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ORIGINAL

BUREAU OF MILITARY HISTORY 1913-21

BURO STAIRE MILEATA 1913-21

No. W.S. 1460

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BUREAU OF MILITARY HISTORY, 1913-21

STATEMENT BY WITNESS.

DOCUMENT NO. W.S. 1460.

Witness

Cornelius Kearney,
No. 1, Cambridge Terrace,
Ranelagh,
Dublin.

Identity.

Commandant, 4th Battalion, East Limerick Brigade.
A member of the East Limerick Flying Column.

Subject.

Activities of Martinstown Company, 4th Battalion,
East Limerick Brigade, Irish Volunteers, and
Brigade Flying Column, 1918-11th July, 1921.

Conditions, if any, Stipulated by Witness.

Nil.

File No .. S. 1971. ...

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STATEMENT BY CORNELIUS KEARNEY,

No. 1 Cambridge Terrace, Ranelagh, Dublin.

(Formerly O/C, 4th (Killmallock) Battalion,
East Limerick Brigade. and
a member of the East Limerick Flying Column.)

I am a native of Tiermore, Kilmallock, where I was born on a holding of about thirty acres of land which my people farmed for generations. I received my education at Martinstown national school and at the Presentation College, Cork, which I left when I was sixteen years of age, and then came back home to assist on the farm.

Some time during the year 1914 when a company of Irish Volunteers was formed in Ballinamina, I became a member. There were about twenty-five men in this company, the captain of which was Ned Hayes. All, or nearly all the unit supported the section of the Irish Volunteer Executive, led by Professor John McNeill at the time of the Redmondite split, and during the Easter Week Rising in 1916 were available for action if orders to partake in the Rising had been received by the company captain. The company did not mobilise then because of the notice which appeared on the "Sunday Independent" over the signature of John McNeill in the Easter Sunday issue of that paper. The only arms at the disposal of the company were about half a dozen shotguns which belonged to the members or their relatives.

After the Rising in 1916, the company went out of existence, and it was not until the conscription threat in the spring of 1918 that the Irish Volunteers were again revived in the district. On my own suggestion, a new company was formed in Martinstown, of which I was elected

captain, Tom Regan, 1st lieutenant, Andy Sullivan, adjutant, and Pat Corkery, quartermaster. This company was about thirty strong and met once or twice a week for drill. Like the rest of the country, each man in our unit provided himself with a pike to meet the conscription menace. The pikes were made by a farrier named Ned Tobin, Glenbrohane, Kilfinane, whose brother, Dave, was later killed on New Year's Day 1921 in an engagement with the Crown forces. These pikes were never used afterwards.

When the conscription threat abated, our company in Martinstown was not affected by the loss of members. Drilling continued regularly, but otherwise the district was quiet and remained so until the commencement of 1920. I think it was early in that year that, on orders from headquarters, all the shotguns - about a dozen, - held by people in the company area were collected by us. By then also we had acquired a parabellum automatic pistol and some ammunition for it. I can't recall how this gun was procured, but I believe it was Paddy Carney, a creamery manager, who got it.

In April 1920, I became involved in my first armed conflict with the British forces - the attack on Ballylanders R.I.C. barracks. I regret that I am rather hazy about a good many of the details of this operation, and, on this account, I'm recording only such facts as I feel sure of.

The Ballylanders barracks was a two-storied stone building held by a sergeant & five constables. Word of the attack was sent to me by Tim Crowley, Ballylanders. Seven or eight men from the Martinstown company took part in the operation, and of these I can only recall the

names of Michael Cleary and Tom Regan; Ned Tobin, the farrier who made the pikes at the time of the conscription threat, was also with us.

We reported to Crowley on the outskirts of Ballylanders at about ten o'clock at night, and I think we were all posted in the same house which was situated about twenty-five yards from the front of the barracks and somewhat on the Kilfinane or western side of it. All the men from Martinstown carried shotguns, and we were posted at windows, in pairs.

The attack began between half past ten and eleven o'clock. Our shooting was aimed at the barrack windows, and was staggered and desultory. During the course of an hour, or not much more, while the attack lasted, I fired about a dozen shots. The police surrendered, through the barracks having been set on fire by a section of the Volunteers who broke a hole on the roof and then threw petrol, followed by bombs through the hole. The garrison had sustained no casualties and handed over five or six carbines, a few revolvers, some grenades and a quantity of ammunition.

I forgot to mention earlier that we had come from Martinstown to Ballylanders on bikes, and as soon as the seizure of the police equipment was completed, Michael Cleary and myself cycled home together without seeing any trace of a policeman or soldier on the way, a distance of eight or nine miles.

There was a great deal of police and military activity after the capture of Ballylanders R.I.C. station, but apparently the authorities had no idea that anybody

from around Martinstown was connected with it, since there were no arrests or even interrogations in the district.

In the following month - towards the end of it - another barrack attack, and probably the biggest of its kind during the Black and Tan war took place in Kilmallock in which the whole of the Martinstown company participated. This was a strongly fortified position occupied by about twenty policemen. It was steel-shuttered at the windows, walls were loopholed at a number of points, and at the front and rear heavy barbed wire entanglements made approach to the wall almost impossible. On the front was a small square, and on the left-hand side was a shop owned by people called Carroll. The roof of Carroll's house was somewhat higher than that of the barracks, and was separated from it by a distance of four or five feet.

The orders which I received prior to this attack required me to block all roads in the company area and to send four men to participate in the actual engagement itself. Having decided on the points at which the road blocks were to be placed, I left the execution of this in the hands of the company quartermaster, Pat Corkery. I took Michael Cleary, Tom Regan and Andy Sullivan with me into Kilmallock. Each of these men carried a shotgun while I had the parabellum automatic. We met the rest of the attacking party in a field near the town, and there we were divided into a number of groups. Each group was instructed as to the part it was to take in the fighting.

Michael Cleary and myself, along with ten or

twelve others, mostly from Ballylanders and Cush, were in the group which, under Tom Malone, alias Sean Forde, were to take over possession of Carroll's house. This house was unoccupied at the time we entered it by the back way, probably eleven o'clock at night. There was a quantity of petrol and paraffin in the kitchen at the time we got into the place. All the guns and ammunition, which we carried as well as matches, were taken from us as a precaution, I presume, against setting the place on fire.

In Carroll's kitchen, Malone allocated men for different jobs. My comrade, Michael Cleary, and Pat Hannigan were among those who were ordered to work on the roof. I was given the job of filling bottles and cans with petrol and paraffin in the kitchen and then handing them to others on the stairway who were to pass them on to a relay of men extended up the stairs to the roof. Cleary, who was a low sized, stoutly built man and a good all-round athlete, especially at the weights, was given a heavy weight - I think it was twenty-eight lbs. - to which there was a coil of stout rope attached. With this cumbersome equipment and from a very precarious position on the corner of the roof of Carroll's house, he was required a break a hole in the roof of the barracks. It meant that he had to throw the weight across the gap between Carroll's and the barracks, then haul it back and keep on repeating the movement until the breach in the roof was completed.

Between half past eleven and midnight, as soon as the men on the roof of Carroll's started their work, fire was opened on the barracks by the other groups of our men who occupied positions in houses in front of the barracks.

I do not know anything regarding the details of what took place outside of Carroll's house, and even there a lot happened which I did not see.

Quite a lot of petrol and paraffin had gone upstairs before we heard that the barracks on on fire, but the next thing which stands out in my memory was the fact that the building which we occupied was on fire itself. This was put out by throwing buckets of water on the flames, work at which myself and the others in the kitchen had to spend the best part of an hour. Between the smoke, the heat and the rush, it was a most exhausting experience. Anyway, we managed to save Carroll's house, and then the job of throwing more oil and bombs into the barracks was resumed.

Some time later, an incident took place which I recall very distinctly. Paddy Hannigan called down from the roof for some water to drink, complaining that he was parched with the thirst. A container of water was promptly despatched up to him. At the same time, other containers, filled with oil, were being passed along to him. On the way, the water became confused with the oil, and from the vessel which was handed to Hannigan as water, he took a big gulp. He had drunk paraffin oil. The curses and abuse which he showered on us down below could be heard above all the din of the shooting and explosions, but, to make matters worse, he fixed the blame on me and threatened, amongst other things, to "blow my brains out". However, he became so violently ill that, by the time he was brought down to the kitchen, he was in no mood to carry out his threat.

As dawn approached, the barracks was well aflame,

and it looked as if the garrison would soon have to surrender, but the policemen, especially the sergeant, were made of stern stuff. They were still undefeated at about six o'clock in the morning though, at that time, only a small part of the building was not enveloped in flames. The order to retire was given around that hour, and myself and my comrades from Martinstown were four tired men by the time we reached home, after walking back from Kilmallock.

The police sergeant in charge there was a man named Sullivan, and, for his part in this attack, was highly praised by his own authorities. He got rapid promotion and was a district inspector serving in Listowel, Co. Kerry, when he was shot dead. There was one fatal casualty on our side, Liam Scully, a native of Glencar, Co. Kerry. Some of the garrison were killed and wounded, but I can't give the figures.

About seven weeks after the Kilmallock operation, I got a despatch from Tim Crowley to come to Lackelly, near Emly, as he had in mind an attack on a patrol of military which he expected to come from Tipperary town to Emly. The scene of the ambush was in Co. Tipperary, but at that particular time a small part of County Tipperary around Emly formed part of the Galtee battalion and East Limerick brigade, and controlled the area at the base of the northern side of the Galtee mountain from Kilmallock on to Tipperary border. I would be inclined to agree with the chronology of the Military History Bureau which fixes the date of this attack as 14th July, 1920.

When I got word from Tim Crowley, I happened to have a service rifle and some ammunition, which Ernie O'Malley,

a G.H.Q. officer, left in my care a few days previously, and took this gun with me to Lackelly. There I met the others who were to take part in the engagement - about eighteen all told - made up of men from Cush, Lackelly and Ballylanders. About half the party had rifles, and the rest carried shotguns. We stayed in Lackelly for the night.

At about ten o'clock next morning, we entered the position selected for the attack, which was behind the northern wall of a by-road connecting Emly with Tipperary town, about a mile from Lackelly itself. The party was extended for a distance of about one hundred and fifty yards of a straight road, and the orders from Crowley, who was in charge of my section, were that the military should be allowed to pass through the ambush position until the leading soldiers were near the end of our position. Crowley himself would then open the firing. He was at the end of the position nearest to Emly.

The soldiers who were on foot numbered about fifteen, and they were in extended order, about five or six paces apart. They came along from Tipperary town about noon. Everything went according to plan, and when Crowley fired, we all opened up. At the end of five minutes, half of the soldiers had surrendered. The remainder got into the fields on the other side of the road, and kept on fighting for nearly half an hour. Then it was noticed they had ceased firing. They were moving off through the fields and tried to sneak away unseen. We started an encircling movement which, because of the nature of the terrain, was difficult to evacuate. The fields were small and were bounded by deep drains and white-thorn fences. Gradually, however, the soldiers

were overcome, one by one, but it took about three hours before the last of them was captured.

Though there was a considerable amount of shooting, there was only one casualty, a soldier who was slightly wounded in the palm of the hand. We captured fifteen rifles and a good quantity of ammunition. After dressing the wounded soldier, we released all the prisoners and directed them back to their barracks in Tipperary town.

Following this attack, Crowley formed the attacking party into a flying column, and added to it about six more men, making the total strength of the column, twenty-four or twenty-five. We moved into the Ballylanders district where we were billeted around farmers' houses and where, incidentally, we seemed to be very welcome. During the two months while I was with this column, there was a daily parade and a few hours' training. After that, we helped the farmers who kept us. I often heard it said afterwards that this was the first flying column to be formed by the I.R.A.

About this time, the old Galtee battalion was reorganised and divided into three battalions - 4th, 5th and 6th - in the East Limerick brigade. In this reorganisation I was appointed commandant of the 4th (Killmallock) battalion. It included the old companies of Killmallock, Ballingaddy, Bruree and Martinstown, and the newly formed companies of Bulgaden, Dromin and Rockhill. On being appointed battalion commandant, I ceased to be a member of the flying column.

During the latter half of 1920, I was very busy in trying to perfect the organisation of the battalion and in drilling and training the companies. The East

Limerick flying column frequently came into the battalion area, and it was also part of my duty to see that billets were provided for these men and that protection was given to them at night time by the local company, the members of which acted as scouts and did guard duty.

In February, 1921, after the Dromkeen ambush, I received word from the Brigade O/C that the East Limerick flying column was about to go into the Bruree district, and I was requested by him to arrange to have the column billeted and fed while there. Everything was fixed up satisfactorily, and I stayed in the townland of Tankardstown with the column for the few days they spent there.

When the column moved off, I remained after them with people named Duane with whom I was very friendly. At eight o'clock in the morning following the departure of the column, Duane's house was surrounded by a mixed force of police and soldiers. I was in bed at the time. The raiders searched my clothes. In the breast pocket of my coat they found a despatch which I had received from Liam Hayes, then a member of the brigade staff. I had forgotten all about this communication and was raging with myself for having made such a bad step. I don't remember now what the nature of the despatch was, but in later years Hayes told me that it dealt with the provision of boots for the flying column. At any rate, it led to my arrest and a beating from my captors. I was conveyed by lorry to Limerick jail and, after a trial before a military court during which I remained silent, I was sentenced to four months' imprisonment. I was not transferred to another prison, after having been tried, and on the expiration of the sentence, I was released

just a short period before the Truce.

While in jail, I received political treatment, and on the whole I regarded prison conditions as reasonably good. I had no work to do and received parcels sent to me from home.

On my release, I resumed command of the 4th battalion, but I was not involved in any military activity between that event and the truce.

Owing to the lapse of time, I am hampered in giving details of a lot of other activities of perhaps a minor nature. I really cannot tell now anything concerning road cutting, the erection of road blocks and barricades which kept the different companies in my battalion area occupied at a full time job from about November 1920 until the cessation of hostilities. These activities had mostly to be performed at night and under considerable risk. There were also a number of raids on the mails in which I was involved, but I cannot give details of these raids.

SIGNED:

Kearney

DATE:

14 / 4 / 1956

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NO. W.S. 1,460

WITNESS

D. Griffin