

ORIGINAL

BUREAU OF MILITARY HISTORY 1913-21

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BUREAU OF MILITARY HISTORY, 1913-21.

STATEMENT BY WITNESS.

DOCUMENT NO. W.S. 1500.

Witness

Anthony McCormack,  
12, St. Patrick's Villas,  
Moate,  
Co. Westmeath.

Identity.

Captain, Tang Company, Irish Volunteers.

Captain, Tang Company, I.R.A.

Subject.

Irish Volunteer and I.R.A. activities

County Westmeath, 1914-1921.

Conditions, if any, Stipulated by Witness.

Nil.

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ORIGINAL

STATEMENT BY ANTHONY McCORMACK

12 St. Patrick's Villas, Moate, Co. Westmeath.

I was born at Tonlagee, Tang, near Ballymahon, and went to school at Tang. There was nothing in the subjects taught at school then that would cultivate or enhance a patriotic or separatist outlook in any pupil. There was, however, a Catholic Curate named Father O'Reilly in Tang who was an out-and-out patriot. Father O'Reilly was responsible for having a very efficient branch of the Gaelic League started in Tang and, at a later period, he was responsible for having a company of the Irish Volunteers started in Tang also.

I was working in Athlone when the Volunteers were organised there and joined the Athlone Volunteers. That was in April 1914. There was a very big number of men in the Volunteers in Athlone at this time and at the head of affairs were Sean Hurley and Peter Malinn. Liam Mellows was a regular visitor at this time to the Athlone Volunteers. When the Split took place in the Volunteer organisation, the vast majority of the Athlone Volunteers took the Redmond side and became the Irish National Volunteers. Sean Hurley and Malinn and a small band remained loyal to the Irish Volunteer Executive. I was one of this small unit.

Meanwhile, the Tang Volunteers, through the good work of Father O'Reilly, had received seven or eight rifles and some ammunition, but much to Father O'Reilly's grief, the Tang Volunteers declared in a body for the Redmond, or National, Volunteer side. The rifles, as well as I can remember, were Howth Mausers and were single shot weapons having no magazines. Those rifles were secured for the Irish Volunteers just prior to the Rising and were taken to Athlone.

Liam Mellows had visited Athlone several times just prior to the Rebellion and for some days before this event we knew that a Rising was to take place in the near future. On Easter Sunday we mobilised at Annagh, Ballykieran, Athlone, to start operations. Each man carried 48 hours rations which were provided by himself and some of the men, principally the officers, were armed with revolvers. We did not carry rifles or other arms, but had implements for cutting wires and first aid equipment. What rifles we had were being conveyed secretly to Shannon Bridge which was to be our main assembly area and where we were to link up with Volunteers from other areas. Our mobilisation was about 60 strong. We were not very long mobilised when we received orders to disperse and go home. We were told that everything was off for the time being, but to hold ourselves in readiness to mobilise again at very short notice.

On Easter Monday we mobilised again. This time our numbers were reduced to 25 or 30. I was sent to Coosan with a dispatch and was told that when I had delivered it I was to go home to Athlone and watch the movements of the British military making up the garrison there. The whole affair seemed to be a mass of confusion. Edward (Kruger) Farrell of Coosan had gone with the rifles to Shannon Bridge on Saturday night. I went to my place of residence in Athlone as instructed. On the Tuesday of that week I was arrested and kept locked up for a day and a night and then released. There were about 17 others detained at the same time. Some of those were also released while others were held and sent to jails in England after the collapse of the rebellion. The rifles and other weapons were not surrendered after the rebellion.

I remained on in Athlone until 1919 when I returned to

Tang. Meanwhile, the Volunteers in the Athlone area had been organised and we had gone through the exciting time of the conscription crisis and the general election of 1918. The Volunteers in Tang had also been organised and I was appointed captain of the new company which was about 32 or 33 strong. John Feeny was 1st Lieutenant of the company. I cannot remember now who was 2nd Lieutenant.

Father O'Reilly had to leave Tang at the request of his superiors and the British Government for his political activities. We had no arms at this stage for, although the rifles belonging to the original Tang Volunteers had not been surrendered after the Rising, we had not got them back. They were located somewhere in the Athlone area. William (Bill) Casey, who had had service in the British Army, acted as drill instructor to the company. We held parades in the local schoolhouse. We always had a screen of scouts out while parades were in progress to prevent us being surprised by British forces. Later on, when times became more dangerous, we held our training parades in secret.

There was a battalion organisation in the area by now. Richard Birthles was O/C. of the battalion. Peter Ballesty was vice O/C., Michael McCormack of Drumreany was adjutant, and Thomas Cuffe was Q.M. Previously, Patrick Mahon of Moyvore had been battalion Q.M. The companies comprising the battalion were A - Drumreany; B - Tang; C - Ballymore; D - Tubberclare; E - Bishopstown and F - Rosemount. The O/C. of Drumreany Company was William Moran. I was company commander of Tang Company. Thomas Kearney, and later James Lynch, was company commander in Ballymore. Michael Carty was captain in Tubberclare, Michael Finn in Bishopstown and John ~~Doolley~~ <sup>Doolley</sup> in Rosemount. Later on, there were changes in the

command of Tubberclare Company caused by the arrest of the captains there.

Tang Company in 1919 had a strength of about 25 men but this increased later to 53. I came back to Tang in April 1919. Tang and Drumreany formed the one Catholic parish. In the harvest time of 1919 a general raid for arms was ordered by our headquarters in order to forestall an attempt by the R.I.C. and British forces to take up or collect all the guns and arms in the country. Every house in our area which we knew or suspected of having arms was visited by our men. In most cases it was only a matter of asking for the guns, as the people were glad to get rid of them. We collected a lot of shotguns of various types both single and double barreled. Some of these were good serviceable weapons, while others were unserviceable and of little value. A small amount of shotgun ammunition was also obtained. The most important of the weapons we received were a few revolvers which were quite serviceable. There were no shooting incidents during this operation.

Sinn Fein, which was the political wing of the movement, was well organised in the area by now and had established their own Courts of Justice. Thomas Keenan, a local man of substance, acted as judge. The Volunteers did all the police work for the Courts such as enforcing its decrees and so forth. The people took their cases to the Sinn Fein Court and generally abided loyally by its decisions. There was no cause to make any arrests or detentions locally and we had not to establish any place of detention or unknown destinations, as they were called, in our area. On the whole, the people were very law-abiding.

It was now decided to put a levy on all property owners in the area in order to raise funds for the purchase of arms

for the Volunteers. The levy was based on a certain sum in the pound on the Poor Law Valuation of property. This was considered as being the fairest method. Every property owner in the area paid up willingly with the exception of Colonel King-Harmon, who owned land in the area and who was, of course, a supporter of the British regime. Dick Birthles, the battalion O/C., decided that the colonel would have to pay up, as it would not be fair to the other people who had already paid up to let him get away without paying. Birthles and I went up to the colonel's residence at Newcastle, Ballymahon, arriving there about midday. We were armed with revolvers. We were admitted by a Miss Donnellan who was a servant in the house and who was also a member of Cumann na mBan. The colonel was in his study and I went in there and held him up with my revolver while Birthles went to the window of the room on the outside to cover him or others from that angle. The colonel was alone. I asked him for the money and he refused to pay it. Birthles now came into the room and the colonel agreed to pay up. He now opened a drawer in his desk as if to get the money, but instead, took out a Webley or Colt revolver. We immediately seized him and took the gun from him. In the drawer we also found another service revolver and 40 or 50 rounds of ammunition. He now produced the money and paid us £70 or £80 which was the amount due by him. He asked us to give him back one of the guns which, needless to say, we did not do. As we were leaving, he said: "There is no hope of your beating the British Empire" to which Birthles replied "Wait and see". We got back to our own area without further incident. Previous to this we had tried to get the Ballymahon Volunteers to collect this money for us but they had failed to do so.

At this time I travelled extensively throughout the area

and into Athlone regularly with a horse and van. I was engaged in buying eggs for a business premises in Athlone. In this way I was able to keep contact with the different Volunteer units in the area and to bring around arms and ammunition. The Volunteers in Athlone were able to purchase an occasional rifle and ammunition from members of the British garrison and I took these out to the country where they were deposited. There was a detective officer named Fleming in Athlone and I am sure that he was aware I was carrying such stuff, but he never stopped me. Liam Mellows also brought arms into the Athlone area.

There was a brigade organisation in the Athlone area at this time and we were the 2nd Battalion of that brigade. In February 1920, the brigade made plans to attack and capture Streamstown R.I.C. Barracks. It was hoped to take this barracks by a ruse and, failing that, there were plans to attack it with mines and bombs and to set it on fire and compel the garrison to surrender. Sunday morning after Mass was the time laid down for the attack. Two of the police used to attend Mass at a chapel at Boher, some distance from the barracks, and it was planned to hold these men up and deprive them of their uniforms. Two of our men, Tom Costello and **Jas** Torney, were to dress in the R.I.C. men's uniforms and proceed to the barracks and get the door opened, which would then be rushed by men who would be in hiding close by. If this did not work, there was a mine or large bomb ready with which it was hoped to blow a hole in the gable end wall of the barracks. Ladders were to be used to get on to the roof which would be broken in and bombs and petrol thrown in.

Only selected men from the different battalions were mobilised for this affair. From our company in Tang, Pat

McDermott, Peter Bannon, I and some others were selected.

I was driving a car which was used to bring men to the assembly area at the Metal Bridge at Streamstown and I was armed with a revolver and a shotgun. There was quite a big mobilisation of men for this attack. The two policemen were held up and our two men dressed in the police uniforms went to the barrack door and tried to gain admission as being policemen from some other barracks. The barrack door was not opened, however, and, instead, the garrison opened fire through the loopholes in the steel shutters on the windows and threw out bombs. Costello and Tormey had narrow escapes in trying to get away from the barracks. Our men now opened fire on the barracks from their positions on the railway embankment and other points which they had occupied and this firing and counter-firing from the barracks went on for some time. After some time we were ordered to retreat and disperse to our homes, which we did, all getting away safely. Other than using up an amount of valuable ammunition, capturing two police uniforms, we had not achieved anything.

The bomb, or mine, had been placed against the wall as planned, but it failed to explode. I understand that the fuze had become damp and, when lighted, fizzled out without igniting the detonator. I cannot say definitely if any attempt was made to get on to the roof by the ladders. I heard afterwards that it was not attempted, as the police had dummy loopholes in the blind wall which was to be used, thus preventing our men from getting the ladders into position. Blind loopholes were made from the inside, only the plaster being left on the outside which was easily pushed out with the nose of a rifle. We had only retreated from Streamstown when a large party of police reinforcements arrived from Mullingar. The police now vacated the barracks, the garrison going to Mullingar and,



a night or so afterwards, the Moate Volunteers destroyed the barracks by burning it.

There was a period of comparative quiet after this and our time was devoted to making and filling buckshot into cartridges for the shotguns. Training was intensified and guns were repaired and got into the best condition possible. Michael Seery, who was battalion engineer officer, made some bombs. These were imitations of the Mills grenade and, on test, worked satisfactorily. In the early part of 1920, the R.I.C. vacated a large number of their outlying stations throughout the country as, under existing circumstances, they were no longer tenable. Littleton Station in my area was evacuated and the police removed to Athlone.

On Easter Saturday night 1920, my company in co-operation with the Drumreany Company burned this barracks down. Enemy forces were getting more active now and raids and round-ups and hold-ups became common features of life, and an occasional arrest by these forces was made.

In October 1920, the brigade started an active service unit or flying column. It was assembled at Faheran near Moate. Tormey, who was one of the bogus policemen at Streamstown, was put in charge of this column which was comprised of men on the run and Volunteers from the different battalions. I volunteered to go on this column but was instructed to remain in my area and look after the battalion as our O/C., Birthles, was joining the column. Birthles selected the men from the 2nd battalion who were to join the column. He remained, however, as O/C. of the battalion. All the rifles and the best of the shotguns were taken to Faheran to equip the column and the battalions were left without any effective armament.

The column assembled at Fah~~an~~ and, after a few days - and, I would say, before they were ready - staged an ambush at Parkwood on the main Dublin-Athlone road. They had hoped to contact a lorry of enemy of some sort, but instead they met up with a whole convoy of Black and Tans who were proceeding from Gormanston to the west of Ireland. After a short fight the column were lucky in being able to ~~extricate~~ <sup>EXTRICATE</sup> themselves from a nasty position without suffering casualties. That day, the Tans shot a man named Michael Burke as they passed through Athlone.

After Parkwood there was a lapse of activity by the column for a considerable time and it became more or less disorganised. It was now decided that an active service unit would be started in our battalion area and I joined this column which consisted of about 27 or 28 men. We had four rifles, two Lee Enfield service and two Howth Mausers. The Lee Enfield rifles were ones which had been bought from British soldiers in Athlone, while the Mausers were some of those that had been in the area since before the Rebellion. The column was different from the brigade unit in that it was not on a whole time basis and was only assembled as required. Most of the members were not yet on the run. Outside the men who were armed with the four rifles, the remainder were armed with shotguns, and there were also a few revolvers and a few home-made bombs. Birthles, the battalion O/C., took charge personally of the column.

It was now planned to have an ambush at Auburn on the Athlone-Longford road. Enemy forces in lorries usually travelled this road at some time each day and comprised two or three tender-loads of Black and Tans or Auxiliary police. A record of the traffic of enemy forces on this road was kept by local Volunteers. We moved into the Auburn area at daylight

on 2nd November 1920, and took up a position on one side of the road. The road at this point ran through a cutting and down to a bend. It was not an ideal position by any means as there was a lake in our rear, but was better than on the other side of the road. We hoped to get an enemy party coming from Athlone but prepared to meet one coming either way. For this purpose, two of the rifle men were stationed on either end or flank of our position with orders to shoot the driver of the leading lorry. We did not place any block on the road but relied on concealment and the ability of our riflemen to halt the lorries and thus create a natural block.

After spending some time - five or six hours - in position, we heard lorries or tenders approaching from the Longford side and not from Athlone as we had hoped. Our rifle men at that flank opened fire on the driver of the leading of two tenders of police but missed him and killed the sergeant who was sitting behind him. The tenders drove on through our position and our men raked them with buckshot from the guns as they did so. Our home-made bombs were also thrown into the tenders, but for some reason, they did not explode this time. It was noticeable that in the leading tender only a few police remained in a firing position; the others apparently were knocked out and were down on the floor. There were only three or four police to be seen on either tender. One of our men - Volunteer Finn - was killed by a rifle bullet.

The column now dispersed, taking Finn's body to a house in the neighbourhood where it was left to be collected later. A party of Tans, however, found the body before it could be removed and took it to Athlone. Finn's house was raided that night by Tans who were looking for his brother, but he was

not at home to them. Finn's body was subsequently handed over for burial to his relatives. On the evening of the ambush I was going into Athlone and, when near the scene of the ambush, I met two tenders filled with Tans. They held me up and questioned me and asked me if I could identify the body of a man they had in one of the tenders. I said I did not know who he was. It was Volunteer Finn's body. That night the Tans burned a house belonging to John Flanagan which was near the scene of the ambush. They also tried to burn a couple of houses at Meaghra, <sup>NEAR ATHLONE</sup> but somehow did not succeed. I think it was on that night also that they burned the Printing Works in Athlone.

The exact casualties inflicted by us at Auburn were never really known. Some sources put it as high as ten enemy killed. When Volunteer Finn's uncle went into the barracks in Athlone to claim the body he could see at least three other corpses there. After the ambush the Tans mistook the road and went towards Kilmore and there were large bloodstains on the road where they stopped. Some of the local people whom they stopped to inquire the way stated that there were at least four dead police in one of the tenders. Had the bombs exploded in the lorries as we had expected, I believe we would have captured the whole lot. The Tans came looking for me shortly after this, but did not get me, and I had now to go on the run.

Later on, we planned to have another ambush near Ballymahon, but this did not materialise as no enemy turned up. We also planned to stage an ambush at Ballymore, but again, for similar reasons, this did not come off.

On 5th January 1921, I was captured outside Tang Chapel; I had gone to confession the previous evening and while at Mass the place was surrounded by a force of military and Tans.

We had an outpost on duty at the time, but somehow or other they failed to warn us in time. Harry O'Brien, who was with me, and also Joe (Miner) Cunningham and Michael Finneran and I got across the chapel wall and into the surrounding fields. Cunningham and the other two got clear away. I was last over the wall as I had to assist one of my pals who, at the time, was still suffering from the effects of bad beating up he received at the hands of the Black and Tans previously. I unfortunately got caught. The enemy had machine guns playing on us and they were on the high ground while I was in a valley. I was taken to the military barracks, Athlone, along with two other Volunteers - Patrick Bannon and Jo<sup>HN</sup>~~HN~~ Coughlan, and held there. Captain Tully, who was the military Intelligence officer in Athlone, interrogated me about I.R.A. dumps in the area and the I.R.A. organisation and so forth. He called me and referred to us as Moonlighters. Tully astonished me by telling me the area in which our dump was located at Aughafinn. We were allowed visitors, so I sent word out to have it cleared, which was done, and although enemy forces searched the area, they found nothing. I was given a bit of a beating up, but not too badly.

I was kept in custody in Athlone Barracks until the following February when I was transferred to the internment camp at Ballykinlar, Co. Down, and I was there until the general release of prisoners in December 1921. There were two camps in Ballykinlar, Nos. 1 and 2. I do not remember which one I was in, but it was the one in which Henderson was the prisoners' commandant. Between the time of the Auburn ambush and my arrest, our principal activity was the blocking of roads to obstruct enemy movements and communications. So efficiently did we do this work that we

were complimented by the battalion O/C. Often when the enemy forces were raiding a district we blocked the roads behind them as well as in front and they had difficulty in getting out of the place. On one occasion Captain Tully placed hand grenades in one of our blocks, but a local man spotted him doing so and told Bill Casey about it. Casey, who understood grenades, had them removed safely.

Other than the making of buckshot and the filling of this into cartridges, and the construction of some bombs or hand grenades and the repair of shotguns, no attempt was made to produce munitions. That was all that was feasible under the circumstances.

Intelligence sections were organised within the battalions and companies. They kept watch on and recorded enemy movements and compiled data on regular patrols performed by enemy forces. they were also very useful for keeping watch on persons in the area who were suspected of collaborating with the enemy. There were two men shot for this sort of work - a Mr. Johnston and a Mr. Blagriff. Johnston was shot while I was interned and I understand he was the main source of information to the British Intelligence officer, Captain Tully. Blagriff had worked around the Coosan area with farmers. He had always been on friendly terms with the Volunteers and knew quite a lot of them and a lot about them. One day, while under the influence of drink, he had informed his employer that he was going to join the R.I.C. and had already passed the medical examination for this force. His employer told the Volunteers about this and it was decided that this man could not be allowed to join the R.I.C. He was in possession of such knowledge of the Volunteers that it would be highly dangerous to allow him to join, and the only alternative was to have him executed. When held up he denied all knowledge of the matter

although he had talked freely to his employer about who was who in the Volunteers. He was duly executed and labelled as a spy, although in the real sense he was not one.

The Cumann na mBan were organised in the area also and rendered good service in helping with the carrying of dispatches and scouting and collecting monies and providing parcels and comforts for men who were in jail or internment camps and on the run. My sister and Mary McGloughlin were in charge of the Cumann na mBan organisation.

There was also a branch of the Fianna, or scouts, organised in the Drumreany and Tang area. Thomas McGiff was in charge of this organisation and when he joined the Volunteers his place was taken by Thomas McDermott. They were also useful for scouting and general work and could often get through the enemy lines during round-ups when adults had not a chance of doing so.

Signed: Anthony Mc Cormack

Date: 27. 9. '36

Witness: Martin Sweeney

