

W.S. 1,465
DUPLICATE

BUREAU OF MILITARY HISTORY 1913-21
BURO STAIRGE MILITIA 1913-21
No. W.S. 1,465

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BUREAU OF MILITARY HISTORY, 1913-21.

STATEMENT BY WITNESS.

DOCUMENT NO. W.S. 1465.

Witness

James Hewitt,
Birdhill,
Co. Tipperary.

Identity.

Quartermaster, 6th Battalion, No.1 Tipperary
Brigade.

Subject.

Activities of Ballinahinch Company, 6th
Battalion, No.1 Tipperary Brigade, Irish
Volunteers, July 1917 - 11th July, 1921.

Conditions, if any, Stipulated by Witness.

Nil.

File No S.2795.

Form B.S.M. 2

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STATEMENT BY JAMES HEWITT,

Birdhill, Limerick,

formerly Quartermaster, 6th Battalion, No. 1 Tipperary Brigade.

I was born on 14th June, 1895, at Ballinahinch, Co. Tipperary, on a small farm of about eighteen acres, and I was the youngest member of a family of nine children. After attending the Ballinahinch National School until I was fourteen years of age, I left to go to work as a builder's labourer. After eight or nine years at that business I had served my time as a mason. In the course of time I was left the farm at home and continued to work part time on it and part time at my trade up to a few years ago, when I got a substantial holding of seventy acres from the Irish Land Commission at Birdhill, surrendering in exchange my old place in Ballinahinch. My time is now exclusively devoted to farming.

My first association with the national movement began in July, 1917, when a company of Irish Volunteers was formed in Ballinahinch. From the outset the company had about sixty members. The first captain of the unit was Jim Ryan (Denis), Birdhill, and I don't think there were any other officers appointed for a good while afterwards. The company met for drill once a week and the parades were always taken by the captain, but he had as a drill instructor another Jim Ryan, an ex-British soldier. No arrests were made in connection with the public drilling during 1917 or 1918, probably because we usually mobilised and drilled in a remote part of the country at Gortybrigane Cross.

As the threat of conscription developed, the strength of our company grew to about two hundred men, most of whom fell away again when it became apparent that the British government had decided not to enforce compulsory military service in Ireland. From thence onwards until the Truce there were between sixty or seventy members who were always available for whatever operations they were called upon to perform. Like all other areas throughout Ireland, the Irish Volunteers in Ballinahinch got some pikes made to resist the conscription menace. They were forged by a Volunteer named ^{Jim} ~~Jim~~ Ryan, farrier, Newport, but no use was ever made of these weapons. About a dozen farmers in the company area had promised us their shotguns in the event of armed resistance being offered against the enforcement of conscription.

In January, 1919, Liam Hoolan, Nenagh, summoned a meeting of representatives from the Ballinahinch, Newport, Killoscully and Knockfune Companies at which he announced that these four companies were being formed into a battalion to be known as 6th Battalion, No. 1 Tipperary Brigade. At the meeting the following were elected as officers of that battalion:

Commandant	-	William Gleeson, Lacken, Birdhill.
Vice	"	- Jim Ryan (Denis), Cragg, "
Adjutant	-	Denis O'Brien, "
Quartermaster	-	Mick Ryan, Newport. "

After about six months, Mick Ryan, who was in poor health, was removed and I replaced him. To the best of my knowledge there were no other changes in the staff of the battalion up to the Truce.

Each member of the brigade, especially the brigade quartermaster, Frank Flannery, was most punctilious in regard to matters affecting his own particular department. Returns required at fixed periods, I forget now whether they were weekly or monthly, had to be finished accurately and promptly. As well, monthly meetings of each department, presided over by the brigade departmental chief and attended by representatives of that department in each battalion took place with almost unbroken regularity from the time the brigade came into existence until the Truce. For a while these meetings were held in the town of Nenagh until things became too hot and all the brigade staff had to go "on the run". After that the meetings were held at different places in the rural districts.

Venues in the country of meetings convened by the Brigade Quartermaster at which I attended as the representative of my battalion were Collins's, Gibbet Hill, Nenagh, Spain's, Kilruane, and a wood in Mount Pleasant, Nenagh. The business transacted dealt mostly with money matters, arms and ammunition. Each battalion quartermaster had to hand over at that meeting a monthly levy of 30/- per company, which was the brigade's share of the contributions, amounting to 1/- per month, collected from each Volunteer.

As well as attending these meetings, the battalion officers had to make periodic visits to each company in the battalion for the purpose of inspecting parades, examining arms and checking stores, even though, in most instances, the arms and stores merely consisted of a few shotguns, a couple of dozen shotgun cartridges and a small quantity of gelignite and gun powder.

The collection of arms from the civilian population in our battalion area by the I.R.A. took place in 1919, but I do not remember at what period of the year. Most of the weapons obtained were shotguns and, except in a few instances, were handed over voluntarily by the owners. The exceptions, of course, were loyalists who were opposed to the Republican movement, and in order to secure the guns held by them it was necessary to raid the homes of such people.

Three raids, all at night time, and carried out by about a dozen armed men, took place in our battalion area. In the case of Captain Twiss, Birdhill, a shotgun and a Snider rifle were seized; in Goings, Cragg, Birdhill, we got two shotguns and a large quantity of cartridges, and in Ryan's, Ballymaceogh, one shotgun was taken. A member of the Cumann na mBan, Annie Coleman, who was friendly with a Canadian soldier, in the district on holidays, got a .45 revolver from him which she duly delivered to us.

Through the collection and seizure of arms the battalion acquired about sixty shotguns and two revolvers, together with a quantity of ammunition, but I have no idea now of the number of rounds. Each company kept the guns obtained in its own area. No dumps were constructed but the arms were divided around among reliable Volunteers for care and safe custody. I don't believe the enemy forces ever succeeded in capturing even a single one of these guns, though for want of proper hiding places a number of them had become defective by the time the Truce arrived. The great danger always was dampness, which damaged vital parts of the guns, such as springs, and also affected shotgun cartridges, causing the cardboard casing to swell so much that the cartridge could not fit into the breech.

About February, 1919, Seán Treacy and Seumas Robinson, who were on the R.I.C. "Hue and Cry" after the Soloheadbeg shootings in South Tipperary, came to my place in Ballinahinch where they remained for a week. The only people in the district who knew of their presence were our own household. Both men either stayed in bed or spent their time reading in the house during the daytime and went out for walks at night accompanied by myself or my brothers. Each of them was armed with a service rifle and a revolver. Maurice Crowe, a member of the staff of the South Tipperary Brigade, visited them a few times and was present the night they left. I guided the three men to within two miles of Castleconnel, where we were met by Joe Herbert, a local member of the I.R.A., and they were taken by him to another safe refuge.

I think it was late in 1919 that Liam Hoolan, vice commandant of the No. 1 Tipperary Brigade, came to stay in my house. He was very much sought after at the time. Next day was a Church Holiday and he went to Mass in Ballinahinch but left the district after nightfall. On the day after, the district was raided by a big party of police under the notorious District Inspector Biggs, then in charge of Newport and later shot dead at Coolboreen, four or five miles from Newport. On learning that the police were in the locality, a sister of mine quickly remembered that three shotguns had been left in our house a short while before by the Battalion O/C, William Gleeson, and a few companions who were with him. She gathered the guns and ran with them to me in a field near the house. I hid the guns in a rabbit burrow. The police party approaching the place made a fairly close search along the fence where the guns were concealed, but they did not find them. However, I was held up and questioned. Mr. Biggs interrogated me regarding the

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J. Moloney

Name: (J. Moloney.)

Grade: Col.

Department/Office/Court:

Date: 7 March 2003.

strange man who was in the neighbourhood on the previous day and beat me when I denied all knowledge of such a man. I persisted in my denials and finally he let me go. Hoolan, of course, was well away from the locality by this time.

It was obvious that someone in the Ballinahinch district had given away information. It was afterwards ascertained through a woman in the neighbourhood, to whom the culprit unwittingly admitted it was he who had informed, that the person responsible was a postman attached to Newport Post Office. His name was _____ and I believe he belonged to _____

On 25th January, 1920, the Limerick Volunteers attacked Moroe R.I.C. Barracks. This barracks was between five and six miles from Newport, Co. Tipperary, and could be approached from the latter place, a district headquarters of the R.I.C., by two different roads. In order to prevent or at least impede reinforcements coming from Newport, our battalion co-operated with the Limerick men by erecting road blocks on each road, one at Clonsingle and the other at Clareglens. I was with the battalion commandant at Clonsingle, where the total force in action consisted of eight men, nearly all from Ballinahinch, and at Clareglens Paddy Ryan (Lacken) and John McGrath had about a dozen men from the Newport Company. In addition to erecting the road blocks, it was our job to prevent persons travelling to Newport from the Moroe direction. We were on duty from about 11 p.m. to 4 o'clock next morning and rounded up about twenty travellers during the night. Incidentally, the attack was not a success, or at least the barracks was not captured.

Following the withdrawal of the police from Birdhill and Killoscully, the barracks in both places were destroyed by fire about Easter Sunday, 1920. Both operations were carried out by the local companies - Ballinahinch and Killoscully - under the command of the battalion commandant and the company captain, respectively.

About February or March, 1920, a strong detachment of British soldiers, numbering about two hundred, reinforced the R.I.C. in Newport, taking over Rosehill House, a quarter of a mile from that village, and remained in occupation there until after the Truce. As a result of the withdrawal of the police from other stations, the R.I.C. strength in Newport from the time of the arrival of the military was increased to thirty-two men. On being backed up by these reinforcements, the D.I. of the police, Mr. Biggs, became more truculent and active than ever. He was an extremely bitter opponent of the Irish Republican movement and in the force in which he served had few equals in that regard. He resorted to every terror device at his disposal in order to crush the I.R.A. in the district, burning houses on the slightest provocation, shooting and maiming cattle, using old people as hostages, especially the father of Paddy Ryan (Lacken) who lived in the Knockfune area. On one occasion D.I. Biggs surrounded Silvermines Church on a Sunday while Mass was in progress, and as the congregation was leaving after the conclusion of the ceremony every man, woman and child was rounded up by the combined forces of police and soldiers. Biggs ordered the people to sing "God Save the King", a song which few, if any, of them knew. On the people failing to comply with his order, he instructed his troops to fire over the heads of the people with machine-guns and rifles, creating terror and consternation, especially among the women

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J. Moloney
Name: (J. Moloney.)

Grade: Col.

Department/Office/Court:

Date: 7 March 2003.

The people stood up well to all the terrorist tactics of District Inspector Biggs and the vast majority of them staunchly observed the appeal of the Republican party for a boycott of the British forces, particularly the police. In Newport village a young woman named ignored the boycott and persisted in keeping company with Black and Tans despite warnings from the local Volunteers. She was seized by the Battalion Adjutant, Denis O'Brien, and three other I.R.A. men, who bobbed her hair. As a reprisal for this action, the British forces in Newport burned down the local creamery. I would say this occurred in April, 1920.

On 3rd July, 1920, the attack on Rearcross R.I.C. Barracks took place. The operation was planned and directed by Ernie O'Malley, a G.H.Q. officer operating in County Tipperary at the time. The majority of the men involved came from South and Mid Tipperary, although the barracks was situated in the North (No. 1) Tipperary Brigade area. About twenty men from our battalion, drawn from the Newport and Ballinahinch Companies, marched to Rearcross, where within five hundred yards from the barracks on the road from Newport we met Seán Treacy, afterwards killed in Dublin, who was in charge of a party of riflemen at that particular point. It was then about 11 o'clock at night. On Treacy's orders our party, only some of whom, about a dozen, were armed with shotguns, took cover under the road fence and there awaited further instructions. Treacy explained that it was most important that we should remain under cover, as the road was very much exposed to fire which would certainly come from the barracks as soon as the attack opened.

The assault began about 12.30 that night when rifle fire was opened on the building by a number of sections

posted round the barracks. Other attackers operating from the roof of Flannery's house and business premises adjoining the barracks broke slates on the roof of the latter building through which paraffin oil and petrol was then poured. After about a quarter of an hour we could see from our position that the upper part of the barracks was on fire, and it then looked as if nothing could prevent the attack from succeeding. However, the hours dragged on and there was still no sign of the police surrendering. About 3 o'clock in the morning the order was given to retire. Our party from the 6th Battalion, without having been called upon to fire a single shot, returned home after a tough journey through the Lackamore and Cully hills and got into our own district about 7 o'clock that morning.

Other assistance given by our battalion in that attack was the blocking of the two roads connecting Rearcross and Newport at Rossaguile Bridge, Derryleagh and Toor. This was done by men from the Newport and Knockfune Companies.

The only occasion in which the 6th Battalion, acting on its own, attempted to carry out an ambush on the enemy forces was early in 1921, when, in anticipation of a party of them coming to arrest Michael Ryan (Taylor), about fifty men drawn from the Ballinahinch and Newport Companies took up positions in the townland of Cortshane. Every man was armed with a shotgun, and the battalion commandant, William Gleeson, was in charge. After waiting from ten o'clock at night until two o'clock next morning, there was no sign of the enemy coming along and the order to dismiss was given.

There was a strong force of Auxiliaries stationed in Ballina, Co. Tipperary, from the end of the autumn 1920 onwards. They were well equipped with transport, which was

widely used for making rapid sorties into East Limerick, Co. Tipperary and Clare. Orders received from Brigade H.Q. requested that the roads between the Limerick border to the boundary of the battalion area on the Ballina and Nenagh roads were to be trenched and blocked so effectively that the enemy, particularly the Auxiliaries, could not use these roads. This order could only be executed with safety by night time, and, besides, most of the Volunteers could not get away from their work during the day. It involved a considerable amount of hard labour with the pick, shovel and spade in order to cut trenches which had to be frequently re-opened, as the enemy filled them in each time his convoys used the roads. Two trenches cut outside Birdhill on one occasion were neatly camouflaged with a covering of netted wire, sods and road dust. A convoy of Auxiliaries coming from Limerick failed to detect these road traps and two tenders which ran right into them were badly damaged. I cannot say if any casualties occurred among the occupants. Ultimately, by the use of explosives and an electric charge, Bob de Courcy, Limerick City, made the road cutting operations considerably lighter for us when he blew up the Kilmastullagh Bridge on the main Limerick-Nenagh road. I cannot remember when this happened, but between then and the Truce that bridge was not repaired.

Signed:

James Heintz

Date:

19th July 1956

Witness:

D. Gibbin

(Investigator)

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