

ORIGINAL

BUREAU OF MILITARY HISTORY 1913-21

BURO STAIRÉ MILÉATA 1913-21

No. W.S. 1.436

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BUREAU OF MILITARY HISTORY, 1913-21.

STATEMENT BY WITNESS.

DOCUMENT NO. W.S. 1436.

Witness

Walter Brown,
Ashgrove,
Oldtown,
Co. Dublin.

Identity.

Officer Commanding, 4th Battalion, Fingal Brigade,
I.R.A.

Subject.

Activities of Fingal Brigade, 1918-1921.

Conditions, if any, Stipulated by Witness.

Nil.

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STATEMENT BY MR. WALTER BROWN,
Ashgrove, Oldtown, Co. Dublin.

I was born and reared where I now live, and educated at the local national school. There was nothing of importance amongst the subjects taught in school then that would develop any pupil's patriotic sense. My great grandfather's uncle was killed at the battle of Tara during the insurrection of 1798, and this tradition descended down through our family to my time. As children, our parents taught us to dislike everything English and, particularly, the police force, the Royal Irish Constabulary, who were looked upon as the main means by which the English kept this country in subjection.

Prior to 1916 rebellion, there was no Irish Volunteer organisation in this area. There had been companies of the original Irish Volunteers in Oldtown and Garristown, but when the split took place in that organisation, they took the Redmond side and became the Irish National Volunteers. They did not survive long after this, and faded out of existence.

In May 1918, a company of the Irish Volunteers was started in Oldtown, and I joined this company. James Bride was instrumental in starting this company, and was its first captain. The membership was very small - only about nine men - and no arms of any type. Michael Lynch of Dublin, who had taken part in the

1916 Rising in the city, used to come down from the city and instruct us in drill and other subjects. Lynch later became brigade O/C when the Fingal area became a brigade organisation. Archie Heron also used to visit us and help us along. Thomas Wilson and I were detailed to attend engineering classes which were held at Lusk in the evenings. These classes were conducted by the late Noel Lemass.

In October 1918, I started a company in the Garristown area, and succeeded in getting twelve men to join. Again, we had no arms of any nature. I did the instruction, imparting what I had learned with the Oldtown company and by studying British army manuals. A brigade organisation had now come into being in the area, and our company was known as E. company, 2nd battalion. I was captain of the company. The officer commanding the battalion was Bernard McAllister; Edward (Ned) Rooney was vice o/C of the battalion. Fred Murphy was battalion adjutant, and Bill Dempsey was battalion quartermaster. The companies comprising the battalion were Rush, Lusk, Donabate, Oldtown and Garristown. In Lusk, the company captain was Sean Devine. In Rush, a man named Archbold, was captain, and in Donabate, a man named Kelly who was one of four brothers. The captain of Oldtown company was still James Bride, and of Garristown, myself.

A battalion council or committee, comprising the company captains and battalion staff was inaugurated and met regularly once per month. Business at such meetings was then purely routine, and covered training, recruiting of new members and so forth. Each captain reported on incidents in his company area, and on

progress made.

At the end of 1918, a general election was held throughout the country, and all the Volunteers were busily engaged in canvassing voters, collecting funds and so forth. They attended meetings and afforded protection to Sinn Féin speakers from the Nationalist element who were still very strong in the area. The R.I.C. attended such meetings, and were openly hostile to Sinn Féin, but sympathetic to the Redmond side. The Sinn Féin organisation was pretty well organised in the area by now, and generally our Volunteers were members of Sinn Féin also. The election was really the responsibility of the Sinn Féin organisation, but most of the work was carried out by the Volunteers. On polling day, the Volunteers were on duty at the various polling stations, to ensure that their supporters were allowed to record their votes without interference. When the ballot boxes were being conveyed to Balbriggan to be lodged in the town hall prior to counting, the Volunteers provided an escort which accompanied the boxes to Balbriggan. The boxes were conveyed by horse and car, and the Volunteers were on bicycles. The R.I.C. also provided an escort, and both forces mounted a guard on the boxes that night, but there was no clash between them. Frank Lawless of Saucerstown, Swords, who had been with Tom Ashe in 1916, was the Sinn Féin candidate, and he won the election for North Dublin by a large majority. Personation was rife on behalf of Sinn Féin.

Early in 1919, the first Dáil met, and one of its first acts was to float a national loan. The Volunteers were instrumental in making this a big success, and collected a large amount of money for it. It was

really wonderful the way the people subscribed and handed over money which, I am sure, they had no expectation of ever seeing again. My brother, who had returned from America some time previously, did an amount of collecting for this loan. Frank Lawless, T.D., took charge of all the money collected in the area, for the Minister of Finance. The Dáil now took over responsibility for the Volunteers as the army of the Irish Republic, and each officer and man was required to subscribe to an oath of allegiance to the Dáil as the government of the Republic. All our officers and men subscribed to this oath. The company strength had increased to about thirty by now, as the elections had given the Volunteers a bit of a fillip. The battalion and brigade organisation remained the same, and the arms position was still in the same bad state - there ^{WERE} ~~was~~ none.

The year 1919 and most of 1920 went on peacefully. Training and parades were the principal activities. All our parades were held in secret. The R.I.C. held their stations still at Garristown, but they did not interfere with us, or make any serious effort to track us down. Towards the end of 1919 and early 1920, the police began to evacuate their small outlying forces and concentrate them in the bigger stations in the towns. This took place consequent on a number of the smaller barracks having been attacked and, in some cases, captured throughout the country. The force was also getting badly depleted in strength consequent upon resignations and retirements, and recruits were not forthcoming to fill the vacancies as heretofore. Under these circumstances, they realised that they could not hold on to their small outlying stations. The withdrawal of the police force from all

these small posts was the first apparent crack in the armour of the British government. It was the first time that the British forces in Ireland had to pull in their horns, and was a great blow to the dignity of the government. It was also a severe reverse to the British government in another way. The R.I.C. were the eyes and ears of Dublin Castle which was the ruling authority in the country, and everyone recognised they were the weapon by which the British government kept a close hold on this country. Now, that weapon was almost neutralised.

The withdrawal of the R.I.C. from their small posts was a boon to the Volunteers, as it gave them almost complete freedom of movement in the country districts, but it also had a less favourable side. Unruly elements and certain evilly disposed persons, who are always ready to take advantage of any situation favourable to themselves, now began to operate when they found the country-side without a regular police force. Volunteer headquarters decided that this would have to stop, and issued orders to that effect. The Volunteers began policing the country-side. The people soon co-operated with them - more than they ever did with the R.I.C. - and very quickly the situation was under control. Although the Volunteers generally could only devote their spare time to this work, and as such, it was a severe job, it was good for them. It gave them work to do and was a decided change from the monotony of parading and drilling and helped to build up an esprit de corps. They were proud of their work, and the people gained confidence in them. British and pro-British elements had always declared that Irishmen were not capable of governing themselves or of keeping law and order. The people

were led to believe that, if the British forces, including the R.I.C., were withdrawn, the people would get drunk and kill one another. The Volunteers gave the lie completely to this illusion. In fact, never before had there been such a feeling of security in the countryside.

In this area, Garristown and Lusk R.I.C. barracks were evacuated in our battalion area. Shortly before Easter Sunday 1920, a brigade council meeting was held to discuss plans for the destruction of the vacated barracks in the Fingal area, as orders had been received from G.H.Q. that all such barracks were to be destroyed on Easter Saturday night. At this meeting, it was decided that Garristown could not be destroyed, as it was a house in the centre of a terrace of houses, and this would mean the destruction of the whole terrace. Likewise, it was decided that Lusk could not be burned either, so there was no demolition jobs to be done in our area. It did not seem sensible to destroy such places as these barracks as, if the police wanted to return, they would commandeer an equally suitable house in any district. When this ^{POINT} ~~plan~~ was raised, we were informed that it was the propaganda effect that was essential. It was important that Americans should read in their papers how some hundreds of police barracks were destroyed throughout the country, at the same hour on a particular night, and to demonstrate that the country had an army or force which could act in unison under a single directorate. It was really enlightening to read in our own daily press of the destruction throughout the whole country of hundreds of former enemy posts. It was a great act of defiance thrown at the enemy.

The Sinn Féin organisation had by now set up a

system of courts to administer justice, and the people were taking their disputes and troubles to these courts and abiding loyally by their decisions. Local men of standing acted as judges. They were more in the nature of arbitration courts than law courts, and common sense more than law was their guide. At first, such courts were held publicly, but when the British government tried to suppress them, they were held in secret. The police never succeeded in capturing any of the courts which were well guarded by Volunteers, by means of outposts and scouts to give warning of enemy approach.

Some time in the summer of 1920, the brigade planned to ambush a military patrol at Lissenhall, near Swords. The British military had established an outpost at Swords in a big house there, and sent out patrols on lorries or tenders from there. James McLoughlin and I - from the Garristown company - went to the mobilisation centre for this attack. We had no arms as yet in the company, and had to borrow shotguns and cartridges from local farmers to arm ourselves. The attempt came to naught and had to be abandoned. Bernard McAllister, the battalion O/C, and James Derham were caught on the road while carrying rifles on their way to the mobilisation centre. Both men were arrested. The military at Swords now realised that something was afoot, and they sent out motorised patrols on all the roads ^{AND} ~~who~~ scoured the countryside around. It was only with the greatest difficulty that we succeeded in avoiding them, in our efforts to get back to our own areas. Other than McAllister and Derham, everyone succeeded in getting away.

Some time during that summer also, an attempt was made to capture Rush R.I.C. barracks. McLoughlin, who

was the 1st lieutenant of Garristown company, and I were mobilised for this affair. We were engaged around the Ballyboughal area, blocking the roads there. We met no opposition in that area. The attack on Rush barracks took place alright but, for some reason which I do not exactly know, our Volunteers failed to capture it.

In the autumn of 1920, our general headquarters ordered a general raid for arms. I understand that the British were about to collect or take up all the shotguns and other weapons in the country, and the Volunteers were ordered to forestall this move, by collecting them themselves. We visited every house in our area where it was known that there were guns or other weapons. We collected an amount of shotguns and cartridges, and a few .22 sporting rifles. No service weapons - either rifles or revolvers - were obtained. In nearly all cases, it was only a matter of asking for the weapons and they were handed up, and in cases where a reluctance to do so was encountered, a display of force and determination convinced the owners that it was wiser to hand them up. There were no shooting incidents during this operation. Each of our members was given a gun or two, and held responsible for their proper care and maintenance.

By the winter of 1920, things were beginning to get very hot. The Black and Tans and auxiliary police had arrived in the country. The Tans established a depot or headquarters at Gormanston aerodrome, just north of Balbriggan, and some thousands of them were stationed there. From there, drafts were sent out to reinforce the R.I.C. garrisons remaining throughout the country. The Tans were a motley lot. Although this force was supposed to be

reinforcements for the existing R.I.C., they looked like anything but policemen. They were generally given to drunkenness, badly dressed and badly disciplined, but well armed with rifles, revolvers, hand grenades and machine guns. They were really mercenary soldiers, organised to terrorise the Irish people. They drove around the countryside in tenders, and made it increasingly hard for us to get around. Their motor lorries or tenders were very silent, and one could never tell when they would pop on one, when one used the roads. If one were unfortunate enough to fall into their hands, the least one could expect to get away with was a kicking and bad beating. Hold-ups, searches and raids on houses by this force became a daily and nightly occurrence, and, for safety and to avoid being arrested, all the active Volunteers did not stay in their homes at night. We slept in various places, mostly in sheds and suchlike. We kept a watching post on the Hill of Garristown at night. This hill is very elevated and from it one could see the lights of tenders or cars for a large distance around, as they travelled along the roads.

In order to hamper the movements of the enemy forces, resort was had to blocking roads by cutting trenches across them and felling trees across them. Enemy communications were also interrupted by cutting telephone and telegraph wires. The main Dublin road was trenched at Ballough and at Lissenhall, but this interruption to the enemy was only temporary, as they commandeered the local people and made them fill in the trenches again.

The strength of our company had increased somewhat, but it was generally only a paper strength, as the number of Volunteers who were really active was very small. We still had no arms except the shotguns which were obtained

in the general raid for arms and which were absolutely useless for guerilla warfare because of their short range in our flat open countryside, with big fields and a honeycomb of roads. Michael Lynch was still the brigade O/C, but I did not know any of the other officers of the brigade staff as I had no occasion to meet them. I only met the battalion staff. When McAllister was arrested, Jack Shields was appointed battalion O/C.

About March 1921, a division was organised, and the Fingal brigade was incorporated into this, which was known as the 1st Eastern Division. The division included the areas: South Louth, portion of South Cavan, North Kildare, part of Westmeath, including Mullingar, and all County Meath. Portion of South Louth brigade was now transferred to the Fingal area. This comprised the areas of Duleek, Ardcah and Bellewstown. Our battalion was also reorganised, and the companies now forming the battalion were: Oldtown, Garristown, Ardcah, Duleek and a newly formed company in Bellewstown. This was the 4th. battalion, Fingal brigade. The Rush, Lusk and Donabate area was incorporated in the Swords battalion area - the 2nd battalion. Shields was now appointed vice O/C of the brigade, and I was appointed O/C of ours, the 4th battalion. Peter Walsh of Ardcah was my vice O/C. Christopher Brown, my brother, was appointed Adjutant, and Thomas Wilson, battalion quartermaster. The company commanders were:-

- A. Company - Garristown - James McLoughlin.
- B. Company - Ardcah - James Dunne.
- C. Company - Duleek - Nicholas Connell.
- D. Company - Bellewstown - Edward Hamilton.
- E. Company - Oldtown - Joseph Callan.

Shortly after the division was organised, a column or active service unit was started in the brigade.

James McLoughlin, the captain of Garristown company, who was on the run, joined this unit and was a regular member, but a number of us quite often joined them when some operation was intended. Jack Shields was O/C of the column while Paddy Mooney from Trim, Co. Meath, acted as instructor. As well as training the column, men were taken in from the different battalions for short periods and given a course of training. The column was armed with service rifles which I understand were some of the rifles obtained from an earlier raid on Collinstown aerodrome.

I was with the column when they burned the remount depot at Lusk. This was a place where horses were broken and trained, for remounts for the cavalry regiments. There was always a big number of horses there. There was no military or other guard on the place, and the employees were all civilians. The manager was an ex Major of the British army. The column that night was under the command of the brigade O/C, Michael Lynch. The column was fully armed, with rifles and ammunition, and a number of them also had revolvers. We travelled across country from Mooretown, near Oldtown, where the column was billeted to Lusk. We had no trouble in getting into the depot and, having cut the telephone wires and made prisoners temporarily of the employees present, including the manager, we turned the horses loose into the paddocks or fields, and then proceeded to burn the place. The whole place, including the stables and stores and other buildings, was then liberally sprayed with paraffin oil which had been dumped close by, by the local Volunteers, and the place was then set alight at several different points. The place was completely burned out. A few of the horses had to be shot as they could not be got out

of the stables. We met no resistance of any nature, and got back to Mooretown without trouble.

At a later period, the column burned all the coastguard stations along the North County Dublin coast, but none of our battalion took part in this operation. I was again with the column on a couple of occasions when it made efforts to stage an ambush on the main Dublin-Belfast road. We had no luck, however, in these attempts as no enemy ever showed up. We could not stay too long in the positions because, once the element of surprise was not with us, the situation, in case we had to fight a retreating action, would be very precarious owing to the flat open nature of the country and the great net work of roads available to the enemy. We also tried to ambush a party of Tans at Furry Hill who usually passed that way on a certain day each week. This time, they travelled on a different road and our effort was again frustrated.

When the Truce came, our battalion had still no proper arms - only a few shotguns. The only attempt we could make at making munitions locally was the casting of slugs for refilling into shotgun cartridges, and quite a lot of this was done. As the guns and cartridges could not be kept in houses now, they had to be stored out-of-doors, and despite the care given to them, the cartridges got damp and deteriorated. The light cardboard or paper, from which the cartridge cases were made, got damp and became swollen, and it was almost impossible to get them into the chambers of the guns. Once in it, it was utterly impossible to extract them without a ramrod of some sort.

We also tried to make bombs. Those were made from lengths of metal piping, and filled with a home-made

explosive, known to us as war flour. Each bomb was fitted with a length of fuse which had to be lighted before being thrown. Such bombs were really not effective, and, when they did explode, gave a very poor shrapnel effect. We had a few genuine grenades of the Mills and G.H.Q. type. We did not make any road mines.

Communication within the battalion and with the brigade was maintained by despatch riders on cycle, or on foot. The brigade headquarters was with the column when that unit was established. James Crennigan was the brigade adjutant, and Vincent Purfield, the brigade quartermaster. Thomas Peppard was the brigade intelligence officer. Quite a large amount of despatches for G.H.Q. were handled by our men, as this was the line of communication for the Louth brigades and other units up north.

There were no spies executed in our area, and we had nothing to indicate that there was any such person operating there. Of course, there were a few people under suspicion, but nothing definite was ever found out that would prove their guilt and, after all, there were very few arrests in our area. The enemy seemed to be working by rule of thumb only. We regularly raided the mails, looking for information of this nature, but never discovered anything of any importance. Once, we found a cheque from Dublin Castle for a man in Ardcath, but, on investigation of the matter, it was proved that the man was an employee of the British authorities and was otherwise harmless.

Intelligence sections were organised within the battalion and companies, but as there were no garrisons of military or police except in Duleek in our battalion area, they had not much scope for activities in this respect. They were useful for keeping watch on individual residents

whom we were suspicious of. The people in the post office in Duleek and Garristown were working for us wholeheartedly, and when their suspicions were aroused by some letter passing through, they would hold it for us. We would check on it, and then repost it.

I joined the I.R.B. at the time I was appointed battalion O/C - about March 1918. It was Thomas Kelly of Lusk who took me in, and administered the oath of the organisation to me. Later, we formed a circle in Garristown. Thomas Wilson and my brother, Christopher, James and Jack Bride and Tom Battersby were our members. We met regularly once per month. We paid a small subscription towards a fund for expenses. Nothing of a concrete nature ever took place at these meetings. A discussion of current events was usually all that happened. It is hard to understand the object of the organisation at that time except that headquarters wanted to have a number of keymen and a majority on each battalion and brigade council and, through them, to have a certain hard control on the Volunteers.

SIGNED: Walter Browne

DATE: 18th June 1956

WITNESS *Walter Browne* COMMDT.

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