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**ORIGINAL**

BUREAU OF MILITARY HISTORY 1913-21

BURO STAIRÉ MILEATA 1913-21

No. **W.S. 1491**

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BUREAU OF MILITARY HISTORY, 1913-21.

STATEMENT BY WITNESS.

DOCUMENT NO. **W.S.** 1491.

Witness

Thomas Keely,  
Kiltartan,  
Gort,  
Co. Galway.

Identity.

Battalion Engineer.

Subject.

Activities of Kilbeacanty Company,  
Co. Galway, Irish Volunteers, 1917-1921.

Conditions, if any, Stipulated by Witness.

Nil.

File No **S.2776.**

Form B.S.M. 2

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STATEMENT BY THOMAS KEELY,  
Kiltartan, Gort, Co. Galway.

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I joined Kilbecanty company of the Irish Volunteers about April 1917. John Coen was the company captain, and the lieutenants were Daniel Ryan and Martin McGrath. The strength was then about thirty. It increased to eighty at conscription time, and remained steady at around seventy from then to the Truce. Foot drill at first and, later, extended order drill were practised at parades of the company which were held regularly twice a week up to the middle of 1920 when drilling ceased. I do not know from whom the order to cease drilling came, or why.

I remember the general election of 1918. I canvassed the company area which corresponded to the Kilbecanty parish area, on behalf of the late Mr. Frank Fahy, the Sinn Féin candidate. He was elected with a good majority, and afterwards became Ceannt Comhairle of Dáil Éireann which position he held for many years. Shortly after the general election, raids for arms were commenced by the Volunteers.

I remember that a shotgun was taken from Thomas Burke of Lisbrien, a local farmer with pro-British tendencies. Burke was out fowling when his gun was taken. An automatic pistol was taken from a man in Lough Cutra, named Houston. He was a gamekeeper for Lord Gough, and a tough, strong and exceedingly active

Scotsman. He had his residence fortified against raids for arms, so we got him out of the house by pretending we wanted him to go to see a sick horse. He was a lover of horses and fell into our trap. Having got him out of the houses we disarmed him after a struggle. We then searched his house, but found no other arms. He had them well hidden or handed over to the R.I.C. Those who took part in these raids were Lieutenant Dan Ryan, afterwards quartermaster, Galway south west brigade, Michael Reilly, afterwards adjutant, Gort battalion, Patrick Glynn, afterwards vice commandant, Gort battalion, Volunteers Jeremiah Deely, Thomas Hynes, Patrick Hynes and myself.

I remember the main Gort-Ennis road being blocked by felling trees at Lough Cutra - perhaps late in 1919 or early 1920. I cannot remember the time very well, or the reason for the barricade. I think it was in connection with some barrack attack in Co. Clare. When Lord Gough's workmen assembled the next morning for work, the steward told them to remove the trees. One of the workmen, Volunteer Thomas Flanagan from Beagh company refused, and the steward dismissed him. When we heard about the incident in Kilbecanty company, Lieutenant Dan Ryan, Volunteers Michael Reilly, Patrick Glynn, my brother, Volunteer Seamus Keely, now District Justice in Cobh, Co. Cork, and I went to Lough Cutra Castle and interviewed the steward. We threatened him severely, with the result that Volunteer Flanagan was taken back into the employment the following day.

I can remember being present at one sitting of the Kilbecanty parish court. The president of the court was a farmer, named John Forde, of Tubber, Co. Galway.

There were others on the bench, but I cannot remember their names. One case concerned the ownership of a small farm of land which a farmer, named Thomas Forde, of Ballyturn had bought some time before, from a man named O'Loughlin of Derreennacornane. O'Loughlin wanted to get back the farm from Forde by threats, taking full advantage of the troubled times. He got his brothers-in-law, Morrissey's of Gort, to threaten Forde who sought the protection of the Sinn Féin court. The Morrissey's were summoned before the court. I remember that they were sworn and questioned. I was not present during the full hearing of the case, as I had to take my turn doing guard outside because the court was held in secret and was protected by Volunteers. I remember, however, that the case went in favour of the complainant, Thomas Forde, and that O'Loughlin had to give an undertaking not to interfere in the future with Forde.

There was a case of assault also heard. One of the parties was named Reilly from Derreen. I cannot recall the name of the other party. There were some further trivial cases. I remember that almost all the disputing parties agreed to settle their differences, on the advice of the court.

Many cases of agrarian trouble were settled by the Volunteers, apart from the Dáil Éireann courts. Cases occurred in which people, taking advantage of the troubled state of the country, broke down farm fences with a view to getting portions of land. The Volunteers investigated those cases, found the parties responsible for breaking down the fences and compelled them to repair them. The Dáil Éireann loan was collected by the Volunteers in the Kilbecanty company area. I was not engaged in the collection, but I subscribed £5 which

was returned to me afterwards.

By the middle of 1920, I was a marked man by the R.I.C., and had some narrow escapes from being captured. On one occasion, I was at Mass in Kilbecanty parish church when it was surrounded by R.I.C. and British cavalry from Gort. Company captain John Coen and Volunteers Patrick Glynn and Thomas Craven were also attending Mass. Coen heard the cavalry and escaped through the fields at the back of the church. He was seen by the British, but he pretended to be driving sheep which happened to be in the field, and no further attention was paid to him. When I got to the door of the church on my way out, I saw the R.I.C. and cavalry, and knew there was no hope of getting through. I then went up to the gallery with Glynn and Craven, and entered a little room usually used by the choir. From the choir room, there was a trap-door leading to the bell tower on the roof. We got to the bell-tower by climbing through the trap-door with the help of a stool. When we got safely up, my sister removed the stool.

The R.I.C. searched the church, including the choir-room, and when they had gone away, Fr. Fitzgerald, P.P., entered the choir-room and let us know. Another Volunteer, Martin Coen, had a narrow escape. He was rounded up and, with a number of men, was awaiting identification by the R.I.C. He walked leisurely away from the others, and had gone about a hundred yards or so before his move was detected. When called on to halt, he hopped over the wall of the nearby graveyard. He was pursued by two of the mounted soldiers but they were unable to manoeuvre their mounts through the tombstones. They fired several shots at him, but he had good cover and eventually escaped,

unhurt, through a laneway which the enemy had overlooked when surrounding the church. I was forced to give up my work as a building contractor, as the R.I.C. nearly always found out where I had the contracts and raided for me. I had a very narrow escape from capture while building a house for Patrick McCarthy near Kilbecanty parish church.

In the year 1919 or 1920, I, with other Volunteers of the Kilbecanty company, visited members of the R.I.C. and D.M.P. home on leave to get them to resign or to force them away from the area.

In the last few days of October 1920, I took part in an attack on a party of five R.I.C. at Castledaly, on the main Loughrea-Gort road. They were a cycling party that left the village of Kilchreest to patrol the road between Kilchreest and Peterswell. They were on the return journey from Peterswell when the attack occurred. The I.R.A. party numbered about thirty, and were under the command of Thomas McInerney and Peter Howley, commandant and vice commandant respectively of the Gort battalion. One of the R.I.C. party was killed and one wounded. The whole party was disarmed, as far as I can remember. The majority of the I.R.A. were armed with shotguns. There were a few rifles, but I cannot say how many. The I.R.A. position was directly opposite the Castledaly Catholic church and right inside the fence of the road. I was at the Gort end, and I remember that Volunteer Martin Holland from Beagh company was beside me.

I have often been wondering how the other three members of the R.I.C. party were not killed or wounded, in view of fire from thirty men being brought to bear on the R.I.C. party of five, and I have come to the conclusion that buckshot was not able to penetrate their tunics. I

saw one of the R.I.C. tunics in Gort barrack after the Truce. The late Joe Stanford, O/C, Galway south-west brigade, spread it on a table. He opened one of the blades of a sharp barber's knife, and struck the spread out tunic as hard as he could. He was a very strong man, but he failed to get the point of the knife to penetrate the full depth of the tunic material.

The following is a list of the officers and men I remember having taken part in the Castledaly ambush:-

Thomas McInerney, O/C, Gort battalion.

Peter Howley, Vice O/C, Gort battalion.

Joseph Stanford, captain, Gort company; afterwards  
O/C, Galway south-west brigade.

Volunteer -- Slattery, Gort company.

Daniel Ryan, lieutenant, Kilbecanty company;  
afterwards brigade quartermaster.

Michael Reilly, Volunteer, Gort company; afterwards  
adjutant, Gort battalion.

Patrick Glynn, Volunteer, Kilbecanty company;  
afterwards vice O/C, Gort battalion.

John Fahy, captain, Peterswell company; afterwards  
O/C, Gort battalion.

Martin Fahy, Volunteer, Peterswell company;  
afterwards brigade engineer.

Volunteer Thomas Fahy, Peterswell company;  
afterwards captain, Peterswell company.

Volunteer Michael Fallon, Peterswell company.

Volunteer Jack Healy, Peterswell company.

Volunteer -- Holland, Ardrahan company.

Volunteer Martin Holland, Beagh company.

Lieutenant Patrick Loughnan, Beagh company.

Volunteer Thomas Regan, Beagh company; and

Volunteer Thomas Keely, afterwards battalion engineer,  
Gort battalion. (Myself.)

About Easter 1921, I remember a prepared ambush at Dalystown, a few miles from Loughrea - in the Loughrea battalion area. I do not know the locality very well. I remember going to Derrybrien with others from the Kilbecanty company and that we met Michael Brennan's flying column at Derrybrien. From there, we went to the Abbey company area where I heard there was to be an ambush. I heard afterwards that the Abbey company got the location for the ambush switched to Dalystown. Positions were taken up near Dalystown House at about 8 a.m. by about a hundred I.R.A. under the command of Michael Brennan, O/C, east Clare brigade. The position was occupied from 8 a.m. until mid-day at least. The R.I.C. were expected to come out from Loughrea to investigate a raid on mails that had been purposely carried out earlier in the morning, to draw them towards Dalystown. Three small lorry loads of R.I.C. passed the position shortly after it had been evacuated. They did not come directly from Loughrea as expected, but from Loughrea via Kilchreest and back to Loughrea, in the direction opposite to that which they were expected. I remember that the main body of the I.R.A. were in position on the main Loughrea-Woodford road, but Joseph Stanford, Miko Lillis of the Clare flying column and I occupied a farmyard, some distance from the main road.

Shortly after this, there was a reorganisation of the Gort battalion. It had been up to then comprised of ten companies, with Thomas McInerney as battalion O/C. It was now split into two battalions of five companies each, with Thomas McInerney in charge of one, and John Fahy, captain of Peterswell company, in charge of the other. John Fahy's battalion was called the 1st (Gort) battalion, and McInerney's, the 2nd (Ardrahan) battalion.



The companies of the 1st (Gort) battalion, with their captains, were:-

Gort - Joseph Stanford.  
(Also brigade commandant, Galway  
south-west brigade.)

Derrybrien - Patrick Flynn.

Peterswell - Thomas Fahy.

Kilbecanty - John Coen.

Beagh - John Flaherty.

I was appointed battalion engineer at the reorganisation.

In the middle of May 1921, I took part in the Ballyturn ambush in the Kilbecanty company area in which district inspector Blake of the R.I.C. and two British officers were killed. Unfortunately, Mrs. Blake, wife of the D.I., was also unavoidably killed. The I.R.A. had no casualty. The I.R.A. who took part were:-

Joseph Stanford, brigade commandant, Galway  
south west brigade - in charge.

Dan Ryan, brigade quartermaster.

Patrick Glynn, battalion vice commandant, Gort  
battalion.

Thomas Keely, battalion engineer, Gort battalion -  
myself.

John Coen, captain, Kilbecanty company.

Patrick Houlihan of the East Clare flying column.

Thomas Craven, Volunteer, attached to Kilbecanty  
company, and previously attached  
to Tuam Battalion, North Galway  
brigade.

Volunteers Timothy Reilly and Thomas Reilly and  
my brother, Volunteer John Keely,  
all from Kilbecanty company,  
did the scouting and made a good  
job of it.

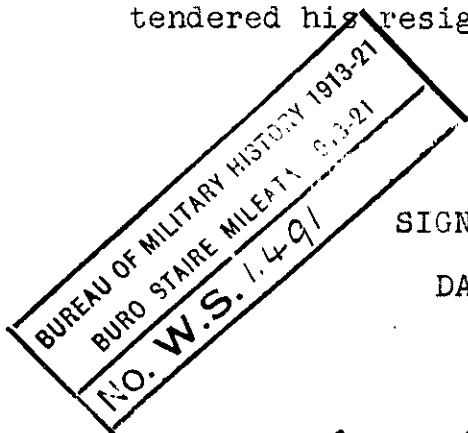
The attack took place on a Sunday evening in the middle of May, opposite to the gate lodge leading to

Baggott's of Ballyturn. Baggott was a local landlord. The evening before, it was learned by Joe Stanford and Dan Ryan that Blake was likely to visit Baggott's the following day. When it was confirmed by the scouts that he had actually gone there on the Sunday morning, positions were taken up by the seven members of the I.R.A. as follows: Coen and Houlihan, in the gate lodge facing the gate through which the enemy party had to leave Baggott's, at a range of twenty yards; Keely (myself) at the corner of the gate lodge outside; Stanford, Ryan, Glynn and Craven, about twenty yards from the avenue along which the enemy party had to travel on the way out - these four were concealed by trees and rhododendrons.

We went into position about 1 p.m., and the attack took place about 7 p.m. By this time, the gate lodge was filled with people whom we had to detain after they had seen us. When the car containing Blake, the two British officers, Mrs. Blake and another woman, stopped inside the closed gate, Stanford gave the order, "Hands up". Blake got out and took cover underneath the car. He fired a few shots before he was killed. The man, whom I learned afterwards to be Captain Cornwallis of a cavalry regiment, dodged outside the gate when he heard the order, "Hands up", from inside. He located Stanford's position from the sound of his voice, and commenced to shoot from his automatic in Stanford's direction. I had a Winchester repeater rifle, with full magazine of eleven rounds and a few spare rounds. I would have fired at Cornwallis the moment I saw him fire, but I wanted Houlihan, who was in charge of the gate lodge party, to have the first go. Cornwallis had fired three or four shots when I fired at him, and he fell.

There was a long interval between the order, hands up, and the time I fired. I thought we gave them too much time and too much of a chance before we opened fire. I took Cornwallis's automatic. I think the other officer, whom we afterwards learned was lieutenant McGreery, was killed without his having fired a shot. The second woman in the car was a daughter-in-law of Lady Gregory of Coole House. She was fortunately saved.

A few days before the Truce, there was a large-scale round-up by British forces of the mountainous portion of the south west Galway brigade and the east Clare brigade areas. The object seemed to be to capture the East Clare flying column, and the men who took part in the Ballyturn ambush. Good information regarding the day-to-day movements of the British forces was given to Brigade O/C, Joe Stanford, with the result that no member of the Gort battalion was captured. The round-up lasted four or five days. The information was given to Stanford by Volunteer Henry O'Shaughnessy of the Gort company, as far as I can remember. I think the information came to O'Shaughnessy from an R.I.C. man in Gort, named Kearney. He was shot by his own colleagues the evening of the Ballyturn ambush. I heard that he often gave information to the I.R.A. and that he would probably have survived but for the fact that he had tendered his resignation.



SIGNED: Thomas Keely  
DATE: 5-9-1956

WITNESS Seán Brennan Lieut. Col.