recruits faded out. They were really followers of the Irish

Parliamentary Party and only joined the Volunteers because of conscription. However, when things resumed their normal routine, we had about 60 members. During this period, the 'old reliables' were engaged in making buckshot and reloading the supply of cartridges, which were held by the company, with same. Pikeheads were also fashioned at the local forge.

There was no contest in the area at the General Election in December 1918. The Sinn Féin candidate - Terry McSwiney - I think, was returned unopposed. I should have mentioned that during 1917 and 1918, all Volunteers were taking an active part in the political movement - Sinn Féin. This organisation was made up mainly of Volunteers, members of their families and members of the Gaelic League.

Cork Brigade of the Irish Volunteers embraced the whole county at this time. The area and the strength of the Volunteers in it was considered too large for one command, so it was divided into three brigades. Our unit, which was in Millstreet Battalion, became part of the new Cork II Brigade. The battalions in this brigade which covered the northern portion of the county were:- Fermoy (1st), Mallow (2nd), Castletownroche (3rd), Charleville (4th), Newmarket (5th), Kanturk (6th), Millstreet (7th).

The officers of Millstreet Battalion were:- O/C. Con J. Meaney; Vice O/C. Denis O'Brien; Adjutant Jerh. Crowley; Q.M. Denis Kelleher.

The officers of the new brigade were:- O/C. Liam Lynch; Vice O/C. Dan Hegarty; Adjutant Tom Barry; Q.M. George Power.

Usual training went on during 1919, but on odd Sundays there were field exercises in which some of the other companies

in the battalion took part. The drill usually consisted of moving in extended order, advancing and withdrawing under cover

When the raiders, who held up some members of the staff of the Munster & Leinster Bank on their way to Knocknagree Fair and seized about £18,000, were being rounded up in the spring of 1920, nearly all members of the company took part. The raiders were natives of the area and were all captured by the I.R.A. They were tried by some members of the brigade staff and were all deported from the country - some to England, others to Canada. This job was taken on by the I.R.A. because of the failure of the R.I.C. to trace the robbers. The R.I.C., when investigating the hold-up, questioned a large number of I.R.A. men and, as a result, some of the general public appeared to get the impression that the robbery was carried out by our men. In the circumstances, the Brigade O/C. ordered an investigation to be carried out with the result that the robbers were captured. The names of those arrested and deported were O'Brien, Carmody, O'Connor, Buckley (2) and two others.

The O/C. of Kilcorney Company (Paddy Healy) was appointed Vice O/C. Millstreet Battalion early in 1920, as Denis O'Brien, who held the post, was forced to retire owing to ill-health. The officers of the Kilcorney Company now were:- O/C. Mattie Kelleher; 1st Lieut. Mick Healy; 2nd Lieut. Humphrey O'Sullivan, Adjutant Tim Kiely.

All members of the company took part in the destruction of Rathcoole R.I.C. Barracks at Easter 1920. This job was done in conjunction with the men of Rathcoole Company. The post was destroyed by fire after we had failed to blow it up with gelignite. I suppose the failure was due to lack of experience in the use of explosives.

With nearly all other members of the company, I was engaged on continuous guard and scouting duties when the brigade flying column came into the area to billet towards the end of November 1920. The column withdrew from the district within a day or two after the attack on Millstreet (22nd Nov. 1920) in which Paddy McCarthy was killed. He was a member of the column. I had no activity in connection with the attack on Millstreet.

Immediately following Millstreet attack, a battalion flying column was formed from members of other local units who had been engaged in the attack. This column was composed of Mick O'Riordan, Wm. O'Riordan, Jimmie Hickey, 'Neelus' Healy, Con J. Meany (Sonny), Con Meany (Big), Jerh. Crowley, 'Miah' Galvin, Denis Hickey. This column were billeted in Kilcorney area for some time while in training. The duty of providing guards and scouts fell to the members of our company. This column were armed with shotguns and, on a number of occasions, lay in ambush for enemy patrols but failed to make contact

The first job carried out by the battalion column was the train ambush at Glebe Bridge on the Mallow-Killarney line between Rathcoole and Millstreet stations. This took place on 11th February 1921. This was a very successful job as the column captured 14 rifles and about 600 rounds of ammunition. I had no active part in the ambush, but after the fight the column withdrew to Kilcorney area where they billeted in Crinaloo. This meant more guard duty for me and the other members of the company. There was hardly one night in any week, at this time, that we were not called on to act as guards or scouts either for our own column or for the members of columns from other battalions which were passing through the area. In addition to this work, the members of the company were

engaged on the cutting of lines of communication, the demolition of bridges and the digging of trenches. I joined the column about this time.

The battalion column left the area on the night of ⁵ 4th March 1921, to take part in Clonbanin Cross ambush, but beyond acting as scout for part of the way I had no further connection with this job. However, the column were back again within 24 hours and the usual routine of guard duty had me again moving round. About the same time, the brigade staff with the members of Mallow and Kanturk battalions columns, who had escaped from a British round-up in the Nadd area, came into the area where billets had to be found for them. In addition, this meant an increase in the number of scouts and guards to be found, with the result that I was now engaged full time on these activities.

Things were now getting more lively and the enemy were moving around in large bodies, so constant watch was necessary. As many members of the company were now engaged whole-time on military duties, the battalion O/C. ordered that these men should be trained so that they could be ready to replace or reinforce the men on the column. As a result, the following underwent a course of training in the use of arms (rifle and revolver) and were formed into a kind of company column :-
 Mattie Kelleher, Dan Sheehan, Mick Healy, John Burke, Tim Kiely, Tim Kelleher, Paddy O'Shea, Maurice Burke, 'Neilus' Cronin, John P. Kelleher. The training was carried out by the members of the battalion column.

I was one of a party (nearly all members of our company) who co-operated with Rathcoole Company in the destruction of the railway line between Rathcoole and Millstreet in May 1921. I took part in the sniping of a large party of enemy troops

who were taking part in a round up of Clydagh Mountain, where Millstreet Battalion H.Q. was situated, in May 1921. By our activities we delayed the enemy who failed to close the ring round the area and our battalion staff escaped. I was accompanied on this operation by Mattie Kelleher, Jack Burke and Dan Sheehan.

About mid-May 1921, I was one of a party from Kilcorney company who moved in on Millstreet to shoot up any enemy troops who might be to be seen. This was to be a reprisal job for the execution of I.R.A. men found in possession of arms. There were no enemy troops to be seen, so we returned to our billets.

Beyond the usual scouting duties, blocking of roads and cutting of communications, there was nothing of note until the night of 15th June 1921, when the columns from Mallow, Kanturk, Newmarket, Charleville and Millstreet assembled at Rathcoole Wood. The combined columns together with members of local companies acting as scouts numbered about 150. Paddy O'Brien (Brigade Vice O/C) was in charge. The Millstreet column (Jimmie Hickey, Wm. O'Riordan, 'Neilus' Healy, Wm. Kelleher, Tom Crowley, Jerh. Crowley (column leader), Neil Barrett (witness), 'Neilus' Cronin, Bernard Sullivan, Con J. Meany, 'Miah' Galvin, Sean Reid, Jack O'Keeffe, Dan Coakley, John Carey and, I think, two others) were armed with rifles. The majority of the members of the other columns had rifles. The others present had shotguns. There was also a machine gun in charge of Leo O'Callaghan (Mallow Battalion).

When the whole party had assembled in Rathcoole Wood in the early morning of 16th June 1921, we learned that it was proposed to attack an enemy convoy of 3 to 5 lorries of Auxiliaries who usually travelled between Millstreet and Banteer. The position selected for the ambush was on high ground on the

south side overlooking the road, and the whole I.R.A. force was divided into eight (I think) sections to be placed in selected positions extending over a distance of about 1500 yards. Six mines were laid in the road. They were spaced at the estimated distance between lorries travelling in convoy. When the mines had been laid everybody except a few scouts moved into the cover of the wood. It was now about 8 a.m.

The enemy convoy moved through the ambush position from Millstreet about 10 a.m. and returned about 12.30 p.m. It passed through on a second journey about 3 p.m. When it had passed, all sections left the cover of the wood and took up their selected positions. I was with 'Neilus' Cronin (Kilcorney) and Ben Sullivan (Rathduane) in position behind a fence about 200 yards from the road and nearly in the centre of the ambush position. We were armed with rifles and were responsible for covering off a small breen which led from the road into our position, so that none of the enemy could get in from the road. About 4 p.m. the approach of the convoy was signalled from the east and within a minute or two the first of the lorries entered the ambush site. The third lorry was just opposite our position when the mine at the eastern end exploded under the last lorry (4th). All sections immediately opened fire. The Auxiliaries immediately tumbled from the lorries and took cover behind the roadside fence while we continued to fire at any available target. The enemy returned our fire. The lorries (1st, 2nd and 3rd) had stopped between mines so that the mine at the eastern end was the only one to be exploded to any effect. Fighting went on for about two hours and eventually the signal to withdraw was given. We then withdrew from our position to the rear of Rathcoole Wood where we met all the other sections. The I.R.A. party had no casualties. Enemy losses were not made known.

Later on the night of the ambush, I returned with Mattie Kelleher (O/C. Kilcorney Company) to the scene of the ambush to collect a mine and some wire which had been dumped in the vicinity.

Within a week the enemy brought large forces into our area and engaged in a large scale round-up. I was billeted in the Musherá area at the time and was lucky to escape after coming under heavy enemy fire. I continued to operate in Kilcorney area until the Truce.

Rank at Truce:- Volunteer and member of battalion column.

The strength of Kilcorney Company at the time - about 60.

Signed: Lt. Barrett

Date: 24th April 1956

Witness: P. Donnell

