

ORIGINAL

BUREAU OF MILITARY HISTORY 1913-21

BURÓ STAIRÉ MILEATA 1913-21

No. **W.S.** 1,418

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BUREAU OF MILITARY HISTORY, 1913-21

STATEMENT BY WITNESS.

DOCUMENT NO. **W.S.** 1418.

Witness

Commandant Michael Kearney,
5 Audley Place,
St. Patrick's Hill,
Cork.

Identity.

Lieutenant, Midleton Company, 4th Battalion,
Cork No. 1 Brigade.

Subject.

Activities of Midleton Company, Irish Volunteers,
Cork No. 1 Brigade, 1917-1921, and
4th Battalion Flying Column, 1920-1921.

Conditions, if any, Stipulated by Witness.

Nil.

File No .. S. 2747. ...

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STATEMENT BY COMMANDANT MICHAEL KEARNEY,
5 Audley Place, St. Patrick's Hill, Cork.

I was born in the year 1890 at Churchtown, Midleton, Co. Cork. My father was a carpenter by trade.

From my earliest days, I was always interested in the physical force movement in Ireland, principally, I suppose, because of hearing from my father tales of Fenian activity in our area. I remember him telling such incidents of the Fenian Rising as the shooting of a Midleton Fenian, named Tim Daly, by the R.I.C. at Castlemartyr, Co. Cork, and the fight at Kilclooney Wood where Peter O'Neill Crowley was killed.

As a young lad, I joined the local branch of the Gaelic League, and when a company of National Volunteers (John Redmond's) was formed in Midleton in 1913, I became a member.

We had a few hundred men in the company but, so far as I can remember, we had no guns; at least, I never saw any, except wooden rifles which we used when drilling. Our O/C was an ex British army officer named O'Hanlon, the proprietor of Midleton flour mills. Our instructors were men who were formerly in the British army.

When the split in the Volunteers came in 1915, I withdrew altogether and did not join up again until 1917, when an Irish Volunteer company was started in Midleton. We had about thirty men in this company, with John Brady

as O/C for a few months. He was replaced by Diarmuid Hurley who later proved himself one of the best fighting officers in the Cork brigade. Joseph Aherne of Middleton was one of the earliest lieutenants in the company. We had very little arms at that time. There were probably a few revolvers and shotguns, but little else.

The years 1917-1919 were mostly taken up with drilling and general training; organisation of other companies at the East Cork area was begun, and the men took part in canvassing electors, stewarding meetings and other work for Sinn Féin in connection with the general election of 1918. A company was started in my native place, Churchtown, a few miles from Middleton, and I was appointed a section leader.

To augment our small supply of arms, we carried out raids at night on houses - principally on those belonging to loyalists - for anything we could get. We did obtain a few sporting guns and pistols as a result. A few of us raided the goods store at Middleton railway station where, we were told, a British army officer had left his kit bag. We searched the bag, but found nothing except a pistol used for starting races at athletic meetings.

Raid on Ballyquirke Aerodrome:

It was on 4th July 1919 that I took part in what I might call my first major activity with the Middleton company. The occasion was a raid to be made on the British military guard on an aerodrome under construction at Ballyquirke, about nine miles from Middleton. A party of the Wiltshire regiment was stationed there. Owing to the fact that our arms consisted of a couple of revolvers only, it was arranged that a party of Volunteers from

Cork, with Terence MacSwiney in charge, would come to our assistance, bringing some guns. They were travelling to Ballyquirke by car on the night in question.

About 9 p.m., I was instructed to accompany another Volunteer named Cronin of Midlton to a road junction north of the aerodrome and to order any of our men on the main road to keep to the bye-roads, to avoid attracting attention. The telegraph and telephone lines to Ballyquirke were cut while we waited the arrival of the Cork city men. There were about thirty men from the Midleton company there, under the command of Diarmuid Hurley, captain, and Joseph Aherne, lieutenant.

We waited around until almost midnight when we were ordered to disperse. It transpired afterwards that the Cork men en route to Ballyquirke pulled up on the way, to inquire the right road. They were wrongly directed - quite by accident - and actually drove in the opposite direction to the aerodrome. When they realised their mistake, it was too late - we had dispersed.

Later that same year - on 11th November 1919, to be precise - it was again decided to hold up and disarm the military at Ballyquirke. This time, the job was to be carried out by selected Volunteers from the Cobh and Midleton companies only. They numbered about twenty men from Midleton, and a dozen approximately from Cobh. Between the lot of us, I am sure there were not more than half a dozen revolvers, but, as an additional weapon, I made a number of short wooden batons, to be used, if necessary, in the attack. I was armed with a long Webley revolver.

The plan was that the Volunteers with revolvers

would hold up the sentry and rush into the guardroom, followed by the men with the batons who would knock out any soldiers who showed signs of resisting. The arms would then be captured.

A few hours before we were in position at Ballyquirke, some of our lads had held up and taken prisoner a soldier who was conveying mails from the aerodrome to Killeagh. He was questioned as to the layout of the guard, the numbers, position of sentries and suchlike. He readily gave the required information and was held prisoner until the job was over.

Those of us from Middleton were in the vicinity of the aerodrome at the appointed time - about 9 p.m. - but there was no sign of the Cobh men. The night was very dark with rain falling.

We must have waited an hour for the Cobh men to turn up - they had three or four revolvers - when, suddenly, the lights in the aerodrome went on, and it was obvious that the garrison had been alerted. As only myself and Joseph Aherne had revolvers, Michael Leahy, the battalion O/C, who was in charge, decided to call the whole thing off. The element of surprise having gone, he apparently saw no hope of success with the few guns we had. It is possible that the British became suspicious at the non-return of the soldier delivering the mails. It could also have happened that the sentry heard the Cobh men moving up on foot by the railway line which adjoined the camp. Whatever the reason, we had to leave Ballyquirke, after failing a second time to carry out what, with any luck at all, would have been a comparatively simple task.

Attack on Carrigtwohill R.I.C. Barracks:

Early in the year 1920 - the date was 3rd January - it was decided by the Brigade that a police barracks in the 4th battalion area (our area) should be attacked, and Carrigtwohill was selected, the job of capturing it being entrusted to the Cobh and Middleton companies. Commandant Michael Leahy of Cobh was the officer in charge of the operation.

A short time prior to this, Tadhg Manley, N.T., (now a T.D.) went up to Belfast and was fortunate enough to secure six or seven revolvers and some ammunition. Tadhg was a member of the Middleton company and a very earnest Volunteer.

The actual attacking force that night numbered about twenty men, the remainder, approximately fifty, were engaged blocking roads by cutting trees and destroying telegraph and telephone wires, thereby isolating Carrigtwohill.

The village is about ten miles from Cork, and four from Middleton on the main Cork-Youghal road. The barracks was one of a row of houses in the main street. It was a stone and slated building, two stories; the windows, front and rere, were fitted with steel shutters, providing loopholes for firing. There was a garrison of eight R.I.C. men in charge of a sergeant, as far as my memory serves me.

The attack opened about 11 p.m. with volleys of rifle and revolver fire - we had received a few rifles from the brigade to help us out - on the barrack windows front and rere. The R.I.C. replied vigorously with

rifles and grenades. They also sent up Verey lights to summon assistance. This went on for more than half an hour. Michael Leahy, the O/C, then decided to blow a hole in the gable end of the barracks, to gain admittance. Tom Hyde of Ballinacurra, an engineer in the County Council, removed a few stones from the gable, and John Moore of Cobh, a quarryman, inserted some sticks of gelignite. The subsequent explosion blew a hole in the barrack wall, sufficiently large to admit one man at a time. While this was going on, we were keeping up spasmodic fire on the barracks, with a view to keeping the enemy's attention distracted from the men laying the gelignite.

When the breach was made, Diarmuid Hurley, captain of Middleton company, Joseph Aherne, 1st lieutenant, Volunteer Cronin and I entered the barracks, Hurley leading the way. Tadhg Manley, who was also on the spot, wanted to enter too, but he was ordered to remain outside, as he was required to see to the safety of the arms we hoped to capture. In fact, it was arranged that Tadhg should take the guns to his own home at Tubbereenmire, about four miles from Carrigtwohill.

When we entered the barracks, we found ourselves in the dayroom, but could see little in the intense darkness. A few shots were fired down the stairs by the R.I.C., and we replied. Hurley shouted upstairs, "We are in. Come down and surrender". There was a lull in the firing, and then a voice from upstairs enquired if we would let a woman out. Hurley said, "Yes, certainly". The sergeant's wife then came down, and asked Hurley what would happen the R.I.C. if they surrendered. Hurley said they would be quite safe if they came down, one by one, with their hands up. He added that, if they

did not do so, he would burn the barracks. The woman went back and had a consultation with the R.I.C.. She again came down, and was taken by a Volunteer out of the building to friends in the town. The next thing I saw was the R.I.C. filing downstairs with their hands up. They were then handcuffed in pairs and marched out on to the street, under a guard.

While this was happening, more of our men had come through the breach, and were engaged searching for arms and ammunition. I was lucky to get a new Webley revolver which was lying on a table. I had this revolver with me during the subsequent years of fighting.

The captured carbines, belonging to the garrison, revolvers, ammunition, a few shotguns and grenades were taken away and loaded on a car driven by Joseph Aherne. Tadhg Manley accompanied him. The captured stuff was removed to Tadhg's home at Tubbereenmore, and put in a safe place. None of it was afterwards recaptured by the British.

It must have been about one o'clock in the morning when we left Carrigtwohill. We had been in the village since 10.30 p.m. the previous night.

The captured police were marched a few miles outside the village where they were addressed by Commandant Leahy and advised to resign from the R.I.C. They were left to make their way back as best they could.

We suffered no casualties at Carrigtwohill, and I think neither did the garrison.

Attack on Castlemartyr Barracks:

The day of February 9th 1920 was a fair day in Midleton. It was customary on such occasions for the local R.I.C. garrison to be strengthened by a few police from outside stations, and, on this particular day, one of the Midleton Volunteers noticed that two policemen from Castlemartyr were on duty in the town. This news he promptly communicated to Diarmuid Hurley who decided to attack Castlemartyr barracks that night when he would have two less in the garrison to deal with.

Castlemartyr is a village, about five miles east of Midleton, Co. Cork. The barracks was situated on the south side of the village street, one of a row of houses. It was two-storied, slated, and had steel-shuttered windows. The garrison, so far as I can remember, was six or eight men.

On the night in question, I was going into Midleton from my home in Churchtown when I met Diarmuid Hurley, O/C, Midleton company who told me of his intention to attack Castlemartyr later that night. He said that, earlier - about an hour or so previously - Tadhg Manley and a few other Midleton men had waylaid and captured the two Castlemartyr R.I.C. men who had finished duty in Midleton and were returning to barracks in Castlemartyr. Their names were Sergeant O'Brien and Constable Collins. It was Hurley's intention to take Sergeant O'Brien with him to the door of the barracks to secure admittance. When the R.I.C. man on duty inside opened the door to admit the sergeant, Hurley would keep the door open, and others of us would then rush in and hold up the garrison. This plan miscarried entirely, as neither the sergeant nor the constable would agree to do as Hurley suggested. They

were coaxed, and then threatened, but all to no avail; they refused, they said, to betray their comrades.

Meanwhile, about eight of us had congregated in the vicinity of the barracks, in groups of two. I was armed with a revolver. Hurley, having been frustrated in his efforts to secure an easy entry to the barracks through the medium of the two captured R.I.C., decided to go ahead with the job without them. The time was then about ten o'clock.

Hurley went up to the barrack door, accompanied by Joseph Aherne and Tomás Hourihane; the latter two men kept a little to the side of the door. Hurley knocked, and a voice inside enquired, "Who is there?". Hurley replied, "Sergeant O'Brien" - at the same time, trying to imitate the sergeant's voice. The door was opened slightly, but was still held by a chain on the inside. As the door opened, Hurley, not knowing about the chain, put his foot in and shoved. The door held fast. The R.I.C. man inside - named Lee - now thoroughly alarmed, fired his revolver through the opening. Hurley did likewise but neither could hit the other, owing to the angle at which they were firing. Hurley, seeing that he was making no progress towards shoving open the door, commenced to slash at the inside chain with the butt of his revolver. He smashed the chain alright, and then began a struggle between the Volunteers outside and the R.I.C. man, they to get the door opened, he to keep it closed. Weight of numbers told eventually. The door was opened, and Hurley and his two comrades rushed in. I followed with a few other lads.

When I entered the barracks, I saw Constable Lee

with his hand up to his eye. He was moaning in pain. In the struggle with Hurley when the latter got inside, Lee was struck in the eye with a revolver butt. I saw a closed door and burst it open. Inside was a Sergeant Sullivan. We asked him where the arms were kept, and he told us. There was another constable there also. The remaining members of the garrison were in their homes in the village.

We collected about half a dozen revolvers, eight police carbines and a quantity of ammunition. A priest and doctor were got for Constable Lee. Having handcuffed the R.I.C. men, we left the barracks with the captured arms which were safely dumped in the Dungourney district. It was shortly after midnight when I reached home.

The Constable Collins referred to was some distant relation of Mick Collins. He resigned shortly after the Castlemartyr attack, and joined the I.R.A. He later held the rank of captain in the National Army.

Attack on Cloyne R.I.C. Barracks:

On 8th May 1920, Commandant Michael Leahy, with men from the Cobh and Middleton companies, attacked and captured the R.I.C. barracks at Cloyne, Co. Cork. The following is an account, to the best of my memory, of my part in the operation.

Cloyne is a village about four miles south of Middleton, Co. Cork. The barracks was in the main street, flanked by houses. It was a two-storied stone and slated building, with the windows, front and rear, reinforced by the fitting of steel shutters. The garrison comprised eight or nine R.I.C. in charge of a sergeant.

In view of the recent success of our attacks on Carrigtwohill and Castlemartyr, it was expected that the Cloyne R.I.C. would put up a determined resistance. We could not hope for the element of surprise on this occasion, to make the job easier for us. For these reasons, Commandant Leahy mobilised upwards of eighty men from different companies to take part in the operation. The majority of the men from companies other than Midleton and Cobh were to be engaged entirely on felling trees to block roads leading to and from the village, cutting telephone and telegraph wires, and ensuring that no unauthorised person would come into or leave the village when the attack commenced. The actual attack was to be carried out by men from the Cobh and Midleton companies, most of whom had been 'blooded' in previous encounters.

The attack was fixed to take place on a Saturday night. On the following night, we had proposed to hold a concert, under the auspices of the Gaelic League, to be held in the technical school, Cloyne, and it was arranged that I should erect the platform and carry the props to the school on the Saturday evening. I was to keep the school door open, to admit the Volunteers who were to assemble there, to take part in the actual attack on the barracks later that night. I conveyed the props from Midleton to Cloyne with a horse and cart in the evening, and in the cart I brought some bombs to be used in the attack. En route to Cloyne, I passed a police patrol, but no notice was taken of me.

About twenty Volunteers came into the school in one's and two's, from about 8 p.m. Most were armed with revolvers. There were a few rifles also. I was

instructed by Diarmuid Hurley to take two men, Volunteers Liam Aherne (afterwards killed at Clonmult) and Cronin to a place about three-quarters of a mile from Cloyne, and fell a tree across the road; we were to engage any enemy who might approach our position. We were armed with revolvers. We felled the tree across the road and awaited developments.

Sometime about 11 p.m., firing began in Cloyne, and we could see Verey lights being set up by the R.I.C. in the barracks. This went on for about an hour, or maybe longer. Then we saw what appeared to be a house on fire. When the fire started, there seemed to be a lull in the shooting. A scout came out from the village and told me that the garrison had surrendered. I then went into Cloyne with Aherne and Cronin. When I got there, the barrack building was on fire, some of our lads were coming out of the barracks after collecting some arms, and the noise of exploding ammunition could be heard. Commandant Leahy had lined up the R.I.C. (eight or ten) on the street, and was addressing them, telling them that, as Irishmen, they should resign and fight against the old enemy. The police were then marched out a few miles along the Middleton road and left there.

The captured arms, the number of which I cannot state, and ammunition were piled into a horse and trap, driven by Jack Aherne. Paddy Whelan of Cobh (afterwards Commandant Whelan) accompanied us. Our intention was to dump the stuff in Jack Aherne's orchard at Milebush, outside Middleton, but we decided to go a roundabout way via Churchtown, to avoid the main road as much as possible. We were approaching the house of a man named Spillane,

about half a mile from Cloyne, when Aherne was taking a wrong turn. I told him so, he jerked the reins suddenly, and one of the shafts of the car broke, depositing us and the guns and ammunition out on the road. I might add that the night was pitch black. We were now in a nice predicament. The time was 1 a.m. We knocked up the Spillane's, who gave us a cart to replace the damaged one, and we started out again. As we approached my home district, Churchtown, we encountered road blocks of fallen trees. I got busy on these with a saw I had with me, and cleared a way for the cart. With the delay caused by having to saw through fallen trees on roads, it was 3 a.m. by the time we got from Churchtown on to the main Midleton road. As we approached the main road, two lorries of troops passed, travelling very fast towards Midleton. It was a miracle we weren't spotted. There was nothing much else I could do to help the other two men (the road was clear, obviously, as the military had come along it), so I left them, at their desire, and returned to my home at Churchtown. I am glad to say they got to Aherne's place safely with the stuff, and dumped it there. It was not recaptured.

The following night, 9th May, 1920, we held our concert in Cloyne. Quite a number of those who took part in the barrack attack the previous night were present. There was no raid by the enemy and no arrests.

The Mile Bush (Bowling Match) Ambush:

On Saturday evening, 5th June, 1920, I met Diarmuid Hurley and Tadhg Manley in Midleton. I enquired if these was anything doing that night, and Hurley told me, "No", there wasn't. He added that I

would be wanted for an attack on Ballycotton R.I.C. barracks which was due to take place the following night (Sunday). I left Hurley, telling him I would meet him later in the night, and went off to Confession. As I came out of the chapel, I met a local Volunteer named Dinny Walsh who said I was wanted up the Cork road as quickly as possible, and to bring my gun. I had my revolver hidden in a stable on the outskirts of Midleton, and went for it, with all speed. Getting on to the main Cork road by a circuitous route, to avoid the barracks, I went out beyond Midleton for about a mile and a half, where I met Diarmuid Hurley. The time was about 8.30 p.m. Hurley told me the ambush was over, and had been successful. I remember quite clearly the facts as told to me that night by Diarmuid. They are briefly as follows:

A short time previously, a company of the British regiment, known as the Cameron Highlanders, had come in to occupy Midleton in place of the Essex regiment. After leaving me earlier that day, Hurley was informed that eleven of the Camerons, with one N.C.O. and an R.I.C. man as guide, had left their barracks at Midleton on bicycles and were proceeding by the back roads to Carrigtwohill. Two Fianna boys on bikes - Tom McCarthy and - Daly - were sent to follow them, note their movements and report back. Meanwhile, Hurley hurriedly got together about nine Volunteers, with a view to ambushing the soldiers on their way back to Midleton.

It was a fine summer's evening and very suitable for a game of bowls which is very popular in Co. Cork. Hurley conceived the idea of using this bowl game to trap the military. The game is played by two men usually,

bowling a match ball for a distance of two miles, as a rule, along the road between specified points, the winner being the one who covers the distance in the least number of throws. A number of men take up positions along the road at a distance from the contestants, to mark the spot where a bowl may run into the grass on the roadside. These latter are called markers.

Diarmuid Hurley and Tadhg Manley were the contestants in the mock game played on the night of 5th June, 1920. The other Volunteers were spread out a short distance away, pretending to be markers. At a place called Mile Bush, about two miles west of Middleton, on the main Cork-Carrigtwohill-Middleton road, word was received from the scout that the cycling party of the Camerons was approaching. When the military unsuspectingly rode in between the lines of markers, Tadhg Manley, one of the bowlers, drew his revolver and fired in the air. This was the signal for a concerted rush by all the Volunteers on the soldiers cycling nearest to them. They were knocked off their bikes and quickly disarmed. A few escaped capture, and dived for cover inside a wall. These opened fire with their rifles, until Hurley spoke to the lance corporal of the Camerons, and ordered him to instruct these men to cease fire and surrender. This was done. While our lads were collecting the rifles and ammunition belts from the soldiers, another Cameron was seen approaching, riding quickly. It appears that he had stopped to make some repairs to his bike and had been left behind. He was the corporal. Our lads ran towards him. He saw what was happening, dismounted and opened fire with his rifle. One of our men, Joseph Aherne, got hold of one of the captured rifles and fired at the corporal.

The latter, having no stomach for a fight on his own, threw away his rifle, and ran through the fields to safety.

Twelve rifles, steel helmets, bayonets and about twelve hundred rounds of ammunition were captured. These were taken away in a commandeered motor car by Joseph Aherne and Tadhg Manley. None of the boys were injured in the affair, and none of the arms were recaptured by the enemy.

An interesting item relating to the Mile Bush ambush concerns the R.I.C. man (O'Connor) who was with the Camerons that evening. After the soldiers were disarmed, some of the Volunteers wanted to shoot O'Connor. Diarmuid Hurley was not in favour of this and, when O'Connor pleaded for his life to be spared, his request was granted by Hurley, on condition that he promised not to identify any of the Volunteers present. Subsequently, this man was a very valuable ally of ours. He was employed as clerk to the District Inspector of R.I.C. in Middleton, and frequently passed on information to us of intended raids by the military.

Not very long after the Mile Bush affair, Tadhg Manley's digs in Middleton was raided by military. Diarmuid Hurley was in the same house when the raid took place, but luckily he escaped out the back way. Tadhg was not so fortunate; he was taken prisoner to Cork gaol and was not released until after the Truce in July, 1921.

Tadhg Manley was one of the finest Volunteers in our area. His loss to us was immense. So much did Diarmuid Hurley think of him that he approached the brigade in Cork with a proposal to rescue Tadhg from

Cork gaol. The brigade considered such an attempt to be suicidal, but Hurley, with the aid of Tadhg's comrades in Midleton, was quite prepared to take the risk. The brigade staff would not, however, give its approval, and the idea had, therefore, to be abandoned.

Churchtown North (Whiterock) Ambush:

In the latter end of August 1920, arrangements were made by Joseph Aherne, 1st lieutenant of the Midleton company, to ambush a lorry of military which patrolled the Midleton-Ballycotton district. In company with Joseph Aherne, Phil Hyde of Ballinacurra, Paddy Whelan and Jack O'Connell of Cobh, we had a look at a few likely places, and decided on a part of the road at Whiterock, a townland two miles from Midleton. The portion of the road in question was within fifty yards of a bend, and there was an overhanging tree for felling at that point.

The Midleton company, to the number of about twenty, was mobilised for the job, and reported to Churchtown the following morning where arms and ammunition were distributed. My first job was to saw through the overhanging tree, leaving it in such a way that, when pulled by a rope, it would fall readily across the road as the military lorry rounded the bend. When, as expected, the lorry would stop, we could pour rapid fire into it from both sides of the road, where our lads were in position. Sean Kelleher of Midleton acted as scout on a motor bicycle. He was to watch the route of the military and report to us, in advance, of their approaching Whiterock.

Things did not materialise as we had hoped. Sean Kelleher reported the route the enemy had taken, and we waited to attack when, about 2 p.m., a look-out, posted

on high ground, signalled the approach of an enemy lorry coming in the reverse direction than that anticipated by us. Joseph Aherne made hurried changes in positions, to meet this unexpected development, and was just doing this when a lorry load of soldiers came at top speed down the road. Volunteer Jerry Aherne rushed across the road with a rope, and the men detailed for the job started to pull on the tree. Very slowly, it began to fall when, just as the back portion of the lorry had passed under it, the tree fell with a crash. The lorry dashed on, unharmed, at greater speed. We opened rapid fire, and saw the driver slump over the wheel. Another soldier, sitting beside the driver, got hold of the driving wheel and, keeping the lorry under control, took it out of range of our fire. Joseph Aherne flung a grenade as the lorry passed him, but it glanced off the hood and exploded harmlessly on the ground, doing no damage. We heard the lorry stop, presumably to change drivers, further up the road, but it was too far away from us and out of sight. We could do nothing about it.

That night, two brothers named Buckley were arrested in their home near Middleton by military, and accused of having taken part in the attack at White-rock earlier that day. In fact, neither took part. One was a Volunteer attached to the Middleton company; the other was not. The two men were put into a military lorry and tied back to back. The British officer in charge then fired from close range with a revolver, killing one of the brothers, the bullet passing through the body and lodging in the spine of the other brother. The latter feigned death, but when the lorry reached the military barracks in Cork, he asked for a priest. His

request was granted. This man subsequently recovered, but the bullet was in such a position, close to his spine, that it could not be removed, and he was a cripple for the rest of his life.

Early in September 1920, the 4th battalion flying column was formed. Diarmuid Hurley was O/C, and Joseph Aherne, Vice O/C. Other officers were Paddy Whelan and Jack O'Connell, both of Cobh but attached to the Midleton company. The column numbered from twelve to fifteen men. They were all armed with rifles captured at various times from the enemy. When the column was formed, I was appointed 1st lieutenant of the Midleton company, but I occasionally linked up with the column when they were in the Midleton-Churchtown district.

In late December 1920, I was with the column at Aghada, six miles south of Cloyne. We were on the lookout for military patrols coming from Fort Carlisle. Curfew was in force at this time, and these patrols came out periodically to affix curfew notices on trees and walls. We arranged an ambush between the village of Aghada and Carlisle Fort, two miles south. On one occasion only, while we were in the vicinity, did they leave the Fort. We took up a pre-arranged ambush position, but unfortunately the patrol had proceeded only a quarter of a mile from their base when they decided to return. They failed to walk into the trap.

We left Aghada on Christmas Eve 1920, and marched northwards through pouring rain to a new location at Stump Hill, six miles east of Midleton, where we put up in a farm, the property of Captain Donnellan, formerly Irish Party member of Parliament. From here, we moved nearer to Midleton on the night of 27th December 1920.

Attack on R.I.C. patrol in Middleton:

The date being shortly after Christmas, the column officers decided that it might be an opportune moment to have a crack at the R.I.C. in Middleton, they might have relaxed their vigilance following Christmas festivities. At first, the idea was to attack the barracks. This idea was abandoned as the place was very strongly fortified and garrisoned by about thirty R.I.C. and Black and Tans. It was decided instead to enter the town and hit up the patrol which was on duty in the streets nightly.

Paddy Whelan and Jack Ahern were sent into the town to observe the movements of the patrol. They reported to Diarmuid Hurley that the patrol, numbering three parties, three men in each party, had left their barracks and were proceeding down the main street, two groups on one side of the street and one on the other. Hurley's plan was that we should get in between the groups quickly and quietly, and open fire on them at a pre-arranged signal.

We got into the town and, on the opening shot being fired by one of our lads, we all opened up. A general free-for-all ensued. In some cases, our lads engaged in hand-to-hand struggles with the enemy. Some of the latter broke and ran, others fought it out with us. The patrol was augmented by other Black and Tans from the barracks, but these met with a similar fate to their comrades; they were either killed, wounded or captured. When the scrap was over, we had captured more than a dozen guns, killed at least three of the enemy and wounded six or eight. Our casualties were one man wounded in the wrist.

Column surrounded at Cloyne:

It would be in the last few days of December 1920, when I was leaving Mass one Sunday with Commandant Michael Leahy at a place called Ballintotas, that a scout reported that the column was surrounded by the enemy in the village of Cloyne, four miles away. We contacted another Volunteer named Jack Knowles, and in a pony trap, driven by David Burke, a local Volunteer, set off with all haste for Cloyne. We were armed with revolvers only. When within less than two miles of Cloyne, we contacted scouts who told us that the column had fought its way out without casualties. Needless to say, we were very relieved to hear this.

During the month of January 1921, about a dozen of us, armed with rifles and revolvers, opened fire on Middleton barracks at night. The attack was more in the nature of a nuisance attack, to keep the garrison (now increased to about fifty men) jittery. We kept up the fire for about half an hour, and then withdrew. The enemy replied vigorously with rifles and machine guns, but we suffered no casualties.

Clonmilt Massacre:

On February 22nd, 1921, disaster overcame the column when it was trapped in a farmhouse at Clonmilt and almost wiped out. I was not present on that particular evening, although I had often been with the boys in Clonmilt during the time they billeted there. The facts about Clonmilt as I know them are as follows:-

About eighteen of the column, with Diarmuid Hurley in charge and Joseph Aherne, second-in-command, were billeted in an old unused farmhouse near the village of

Clonmult for some weeks prior to the disaster. The house was a one-storied thatched building, with only one exit - through the front door.

On the day in question, Diarmuid Hurley, with Joseph Aherne and Paddy Whelan, left the column to inspect position for an ambush at Cobh junction, six miles or more to the south. Hurley placed Jack O'Connell in charge of the column in his absence, and gave instructions that the column should move that evening to another location where Hurley, Aherne and Whelan would contact them that night. Jack O'Connell and his men were getting their kit together for departure, about 4 p.m., and two of his men had gone to a nearby well to fill their water bottles, when shots rang out. These two men were killed. Jack O'Connell now discovered that the place was surrounded by military who had come by lorry from Cork, but had taken to the fields and crept up to the house at the back, where there was only one small window. O'Connell, realising the desperate position he was in, decided that it would be useless to stay in the house. He reckoned that, if he could get his men outside, they would have a better chance of fighting off the enemy. He, therefore, opened the door, and himself led a sortie into the yard and towards a nearby fence. By some amazing stroke of luck, O'Connell got to cover through a hail of bullets, but the men immediately following him were shot dead. The other Volunteers then made up their minds that it would be suicidal to risk breaking out of the house, and decided to fight it out from inside.

The military tightened the cordon, and poured heavy rifle fire on the defenders who replied in like manner.

Then, as if to add the final straw to the column's already heavy task, two lorries of Black and Tans came on the scene. These were en route from Youghal to Cork, and hearing the firing, came along to investigate. Finding that they could not force the boys to surrender by gunfire, the 'brave' British set fire to the thatched roof, with the result that the lads in the house had no option but to either come out and surrender, or be burned alive. They decided to surrender, and walked out with hands up. The first seven men to come out were shot dead by the Black and Tans. Five others had been killed in the fight. Two were wounded, and six unwounded. These eight were taken prisoners. Two of them, Paddy O'Sullivan and Maurice Moore, were executed on 5th May, 1921, in Cork prison.

Following the tragedy of Clonmult, the column could no longer be said to exist. The loss of men and weapons was a staggering blow. We carried on, however, with a small group of about six or eight, seeking out the enemy and having a crack at him at every available opportunity, without accomplishing anything outstanding.

Ballyedekin Attack on Convoy:

One of the last engagements in which I took part occurred in the townland of Ballyedekin, about three miles from Middleton, on the main Youghal-Middleton road.

For some time previous, experiments in making land mines were being carried out by the battalion without any great success. One of our lads, named T. Hyde from Ballinacurra, told us that he had found some nine-inch shells in fishing boats near his place. These shells had been fired in target practice by the British from

Templebreedy Fort, at the entrance to Cork harbour, and were subsequently picked up in nets by fishing trawlers. The fishermen used them for ballast. It was decided to convert some of these shells into land mines.

A few evenings before the Ballyedekin attack, two of the converted shells were handed over to me, so that they would be handy to the main road if required. On 10th April, 1921, Jack O'Connell, Tom Donovan and I brought one mine across country to the main Middleton-Castlemartyr road where it was intended to use it on a British convoy, expected to pass that way.

Diarmuid Hurley, with Joseph Aherne, Jack O'Connell, Paddy Whelan, myself and about two others waited near a road junction at Ballyedekin. Jack O'Connell and Paddy Whelan had two rifles, and were in positions on high ground, about a hundred yards from where the mine was laid. Joseph Aherne had concealed the mine in a heap of stones at the side of the road. The mine was filled with gelignite and home-made powder, wire extended from it to a battery, about seventy yards away, inside a fence; this battery was worked by a switch. With the exception of Jack O'Connell and Paddy Whelan, the rest of us were in the vicinity of the battery and under cover.

Everything appeared to be in order, when scouts reported two lorries of troops approaching our position from Ballycotton. As the leading lorry approached the mine, Joseph Aherne threw the switch. There was a terrific explosion, and shouts from the soldiers. Both lorries stopped, and then Jack O'Connell and Paddy Whelan opened up on the soldiers with their rifles. The

military climbed out of the lorries and got quickly into the fields, with the result that not only were our two riflemen forced to leave their position and get away, but we found ourselves practically encircled by the troops who had deployed through the fields. As I knew this country very well, I was able to guide our lads to safety through the British cordon, although we had to run the gauntlet of heavy rifle fire, crossing the road.

I cannot say what casualties the British suffered that day, but I am certain they did not get away unscathed. None of our lads was hit.

Death of Diarmuid Hurley:

On 28th May, 1921, only six weeks before the Truce, we lost our gallant leader, Diarmuid Hurley

That evening, he was going alone into Carrigtwohill from Midleton on foot, and when rounding a bend in the road, was seen by an approaching patrol of Black and Tans. He made a dash across a fence and into a field, and was fired at. He was escaping to safety when a chance shot hit him, and he fell mortally wounded. He died before aid could reach him. The Tans did not follow him up, as they were under the impression he had escaped, wounded. His body was taken to a farmhouse, a few miles away, and then interred temporarily in the graveyard at Churchtown. After the Truce, he was re-interred, with other comrades of his, in the Republican Plot at Midleton cemetery.

The loss of Diarmuid Hurley was incalculable. He was a fearless leader and a man who commanded the greatest respect from all in his charge. When he died, his place as commandant was taken over by Joseph Aherne.

From the time Diarmuid Hurley was killed until the Truce of July 1921, there is nothing much of interest to record. We kept going, having an odd crack at the enemy now and again. When news of the Truce came, I was still with my comrades in the neighbourhood of Midleton.

SIGNED:

Ch. Keenan

DATE:

15/5/26.

BUREAU OF MILITARY HISTORY 1913-21
BURO STAIRE M.L. 1913-21
No. W.S. 1418

WITNESS

J. Aherne