

ORIGINAL

BUREAU OF MILITARY HISTORY 1913-21

BURO STAIRE MILEATA 1913-21

No. W.S. 1422

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BUREAU OF MILITARY HISTORY, 1913-21.

STATEMENT BY WITNESS.

DOCUMENT NO. W.S. 1422.

Witness

Thomas Reidy,  
Newtown,  
Bantry,  
Co. Cork.

Identity.

Battalion Intelligence Officer, Bantry Battalion,  
Cork III Brigade, I.R.A.

Brigade Intelligence Officer, Cork V Brigade, I.R.A.

Subject.

Activities of Skibbereen Company, Irish Volunteers,  
1914-1916, and  
Bantry Battalion, Irish Volunteers,  
Cork IV Brigade, 1919-1921.

Conditions, if any, Stipulated by Witness.

Nil.

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No. W.S. 1,422

STATEMENT BY THOMAS REIDY

Newtown, Bantry, Co.Cork.

I was born at Ballydonoghue, Listowel, Co. Kerry, on 3rd March 1888. My parents were farmers. I was educated at Liselton National School until I reached the age of 16 years when I went to serve my time to the hardware business in Matthew O'Connor's, Listowel. Having completed my apprenticeship, I left Listowel and worked in various towns throughout Munster.

I first became interested in national affairs when I joined the Irish Volunteers on their formation in Skibbereen in 1914. The strength of the unit there was about 100. We were drilled by <sup>an</sup> ex-British army men named .... Fallon and Sean Hourihane, <sup>whose brother Peadar</sup> ~~who~~ was a Gaelic League organiser at this time. The O/C. of the unit was .... O'Shea. I cannot recollect his christian name.

When the 1914-18 war broke out in August 1914, the Volunteer organisation in Skibbereen was very strong, but following John Redmond's speech at Woodenbridge, Co. Wicklow, in September 1914, there was a big difference of opinion among the members as to whether Redmond's advice to join the British army to defend the coast of Ireland and fight for the alleged freedom of small nations should be followed. Colonel Maurice Moore and, I think, Captain Talbot-Crosbie addressed a big meeting of Irish Volunteers and the general public in the Square, Skibbereen, about this time. They supported John Redmond's appeal. In order to ascertain the views of the Volunteers, a general meeting of the company (Skibbereen) was held in the Town Hall later in the same week. Some strong views were expressed both for and against the Redmondite policy and, eventually, the members were asked to divide on

the question of supporting the policy advocated by John Redmond or voting against it. When the question was put to a vote, all present with the exception of Tom Horgan, Martin <sup>O'Connell</sup> ~~O'Donovan~~, William O'Shea, Peter O'Donovan, Paddy McCormack and Tom Reidy (witness) supported the Redmondite view. The main body then left the Town Hall and marched around the town, but this was the last official route march by them.

Six of us (Tom Horgan, Martin <sup>O'Connell</sup> ~~O'Donovan~~, Wm. O'Shea, Peter O'Donovan, Paddy McCormack, Tom Reidy) now formed the nucleus of the Irish Volunteer organisation in Skibbereen. We gradually built up our strength by small stages until prior to Easter 1916, we had a membership of about 80. During this period we were mainly engaged on close order foot-drill and route marches. The parades were held sometimes in the Town Hall and generally in the fields in the vicinity of the town. Paddy Carey was O/C. of the unit at this stage, but I cannot recollect the names of the other officers.

On Easter Monday 1916, the company (Skibbereen) assembled on the Castletownsend Road and went on a route march around the district. The number on parade was about 60/80 and amongst them were:- Thomas Horgan, Paddy McCormack, Martin O'Connell, William O'Shea, <sup>Peter</sup> ~~Martin~~ O'Donovan, Denis McCarthy, Paddy Carey, Tom Reidy. During the day we had some target practice with a .22 rifle. We were holding ourselves in readiness to take over some of the arms which were expected to be landed in Tralee Bay, but as there was nothing to report and no further orders were received, we returned to Skibbereen at nightfall. No further orders were received during Easter Week and there were no arrests in the district following the Rising.

The Skibbereen Company still continued to operate as before Easter Week. Weekly parades at which close order

foot-drill was performed were held regularly. These activities continued up to early 1917, when the release of the internees and prisoners led to great demonstrations throughout the country. The political side of the republican movement - Sinn Fein - now engaged the attention of the Volunteers. All Volunteers were engaged, at this time, in organising Sinn Fein clubs in their areas. The majority of these clubs were composed mainly of Irish Volunteers and the members of their families. While engaged in these activities the Volunteers carried on their normal training and used their best endeavours, at all times, to promote a revival of the national spirit amongst the general public. They were the prime movers in the organisation of feiseanna, G.A.A., Gaelic League. Through these organisations they organised functions to raise funds to enable them to carry on the military side of the organisation.

When the British threatened to enforce conscription in the Spring of 1918, there was a big influx of new recruits to the Volunteers. Nearly every man of military age in the area joined up. All arms in the district - mainly shotguns held by farmers - were collected as well as any available ammunition. The general public, the clergy and all public bodies organised an anti-conscription campaign which included the signing of an anti-conscription pledge by individual members of the public. The work of securing these signatures was allotted to the Volunteers. However, the conscription threat passed without very much incident and so did a considerable number of the new recruits who had joined the Volunteers.

I was working late on stocktaking at the premises of my employer (Fuller) in Skibbereen one night in May 1918. When I left the shop about 10 p.m. I was met by Dan McCarthy, a Volunteer and motor-driver, who informed me that the District

Inspector, R.I.C. had ordered a number of cars from Woods' Garage and that he (McCarthy) was to act as driver of one of them. I immediately contacted the officers of the Skibbereen Company and informed them of the position. Arrangements were immediately made to send messengers to all men in the area who were likely to be arrested. With Seumas O'Brien I went to Castletownsend and a round by the coast road to Tragumna to notify Paddy O'Sullivan and Bernie O'Driscoll. We travelled by cycle. As we reached the gateway leading to O'Driscoll's we were held up by a number of R.I.C. men and removed on a lorry with a military escort to Skibbereen R.I.C. Barracks. We were removed next day to Cork Prison where I was detained for about two months. I was then released and returned to Skibbereen. I was not, however, re-engaged by my employers (Fuller) who were all imperialists. I then spent about a month or so moving around the area in an organising capacity, after which I came to Bantry where I found employment with Messrs. Murphy & O'Connor, Ltd., Builders Providers, where I am still employed. I should have mentioned that, during the latter portion of my stay in Skibbereen, Ernest Blythe was working there as editor of the "Southern Star" and, at the same time, actively engaged as a Volunteer organiser.

Immediately after coming to Bantry, I joined the I.R.B. I was sworn in by Ted O'Sullivan who, at the time, was O/C. Bantry Battalion, Irish Volunteers. I was then appointed battalion intelligence officer. There were ten companies in the battalion at this time, viz: Bantry, Glengarriff, Durrus, Kealkil, Comhola, Drimoleague, Caheragh, Droum Sullivan, Pearson's Bridge, Kilcrohane. The officers of the battalion were:- O/C. Ted O'Sullivan; Vice O/C. Moss Donegan; Adjutant Sean Cotter; Q.M. Sonny Sullivan.

I immediately set about organising an intelligence service throughout the battalion. Intelligence officers were appointed in each company area with instructions to report at weekly intervals on the movements of R.I.C. and military patrols in their areas. This work kept me occupied up to the end of the year.

In January 1919, Cork Brigade was divided into three brigades. Bantry Battalion now became a unit of Cork III Brigade. The other battalions in this new brigade were: - Bandon, Clonakilty, Dunmanway, Schull, Skibbereen, Castletownbere. The first officers of Cork III Brigade were, I think:- O/C. Tom Hales; Vice O/C. (cannot recollect); Adjutant Liam Deasy; Q.M. Pat Harte.

Beyond organising and training there was nothing much doing in the area in 1919. However, towards the end of the year (17th November 1919) the members of Bantry Company in co-operation with some officers of the battalion carried out a very successful raid for arms on a British M.L. boat in the harbour. The raid resulted in the capture of 10 rifles, 10 revolvers, some Verrey light pistols and a good supply of ammunition. Mossie Donegan was in charge of this operation. Others who took part were:- Ralph Keyes, Sean Cotter, Michael O'Callaghan. The boat was tied up at the pier beside the railway station. It was boarded by Mossie Donegan, Ralph Keyes, Michael O'Callaghan and Sean Cotter. They held up the members of the crew who were on board and then signalled the remainder of the raiding party to the number of six to come aboard. They had been standing near the railway station awaiting the signal from the boarding party. Two men then held up the crew below decks while the others broke open the armoury and removed the guns and ammunition which were taken by a roundabout route

to the Catholic Church where they were dumped in the belfry. It had been intended to dump them above the ceiling in the local school, but the ladder available was not long enough to enable the I.R.A. party to get to the ceiling, so they had to utilise the church belfry.

My first contact with military intelligence, as far as the British were concerned, occurred when a cycle patrol of British military arrived in Bantry early in 1920. They were billeted in a store owned by my employers (Messrs. Murphy & O'Connor, Ltd.) In this connection, I should mention that, following their arrival, a telegram arrived from Wm. Martin Murphy, Chairman of Independent Newspapers, Ltd. and owner of the firm by which I was employed, to say that every facility should be afforded to the military party. As this party was billeted on my employers' premises, I was on constant touch with the commanding officer and other members of the unit and managed to establish very friendly relations with them. However, they remained for only a few weeks and were then withdrawn.

About this time, R.I.C. and military messages being transmitted through the Post Office were sent in code. The Brigade I.O. (Sean Buckley, Bandon) supplied me with a copy of the key to this code so that messages could be deciphered. At the time I had an arrangement with ~~two~~ <sup>three</sup> members of the staff at Bantry Post Office (Jim O'Sullivan and Patrick J. Lynch <sup>and Sean Buckley</sup>) whereby copies of all messages for military or R.I.C. were sent to me by messenger before they were dispatched to the addressees. This information was, in most cases, sent to me at least 30 minutes before it was transmitted through official channels to the appropriate addressee. This interval of 30 minutes enabled me to transmit necessary instructions to I.R.A. personnel affected by the messages, or to communicate the details of the message to my superior officers, if

considered necessary. This arrangement continued throughout the whole period to the Truce in July 1921, and I do not recollect a single occasion on which we were not aware of enemy plans when they used the normal means of communication.

The code word used by the enemy was usually changed at monthly intervals in the early stages. Later, it was changed every two weeks. At this stage, I managed to break the enemy code on my own without the assistance of the key. I succeeded in doing so, due to the fact that I was aware that, on each Friday, the enemy telegraphed their H.Q. in code to say "Returns going by next mail". If the copy of this message, which was transmitted to me by my men in the Post Office, could <sup>Not</sup> be broken by the code key in use, I then worked out the new code from this regular message. This discovery enabled me to decode messages without a break. I recollect that one of the first messages broken by me under these circumstances related to a message sent to R.I.C. H.Q., Bantry, to indicate that two R.I.C. men had been shot outside Listowel. This proved that my solution of the code had been correct.

A strong force of military was landed at Bantry on 17th May 1920. They were members of the King's Liverpool Regiment and were billeted in Bantry Workhouse. A few days after their arrival, their O/C. with his officer i/c. Engineers, arrived at my employers' premises to order supplies of timber, cement, glass and other materials. As I was dealing with the sale of the goods I had a long discussion with the officers and became very friendly with them. Later, I established friendly contact with the members of the engineering section, who came to collect supplies. After a short time I had made several contacts who were prepared to supply me with rifle and revolver ammunition in small quantities, as well as information regarding enemy troop movements in the area. On several



occasions, supplies of .303 ammunition were delivered to my employers' yard in returned cement sacks transported in mule drawn carts escorted by armed guards of British military.

When Durrus R.I.C. barracks was attacked at the end of March 1920, the bombs used in the operation were made from connections used to join 3" rain water pipes. The pieces of piping were closed at both ends with pieces of wood held in position by a bolt passing through the centre of the connection. These home-made bombs were filled with scrap metal and charged with gelignite in which a detonator and fuse were fixed. The fuse protruded through a hole in the wooden piece at one end. The bombs were found to be very effective on this occasion.

As Battalion I.O. I did not take any part in political or I.R.A. activities of a public nature. In the circumstances I had not any connection with the activities in connection with the election of members of local authorities in the summer of 1920. However, towards the end of the summer of 1920, I attended training camps which were held at Kealkil and near Ballydehob. Tom Barry was O/C. of the camps which were attended by representatives from all battalions in the brigade. All attending these camps were put through an intensive course of training, drill, lectures on tactics, selection of ambush sites, musketry practice. Each camp was carried on for about one week.

At this stage, all units of the I.R.A. were becoming more active. Intelligence officers were operating in every company area, and weekly reports on enemy activities, movements strengths and such were furnished to Battalion H.Q. each week, and at shorter intervals if the importance of enemy activities demanded. These reports were co-ordinated at Battalion H.Q. and a composite report was sent to Brigade H.Q.

When reporting on the movement of enemy patrols or convoys the I.O. reported on the strength, mode of transport (cycle, lorry, on foot), roads traversed, time observed, how armed.

In the spring of 1921, I was staying in the same 'digs' as the local District Inspector, R.I.C. (O'Regan). He was in charge of all R.I.C. forces in Bantry. I remember on one occasion decoding a message received from my Post Office agents (Jim O'Sullivan and Patk. J. Lynch) in which the D.I. was instructed to proceed to Drinagh to arrest Sam Kingston, O/C. Drinagh Company. The message also said that Kingston had been under observation all day and was at home. I immediately sent a messenger to inform Kingston of the proposed raid. When I came back to the "digs" for tea, I observed a number of lorries of troops and R.I.C. parked across the street. It was obvious that they were waiting for D.I. O'Regan. When I entered the "digs" I met O'Regan and began to chat with him. I managed to keep him in conversation for about 30 minutes. He then realised that the convoy was waiting for him and he dashed away. When I met him next morning, he told me that he had been out raiding for Sam Kingston but that he (Kingston) was not at home.

After the Auxiliaries had begun to take unofficial reprisals by burning houses in the area, I was instructed by the Brigade I.O. (Sean Buckley) to get the home addresses of the members of this force stationed in my battalion area. With the co-operation of my men in the Post Office, who passed letters addressed to individual members of this force to me before delivery, I was enabled to obtain the information. This information was required as it was proposed to carry out counter-reprisals in England by destroying the homes of the Auxiliaries who were operating here.

Just prior to the Truce on July 11th 1921, arrangements had been made to reorganise Cork III Brigade and to divide it into two brigades - Cork III and Cork V. The western end of the brigade was to form the new Cork V Brigade and was to embrace the following battalions:- Schull (1st); Skibbereen (2nd); Drimoleague (3rd); - this was a new battalion - Bantry (4th); Castletownbere (5th). This arrangement did not come into operation until shortly after the Truce. The first officers of Cork V Brigade were:-

O/C.	Gibbs Ross
V.O/C.	Ted O'Sullivan
Adjt.	Mick Crowley
Q.M.	Michael O'Callaghan
I.O.S	Tom Reidy (witness)
Engineer	James Costigan
Supplies	Murt O'Sullivan
Transport	"Miah" Wholihan
Signals	James Kenefick

The officers of the Bantry Battalion were:

1918 - July 1920	O/C	Ted O'Sullivan (to brigade as V/C. July 1920).
	V.O/C.	Mossy Donegan
	Adjt.	Sean Cotter
	Q.M.	Sonny Sullivan
	I.O.	Tom Reidy (witness).
July 1920-Nov. 1920	O/C.	Moss Donegan (arrested)
	V.O/C.	Tom Ward
	Adjt.	Sean Cotter (arrested)
	Q.M.	John J. O'Sullivan
	I.O.	Tom Reidy (witness).
Dec.1920 - July '21.	O/C.	Tom Ward
	V.O/C.	Denis Keohane
	Adjt.	Michael Harrington
	Q.M.	John J. O'Sullivan
	I.O.	Tom Reidy (witness).

My rank at the Truce was: I.O. Bantry Battalion,  
Cork III Brigade.

The strength of the battalion was about 600.

Signed: Thomas Reidy

Date: 18<sup>th</sup> May 1958

Witness: P. O'Connell

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