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ORIGINAL

BUREAU OF MILITARY HISTORY 1913-21
BURO STAIRÉ MILEATA 1913-21
No. W.S. 1464

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BUREAU OF MILITARY HISTORY, 1913-21.

STATEMENT BY WITNESS.

DOCUMENT NO. W.S. 1464.

Witness

Con Spain,
Ardnacroise,
Thurles,
Co. Tipperary.

Identity.

Commandant, 1st Battalion, No.1 (North) Tipperary
Brigade.

Subject.

Activities of Kilruane Company, 1st Battalion,
North Tipperary Brigade, Irish Volunteers,
October 1917 - July 11th, 1921, and of North
Tipperary Active Service Unit, 1921.
Conditions, if any, Stipulated by Witness.

Nil.

File No S.2798.

Form B.S.M. 2

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BUREAU OF MILITARY HISTORY 1913-21
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STATEMENT BY CON SPAIN,

Ardnacroise, Thurles, Co. Tipperary,

formerly Commandant, No. 1 Battalion, No. 1 (North) Tipperary Brigade.

I was born on 15th June, 1902, at Rapla, Nenagh, Co. Tipperary. My people were comfortable farmers. Being the eldest of a family of eleven children, my services were needed at home as soon as I was able to work, and on that account I left school when I had reached the age of fifteen years.

I joined the Irish Volunteers in October, 1917, becoming a member of the Nenagh Company, as at that stage no Volunteer company existed in my own district. In February or March, 1918, Ned O'Leary formed a company in Kilruane to which I immediately transferred. About twenty members were enrolled in this unit at the outset, a share of whom, like myself, were men who had already been in the Nenagh Company. The first officers of the Kilruane Company were:

Captain - George Lee
1st Lt. - Martin Spain
2nd Lt. - Michael Maher.

We generally met for drill one evening in each week in one of my father's fields in Lisgarode, the company captain giving the instructions himself. He was a competent drill instructor, having acquired his knowledge through his association with the Irish Volunteers in Dublin City where he had resided for a period.

The country was threatened with conscription by the British Government in the spring of 1918, and our company, acting on orders received from the battalion headquarters in Nenagh, got a pike made for each man for use in the event of an effort being made to enforce compulsory military service in the British Army. The pikeheads were made by the 2nd Lieutenant of the company, who was a farrier by trade, the material used for this purpose being the pins of tumbler rakes. The shafts were got in Ballygibbon wood. No use was ever made of these weapons.

Eight men out of our company in Kilruane went to the Waterford by-election in 1918 to help in the preservation of law and order in that city during the campaign. It was an extremely bitter contest, the supporters of the Redmondite party, particularly the Ballybricken pig-buyers, being fanatical in their opposition to the Sinn Féin candidate, attacking his meetings and adherents under the protection of the Royal Irish Constabulary whenever the opportunity arose. Irish Volunteers were drafted into the city from all parts of Munster and there were many bitter clashes between themselves and the pig-buyers. These fights were not readily forgotten, and at a fair in Nenagh after the conclusion of the election a number of pig-buyers from Waterford were recognised, attacked and chased out of the town by some of the Volunteers from the Ballywilliam Company who had been assaulted during the election campaign in Waterford City.

About the beginning of 1919, George Lee was replaced as captain of the Kilruane Company by George O'Leary. Lee was not regarded as suitable for the post. Around the same time the company was divided into four sections,

the membership having increased by then to over fifty men. John Hogan, Tom Walsh, John O'Brien and myself were chosen as section commanders, a rank roughly equal to that of a sergeant in the regular army. By the end of 1919 the 1st Lt., Martin Spain, had gone to the United States and I filled the post vacated by him. There were no further changes in the personnel of the company officers until August, 1920, when I was promoted to the rank of vice commandant of the 1st (Nenagh) Battalion. Thomas Walsh succeeded me as 1st Lt.; Pat O'Meara took Michael Maher's place as 2nd Lt., as the latter had gone to the Cloughjordan Company. Further changes took place later on. In February, 1921, the 2nd Lt., Pat O'Meara, was reduced to the ranks because he reported to the R.I.C. that James Devenney, a member of the North Tipperary Active Service Unit, had been shot in the vicinity of O'Meara's publichouse in Kilruane. James Murray became the new 2nd Lt. George O'Leary, the company captain, became battalion quartermaster in May, 1921. His place as captain was filled by Tom Walsh, 1st Lt. The latter post was then given to James Murray, and he in turn was succeeded as 2nd Lt. by John O'Brien. These men carried on up to the Truce.

With regard to the staff of the 1st Battalion, when I became vice commandant in August, 1920, the other officers were

Commandant - Austin McCurtain, Nenagh.
 Adjutant - Michael Hickey, "
 Quartermaster- Billy Spain, Kilruane.

In March, 1921, I was promoted battalion commandant, Austin McCurtain having been transferred to the Brigade Staff as intelligence officer. Jack Naughton, Nenagh, was appointed vice commandant. In May, 1921, Billy Spain went to the Brigade Staff as Asst. Q/M and George O'Leary succeeded him.

The first arms secured by the Kilruane company were shotguns collected from the civilian population and which totalled about sixteen. These guns were handed over to us by the owners on being approached for them. In five instances the houses of loyalists were raided at night by ten or twelve men belonging to the company under either George O'Leary, Billy Spain or myself. In a few of the raids the raiding party wore masks, as the members were known to the people whose homes were being searched. The following is a list of loyalists from whom guns were seized during such raids:

- Captain Graham Toler, - 1 .45 Webley revolver,
Beechwood. 1 .22 revolver,
1 double barrellled shotgun,
1 Sam Brown belt.
- Lieut. George Jackson, - 1 double barrellled shotgun,
Mountpleasant. 1 Sam Brown belt.
- Mr. Dudley, Solicitor, - 1 double barrellled shotgun.
Southill.
- Mr. Thomas Biggs-Atkinson,- 1 double barrellled shotgun.
Ashley Park.
- Mr. Thomas Brierton, Nothing found.
Raththurles.

During the year 1918 Ned O'Leary got a Lee Enfield service rifle from a British soldier home on furlough in Nenagh. This gun was kept in our company in Kilruane and it was used for purposes of training all the members in the mechanism of the gun, how to load it and to aim with it. With the other officers and section commanders of the company, I attended classes on the use of the rifle which were given in the Institute in Nenagh by Jack McCurtain, and what we learned at these classes was in turn imparted by us to our own company. By using a .22 miniature rifle, each man was given target practice at a range set up by us at Bawn. Three or four practices were held and every individual

Volunteer was given a half dozen shots at each practice. Owing to the scarcity of .303 ammunition, the use of the Lee Enfield rifle for target practice was out of the question of course.

On the completion of the collection of arms from the civilian population, a dump for storing them was brought into use and for this purpose a gullet under the railway line at Rapla on the boundary of my parents' land came in very handy during the summer months. In the winter the arms were hidden in folds of hay in Captain Graham Toler's hayshed in Beechwood by some members of the Kilruane Company who worked for Captain Toler. Both places proved perfectly safe hiding places, as we never had a gun captured by the enemy troops. In fact, the railway gullet in question later on became the dump in which the brigade stores were kept.

On Holy Saturday night, 1920, about fifteen men from the Kilruane Company assisted a section from the Toomevara Company in the burning of the Ballymackey R.I.C. Barracks which had been vacated a month or two previously. Seán McCurtain came out from Nenagh to take charge. I was not there because my mother was very ill at the time and it was decided not to tell me anything about it.

Throughout 1919 and in the early part of 1920 our company, in addition to having its usual weekly mobilisation for drill, got a good deal of training in manoeuvres and skirmishing. This type of exercise went on throughout the whole of North Tipperary, and there were often inter-company competitions which worked up great enthusiasm among the rank and file and rivalry between the different units.

The first armed engagement in which the Kilruane Company, and for that matter myself, too, became involved was the attack on Borrisokane R.I.C. Barracks on 26th June, 1920. We did not go into Borrisokane to take part in the actual assault, as our instructions were to block the Nenagh-Borrisokane and the Nenagh-Cloughjordan roads. At Ashley Park, on the first mentioned road, two trees were felled and two or three more were knocked across the same road in the townland of Conger. On the other road one tree was felled near Kilruane Cross. At the barricades in Ashley Park an ambush party of fifteen men under Ned O'Leary and myself watched for reinforcements which might be coming from Nenagh. This party was equipped with eleven shotguns, three "Peter the Painters" which O'Leary had brought from the brigade stores, and one .45 revolver. We remained in the position from about 11 p.m. until 5 a.m., when a dispatch carrier arrived to notify O'Leary that the attack was over and to withdraw.

It may have been previous to the attack on Borrisokane Barracks that the Volunteers in Kilruane, under the supervision of O'Leary's brother, Dan, filled a couple of hundred cartridges in a disused house in Lower Graigue owned by the Gaynor family. The material was all procured by O'Leary from brigade headquarters. It included a mould for making slugs, some black powder and a quantity of caps. The caps were fitted into cartridges which had already been fired and which were then charged with the powder, filled with the slugs and closed with cardboard wads.

At the end of October, 1920, an order from G.H.Q. in Dublin called for the shooting of R.I.C. men as a reprisal for the death of the Lord Mayor of Cork, Terence MacSwiney,

while on hunger-strike in Brixton Prison in England.

This order was discussed at a meeting of the No. 1 Battalion Council, over which I presided, in the Institute in Nenagh. It was decided to carry out the order in the town itself and the captain of Nenagh Company, Jack Naughton, was entrusted with control of the operation, which was fixed to take place after evening Devotions on 2nd November, 1920, in the vicinity of the post office in Castle St., now Pearse St. It was expected that the street would be fairly crowded at that time, about 7 p.m., and that the attacking party would be less likely to be noticed by the police. Naughton selected the men who were to accompany him - Michael Gaynor, Paddy Starr, Eddie Quigley and George Gleeson (The Dodger), all from the Nenagh Company. Each man was armed with a .45 revolver. It happened that only one policeman, Constable McCarthy, came along and he was fired at and wounded.

That evening the police and military became very active and word got out that they intended to burn the Nenagh creamery during the night. The brigade commandant made up his mind to attack them if an attempt was made to destroy that building and he sent for the Brigade Active Service Unit to take up defensive positions in the neighbourhood of the creamery. About fifteen men from the Nenagh Company and seven men from Kilruane, nearly all of whom were armed with shotguns, reinforced the Active Service Unit, making the total force of over forty strong of which roughly fifteen had rifles. The positions taken up extended from the creamery up along ^{the rear of} Kenyon St. as far as Silver St., and they were occupied from about 10 p.m. to 2 or 3 a.m. next morning. Early in the night one of the I.R.A. party accidentally discharged a shot which, it is thought, warned the enemy that an attack was intended.

At any rate, the police and soldiers remained in their quarters until about 7 a.m. By that time we had withdrawn and the police set fire to the houses of John D. Flannery and Jimmy Nolan in Castle St. In both cases the owners were prominently connected with the Republican movement.

On 4th November, 1920, the officer in charge of the military in Nenagh, Captain Hambleton, was shot dead at Knockalton, four miles outside Nenagh, as he was coming back from his headquarters in Templemore. This job was carried out by members of the A.S.U. under Ned O'Leary. Nenagh creamery was burned that night by the Crown forces as a reprisal for the shooting of Captain Hambleton.

After these events many of the members of the I.R.A. in the town of Nenagh went "on the run" or went out at night to sleep in houses in the country. On the night of 4th November, 1920, police raided the house of Rody Cleary in Knigh. They arrested two Nenagh men, John and Thomas O'Brien, whom they found in bed there, and also a workman of Cleary's named Phil Cruise. The O'Briens were put into one lorry and Cruise put into another lorry. On the way into Nenagh the O'Briens were bayoneted to death by their captors. Cruise was released after a fortnight.

A further murder of an I.R.A. man by Crown forces took place three weeks later in Nenagh. He was Denis Carey, a native of Killaneave outside the town, then managing McCurtain's bakery and hardware stores in Castle St. The place was raided by the R.I.C. on the night of 25th November, 1920, who took Carey into custody. He was brought to Wolfe Tone Terrace and there riddled with bullets. It subsequently leaked out from among the police themselves that Carey's murder was committed by two constables named Keane and Moore.

Taking advantage of the unsettled state of the times, an armed gang carried out a number of robberies in and around Nenagh during the hours of darkness. I think it was just before Christmas, 1920, that they broke into McDonnell's licensed premises, known as the Five Alley Publichouse, in Carrigatogher, and took money and drink at the point of a gun. The owners reported the matter to the I.R.A. in Nenagh, who promptly located and arrested the culprits, four in number. The prisoners were brought before an I.R.A. courtmartial consisting of Liam Hoolan, Austin McCurtain and myself. The case was adjourned and the prisoners were kept in custody under an armed guard in an old disused house in the middle of a bog in Lower Graigue. In the course of a fortnight the brigade staff decided to hand the prisoners over to the Cloughjordan Company, who had them only a short while when the four men escaped and made their way back to Nenagh. Afterwards these men made no attempt to indulge in further robberies, and in fairness to them it must be said that while they were bound to have known a number of the Volunteers who were concerned in their arrest and detention, they did not disclose this information to the enemy forces.

About the end of January, 1921, the North Tipperary Active Service Unit was around the Kilruane district. On 27th January, 1921, at about 1 p.m., three of them, Pat O'Brien, Silvermines, Paddy Whelehan, Toomevara, Jim Devenney, Moneygall, went into O'Meara's publichouse at Kilruane Cross for a drink, leaving a fourth man, Seán O'Leary, outside to keep an eye out for enemy forces. The latter, seeing a lorry of police coming from Cloughjordan, ran into O'Meara's yard and shouted to the men inside that the Tans were coming. O'Brien and Devenney ran out the back

Whelan

way but ~~Whelan~~ hid behind the counter.

The lorry had been travelling on every Monday during the three or four preceding weeks from Cloughjordan to Nenagh and never stopped on its journey at Kilruane Cross. As the lorry approached O'Meara's on this particular day the police saw O'Brien and Devenney running away and they halted the vehicle and dismounted. From the side of the road they opened fire on the two men and threw some bombs into a part of O'Meara's premises which was being rebuilt. Although the workmen were engaged inside at the time, it was miraculous that none of them was injured. The police did not leave the roadside and after a while they resumed their journey to Nenagh and returned in the course of a couple of hours with strong reinforcements in four tenders to make a search and a round-up. I was ploughing at home when I was surrounded and made prisoner, as was also another Volunteer named James Keogh who was working on the railway line. We were driven to Kilruane Cross and taken to where James Devenney was lying dead. He had been wounded through the thigh as he was crossing a fence about two hundred yards from the Cloughjordan-Nenagh road and then bled to death, a main artery having been severed. Keogh and myself were asked if we knew the dead man, but we pleaded ignorance of his identity. Paddy Kelly, a farmer in whose field the body was found, was also arrested, and he helped Keogh and myself to shift the corpse to one of the police tenders in which the three of us were brought into Nenagh military barracks. He we were subjected to a very rough interrogation by a Black and Tan sergeant and Constable Keane. It was the last named whose name was mentioned in connection with the murder of Denis Carey in Nenagh on 25th November, 1920. The interrogation centred round the

identity of James Devenney and about an imaginary ambush at Kilruane Cross on the day of our arrest, but we disclosed nothing. Paddy Kelly was released after two days. Keogh and I were detained for a further two weeks, on each day of which we were questioned by military officers. Otherwise we were treated well enough while in custody. We were both released together, and as soon as I regained my liberty I made tracks for the Active Service Unit which I located at Bantiss. Here I urged upon the unit commander, Ned O'Leary, to do something at once to avenge Devenney's death and eventually we settled on an attack in the village of Cloughjordan on the R.I.C. night patrol. About the third week in February, 1921, the Active Service Unit, reinforced by men from the 2nd Battalion and about twenty men from the Kilruane Company, occupied positions at four points on the outskirts of Cloughjordan at about 8 p.m. The Kilruane men were at the end of the village on the Nenagh road, and the A.S.U. and 2nd Battalion contingent were on the Borrisokane, Shinrone and the station road. We waited until after midnight before dispersing, and not a solitary policeman showed up in any part of the village that night. I estimate that the total force carrying arms on that occasion was over sixty. A fortnight or three weeks later another operation on much the same lines was planned, but again nothing happened, due to the same reason.

In March, 1921, the Spring Assizes took place in Nenagh, and either because information reached the brigade officers or because they calculated that lorries would be bring police from Dromineer and Silvermines to the Assizes, the event led to ambush positions being taken up at Cushmona on the Dromineer-Nenagh road and at Kilmore outside Silvermines to attack these lorries. The Brigade Active

Service Unit was divided into two for these attacks, one half going to each ambush position. At both places the local Volunteers reinforced the A.S.U. men. At Cushmona, where I was, the local Volunteers, numbering fifteen men, were drawn from the Kilruane and Puckane Companies. The police were not attacked in either place as they did not travel.

Apart from the cutting of roads and the felling of trees as barricades, I cannot recall anything of any importance having occurred in my battalion area in April, 1921. On May Day I took between fifteen and eighteen men from the Nenagh and Kilruane Companies to help the Active Service Unit, now commanded by Jack Collison, Moneygall, in ambushing a police lorry which had been travelling from Cloughjordan to Nenagh. The site selected for the attack was at Middle Walk, four miles from Cloughjordan. A trench opened by men from the Kilruane and Puckane Companies, measuring about three feet wide and two and a half feet deep, was cut across the road and this was camouflaged on top by wire netting covered with stones and road grit. We entered the ambush positions about this trench, into which it was hoped the police vehicle would run and thus be brought to a halt, at 5 a.m. and remained there until 5 p.m. when we withdrew. We had not long departed when six armoured plated lorries of military arrived and a thorough search was made of the positions we had only just vacated. Obviously information had reached the enemy that the ambush was prepared, and despite the fact that a number of people were suspected, nothing ever came to light which would justify the finger of suspicion being pointed at any person. The Brigade O/C, Seán Gaynor, was with us on that occasion.

On Ascension Thursday, 1921, acting on orders from brigade headquarters to shoot all animals used by the enemy for transport or any other purpose, Bill Spain, Assistant Brigade Quartermaster, Tom Walsh and Jim Murray, officers of the Kilruane Company, and myself, armed with revolvers and automatics, went from Kilruane by the railway line into Nenagh railway station and shot there two mules which we found harnessed to a cart outside the passenger entrance. About six unarmed soldiers who were in control of the animals were held up and their bandoliers taken from them. These men made no effort to resist and they were released as soon as the mules were shot.

During the month of May, 1921, police from Nenagh visited a number of houses around Ballygibbons and Kilruane and gave orders to the people to cut up a tree which had been knocked across the Nenagh-Cloughjordan road at Ballygibbons and to bring the sawn portions in their carts into the Nenagh military barracks. Drastic consequences were threatened if these orders were not carried out. The people, including my father, were really frightened by these threats and through fear they were prepared to comply with the order. I discussed the whole business with the officers of the Kilruane Company and we arranged that as soon as the people began to work on the tree a few shots would be fired over their heads by two armed Volunteers from a concealed position. The shots had the desired effect, because after the first couple had been discharged the people scattered in all directions. They prevailed upon a loyalist among them to report what had happened to the R.I.C. in Nenagh, who attempted no further action against those whom they had threatened but, instead, about a week or two later, got the tree sawn up by a number of

civilians whom they had rounded up for that purpose in the town.

Coming towards the middle of May, 1921, the Brigade Commandant, Seán Gaynor, sent for Billy Spain, my battalion quartermaster, and myself and told us that owing to the fact that police patrols were becoming very numerous on the roads outside Nenagh, it was becoming difficult for the brigade to maintain its headquarters at O'Brien's in Fawnlough, about one and a half miles from the town along the road to Dolla and Silvermines. The presence of the patrols made it extremely risky for persons going to and coming from O'Brien's, especially dispatch carriers. Before considering the question of vacating the place, he would like to see what effect an attack or two on these patrols would have and he asked us to try to have an ambush party placed on as many roads as possible on the same day.

In order to carry out the brigadier's request I mobilised about eighty men from all over the 1st Battalion and brought into use every conceivable kind of gun which the unit possessed. Between shotguns, revolvers and rifles it was possible to equip about seventy men, and I selected ten others to act as scouts. On Sunday, 15th May, 1921, I mobilised the men and divided them up into four sections, one section being posted on the Dublin road, in Lisboney graveyard, the second on the Thurles road at Tyone, the third on the Borrisokane road at Carty's Cross, and the fourth watched the road to Silvermines. The positions, which were occupied shortly after noon, were all within a radius of about a mile from the town. Between 3 and 4 p.m. two constables named Daly and Galvin stationed in Silvermines and who had come from there during the morning to meet two sisters named Kennedy living in

Ballymackey, were returning towards Nenagh. They were dressed in civilian clothes but as they passed they were recognised by Mick ^{Moylan}~~Moylan~~, Nenagh, and made prisoners. Billy Spain and Tom Walsh, who were in charge at this position, were in a quandary as to what they should do with the captives and Spain came to me for instructions. I referred him to brigade headquarters, where he met Seán Gaynor, the Brigadier. The latter gave orders to shoot and bury them. At about 4 p.m. I issued instructions to all sections to disperse. No patrol appeared that day.

The two prisoners were marched across country to Lower Graigue and that night, after being blindfolded, they were shot by a firing party under Billy Spain. Their bodies were buried in a bog and remained there until 31st July, 1925, when they were exhumed and handed over to their relatives.

On the day after the shooting of these two policemen a widespread search was made by the police and military in an effort to find them. The troops actually walked over the spot where the men had been buried, but apparently they failed to notice that the ground had recently been disturbed.

The last operation prior to the Truce in which I was involved was the dismantling of the telephone in Puckane sub-post office. This was purely a precautionary measure and was carried out by myself and the local company captain, John Hector. We collected the apparatus and handed it over to the Brigade Quartermaster.

With regard to military intelligence, our battalion had no contacts who were attached to either the police or military headquarters in the area which, of course, included the town of Nenagh. There were two friendly policemen who now and again warned us of impending raids, but I know of no instance where members of the enemy forces supplied information to us regarding patrols or convoys which were due to travel.

Signed: Cornelius Spain

Date: 20/7/1956

Witness: D. Griffin.
(Investigator).

