

ORIGINAL

BUREAU OF MILITARY HISTORY 1913-21

BURO STAIRÉ MILEATA 1913-21

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BUREAU OF MILITARY HISTORY, 1913-21.

STATEMENT BY WITNESS.

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Witness

Michael McCormack,
Drumraney,
Athlone,
Co. Westmeath.

Identity.

Adjutant, Drumraney Battalion, I.R.A.
Centre, Drumraney Circle, I.R.B.

Subject.

Activities of Drumraney Battalion, Irish
Volunteers, Athlone Brigade, 1914-1921,
and Brigade Flying Column, 1920-1921.

Conditions, if any, Stipulated by Witness.

Nil.

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STATEMENT BY MICHAEL McCORMACK,
Drumraney, Athlone, County Westmeath.

I was born in Drumraney and was educated at the local school there. There was nothing taught in school then that would serve as a foundation or build-up in young boys any deep sense of patriotism. My father had been in Australia and there he had come in contact with many of the men who had been deported or had to leave Ireland because they loved it too well, according to English standards. When we were children, he regularly discussed Irish History with us and enlightened us on the many crimes and wrongs perpetrated on our country by the English invader, and he often sang traditional folk songs for us. Thus we grew up in an atmosphere in which there was a love for everything Irish and with a great desire to see the country independent and in command of her own destiny. I think my father was a Fenian. I had read and studied books such as "The Jail Journal" and "The last Conquest".

In 1907 I became a member of the Irish Republican Brotherhood. Peter Malinn was organising the I.R.B. in County Westmeath at this time and later on my brother John continued to push the organisation in the county. Both Malinn and my brother were working in Dublin around 1907 and they used to come down here during week-ends and holiday time. Later on my brother took up commercial travelling and Malinn started a shop in Athlone. I attended meetings of the Brotherhood in Athlone and Tullamore from 1907 until 1913. The meetings were generally held in Athlone. At this time the strength of the organisation in the area was about thirty and by 1913 it was about fifty-five. I was appointed Centre in Drumraney when a Circle was established there. After 1916, when the Irish Volunteers were

reorganised, we reached a strength of about twenty in this Circle which included Drumraney and surrounding districts, and the conscription threat further increased our strength.

In 1913 I got to know Tom Clarke and Seán McDermott. I sold "Irish Freedom" in the area where we travelled and collected monies for Seán McDermott for the Wolfe Tone Memorial Fund. Really, I think this fund was to finance the forthcoming Rising. In 1910 I organised a Hurling Club in Drumraney, the committee of which were all members of the I.R.B. The name of the club was "The Leo Casey Hurling Club, Drumraney", and was the first Hurling Club organised outside Athlone in the County Westmeath. This club won the County Junior Championship in 1915 and the Senior Championship in 1918 and 1920. We used this club to disguise our I.R.B. activities and to collect money for the Wolfe Tone Fund.

A branch of the Gaelic League was organised in the area in 1909 by Father O'Reilly of Tang, who laboured hard and organised the Gaelic League in seven or eight parishes in County Westmeath. The Comharle Ceanntear was called Ballymore and the chairman was Father O'Casey. Father O'Casey was a very enthusiastic Gaelic Leaguer, one might say an extremist and he did wonderful work for the Movement. Father O'Clarke was also a great worker in the cause. Father Smith of Milltown was also a very keen worker and was later interned by the British Authorities for his activities. The priests were Gaels and Nationalists of the best type and they believed and preached that if Ireland was to be a nation it must be Gaelic as well. Father O'Reilly was so extreme that he was obliged to leave the country in 1915 and went to China on the foreign missions. It is understood that the British Government brought pressure to bear on the Church Authorities and had him removed. He was very outspoken

regarding his views and spoke freely from platforms about the coming war between England and Germany and of how Ireland should avail of this to establish her freedom. He did everything possible before and after the war had started and up to his removal in 1915 to discourage our young men from joining the British Army and he appealed to the girls not to keep company with the members of the British garrison in the country, but to boycott them instead. As early as 1911 our I.R.B. Headquarters had got out posters on those lines which also warned our men about joining the British Army and of the forthcoming war and appealed to our girls especially to boycott the British garrison. An Aeriocht was organised in Coolevin, Tang. On the night previous I plastered the platform with these posters. The committees who were strong supporters of John Redmond's or National Party tore them down and complained to Father O'Reilly who told them they had no right to interfere with the posters which must have been put there by some good Irishman. Father O'Reilly organised a Company of the Irish Volunteers in Tang in 1914 and bought five Lee Enfield rifles for them.

In September, 1914, when the split took place in the Volunteer organisation, the Tang Company took the Redmond side. This was an awful disappointment to Father O'Reilly and nearly broke his heart. The most he could do then was to get an undertaking from them to remain neutral in the dispute. It was an awful set-back to him that this Company, for whom he had done so much, did not remain loyal to the Irish Volunteer executive.

At this time I was Adjutant of the Drumraney Irish Volunteers and here a vote was taken to decide which side the Volunteers would support. Sixteen declared for the Redmond side and seventeen for the Irish Volunteers. The I.R.B. helped here to hold the unit for the Irish Volunteers. The Drumraney Company had been started in 1914

My brother John and I were instrumental in getting them started and John was appointed the officer in charge. We had then about fifty men. We had no arms of any sort. A man named Carroll, who had served with the British Army, acted as instructor and later Major Dice of Tubberclare took an interest in them for a while. This was the time that Redmond made his offer to the British Government to defend the shores of Ireland against invasion.

My two brothers Thomas and Bernard McCormack took part with the Dublin Volunteers in the Howth Gun Running. As a result of this successful affair in Howth we received five rifles, known as Howth Mausers. Tom Clarke also sent us down a further three rifles, one of which was a Lee Enfield, magazine pattern. The other two were single-shot weapons but serviceable. Before the vote was taken to decide which side the Drumraney Volunteers would support at the time of the split an undertaking was come to in the Company that whichever side got the majority vote would retain the rifles. As we had a majority of one, we had the custody of the rifles. Furthermore, the principal Volunteers and best men remained on our side. We continued to meet and drill as heretofore, but gradually a number of our men became inactive and ceased to be Volunteers and it became increasingly harder to keep things going.

On St. Patrick's night, 17th March, 1916, an incident took place at the Volunteer Hall in Tullamore as a result of which Peadar Bracken from there had to go 'on the run'. He came to our house the night after and knocked on the door in the early hours of the morning, really at 3 a.m. I recognised his voice and got up and let him in. He remained at our house until the Rebellion, being in Dublin for that. Bracken had to remain more or less in hiding with us and only went out for long walks at night time. We had revolver practice with him in the fields a good distance away from the house.

On the 16th April, 1916, Michael Staines arrived at our house from Dublin and he told us that a Rebellion was planned for the following Easter Sunday and he discussed mobilisation plans with us. I took him to Athlone to Peter Malinn and from there he returned to Dublin. On Holy Thursday, Joseph McGuinness of Longford, but who worked in Dublin, came to our place with a dispatch from Pearse which contained orders for us to mobilise and strike on Easter Sunday night at 7 p.m. This would be the 23rd April. Mobilisation orders were now issued but only to the I.R.B. members of the Company including my brother John. We had insufficient arms for a general mobilisation. On Good Friday night a Council was held at our house. Eadar Bracken, Seamus Brennan (Offaly), John McCormack, Michael McCormack, John Hurley and Peter Malinn of Athlone and I and I think Seamus O'Brien were present at this conference. The plans laid down by Mellows in 1913 were discussed. These envisaged the attack and capture of the Military barracks in Athlone and the raiding for arms of all the R.I.C. stations in the surrounding countryside followed by an assembly of all Volunteers at Shannon Bridge from where they would join up with the western men under Mellows. There were also a number of bridges including railway bridges to be destroyed. We were compelled to reduce this plan and revise it accordingly to our strength which was very far below what Mellows foresaw. The attack on the barracks in Athlone was abandoned as was the raiding of R.I.C. stations, and it was decided that after the destruction of communications to proceed to the assembly area at Shannon Bridge. All rifles were to be concentrated in the Athlone Company area including the eight from Drumraney and the five from Tang. The Tang rifles were in the possession of John Flanagan who was a Redmondite. We got the rifles from Flanagan on Easter Saturday

evening, when we let him into the secret that there was going to be a rebellion. When the rifles were concentrated they were to be taken secretly to the assembly area at Shannon Bridge and our men were to go there in small groups so as not to arouse suspicion.

All that mobilised on Easter Sunday evening were five from Drumraney, about seven from Tyrellspass and about fifty from Coosan, Athlone and Meaghra area. Some of the Athlone men were to come to Drumraney and assist in destroying the bridges at Fassagh, Mount Temple and Streamstown and raid the R.I.C. Barracks at Moate. The men from Tyrellspass were to join us at Streamstown. Some of the Athlone men went direct to Shannon Bridge; others went by boat and some by horse and car, taking the rifles with them. We had revolvers and explosives. The five men who mobilised at Drumraney were all ready to start when P. ~~Breathin~~^{ACKEN} and Seamus Brennan arrived and said all was off for the present. We were to go home, but to hold ourselves in readiness to mobilise again and they would see us later. I was detailed to contact one of the Athlone parties with a similar message. I met this party at Wardenstown, and it consisted of fourteen men under the command of Sean Mullaney. They were all mounted on cycles. I delivered my message to them and they were very disappointed. I had them get in contact with the men who had gone on to Shannon Bridge and issue similar instructions to them.. My brother John went to meet the Tyrellspass men at ~~Admore~~^{DONDRE} Crossroads and demobilise them. All were told to hold themselves in readiness to mobilise again when called on to do so.

Peter Malinn and a few others came to our house which we barricaded using bags of meal to block up the windows and so forth. We were only armed with revolvers. We remained there awaiting instructions for further mobilisation. Kate Daly, who was a member

of the Cumann na mBan, sent us a message that one of Hancock's servants had told her that she had heard British officers, who were being entertained in Hancock's, say that they would do Coosan and Drumraney tomorrow night. On receipt of this information we dispersed. Peter ~~McGinn~~^{McGinn} and I went to Tubberclare, the others going to other places. There was no raid on our house and I came home the next day. At 3 a.m. the following morning I was awakened by the banging of rifle butts on the door and someone shouting, "Open your door McCormack in the King's name. I command you to open the door. Your house is fully surrounded by armed forces. Make no resistance whatever or it shall be fatal to you".

I was then taken into custody by a party of military. They were a Cavalry unit and had an armoured car with them. This was the first time I had seen an armoured car. I was taken to the military barracks in Athlone with some others. We went through some form of a courtmartial there. I and the Drumraney men were detained while some others, who were arrested, were released. About twenty or thirty men from Athlone were detained there. None of the men from Tyrellspass was arrested. Our treatment in Athlone barracks was pretty harsh. We were next taken to Richmond barracks, Dublin. Here there was a big crowd of prisoners, many of whom I knew including Peadar Bracken and others.

We were kept in the Richmond barracks for some days and then taken to the North Wall, Dublin, and boarded on a cattle boat and shipped to Holyhead. From there we were taken by train to Wakefield Prison and placed in solitary confinement for three weeks. There was very little food and we were lying on bare boards. The late Laurence Ginnell raised the matter of the treatment of Irish prisoners in the English Jails in the British Parliament and after that conditions were improved somewhat and we were allowed visits

and parcels. Irish priests visited us and brought us food. Father Kavanagh was very good in this respect. About the middle of June, 1916, I and some others were released, while the main bulk of the prisoners, except the men who had been sentenced to periods in jail, were transferred to Frongoch Camp in Wales. My brother Bernard was in Frongoch. My brother Thomas was wounded during the fighting in Dublin. He was with the garrison in the College of Surgeons. Seán Costello of Athlone was killed in Dublin during the Rebellion. Seamus Malinn also fought in Dublin and was sentenced to death which was reduced to penal servitude for life. He was released in June 1917 after the election in Longford.

The night before the polling in the Longford election an article appeared in the "Evening Herald" by Dr. Walsh, Archbishop of Dublin, in which he stated that the country was being ruined and sold by the Parliamentary Party or words to that effect. We took this article to the Athlone Printing Works and had it re-printed in pamphlet form. The following morning a copy of this pamphlet was handed to every voter.

During the bye-election in Longford I and some other men went up there and assisted in the campaign to have McGuinness elected. In 1917 and before the Longford election we had reorganised the Volunteers in Drumraney. On the night of the declaration of the poll in Longford we had bonfires lighted to celebrate the victory. After the Longford election things became more or less dormant until 1918 when the threat of Conscription flared up and threw the country into a period of great patriotism and excitement. Men now flocked to join the Volunteers and very quickly we had a strength of over sixty. With the exception of a few rifles which were surrendered in Athlone, the remainder were not handed up despite the various proclamations and consequent penalties issued by the British Authorities, and they were returned to our area after the Rising had collapsed. The Volunteers now drilled and exercised openly being watched by the R.I.C. who did not interfere with them. The Volunteers were instrumental in having everyone sign the Anti-Conscription pledge and in collecting subscriptions for the Anti-Conscription Fund. Father Clarke addressed an Anti-Conscription meeting one Sunday.

Father Clarke said, "Whoever is with us is here today and those who are not here are against us". Two members of the R.I.C. were present from Ballymore and Father Clarke addressed them and asked them if they were with us. They made no reply. We took it that they were against us and some of our hurlers ran them from the place. A similar meeting was held in Ballymore by Father Casey. The same two R.I.C. attended at this meeting and spoke to the other police who were already there and then all the police withdrew from the meeting. During the Conscription crisis we made a number of pike-heads and prepared handles cut locally for them.

After the Conscription threat had died down the strength of the Drumraney Volunteers dwindled to about forty-eight or so. Richard Barthles was appointed Commandant of the Battalion. I was appointed Battalion Adjutant and Thomas Cuff was the Battalion Quartermaster. The Companies making up the Battalion were - Drumraney, Tang, Tubberclare, Ballymore, Rosemount and Bishopstown. A Brigade organisation was in existence for the whole of the County Westmeath at this time. Seamus O'Mara of Athlone was the Brigade O/C. Our Battalion was the 2nd Battalion of this Brigade. The strength of the Battalion was about one hundred and eighty All Ranks.

During the general election all ranks of the Volunteers had a very busy time. Nominally, the election work was the responsibility of the Sinn Féin organisation, but the greater bulk of it was done by the Volunteers. The demarcation line between the Volunteers and Sinn Féin was never very rigid as most of the Volunteers were also members of the Sinn Féin organisation. There were some minor incidents and clashes with the Ancient Order of Hibernians who were the supporters of Redmond, but none of those was of any importance. 'Vote early and vote often' was the slogan of

the day and on the polling day personation became a game. The election went off quietly with an overwhelming victory for the Sinn Féin candidate.

The first Dáil met in Dublin in January, 1919 and immediately floated a National Loan. Here again the Volunteers did great work in canvassing and collecting for this Loan and it was truly amazing the way the people subscribed to this issue, even the people who had fought against us in the general election. I acted as a Receiver for the Drumraney area and handed over all the money collected to Mr. Robbins of Lake House, Moate, who took it to Michael Collins who was Minister for Finance in the Dáil Cabinet. Each subscriber was given a temporary receipt and later on received an official receipt from the Minister of Finance. Every penny collected was accounted for which was truly a remarkable feat under the circumstances. I am sure that the vast majority of the subscribers did not look upon it as a Loan transaction but rather as another ordinary collection which they would never see again. This money, with accumulated interest, was all paid back in later years by our own Government.

The Dáil now took over the Volunteer organisation as the official Army of the Irish Republic and declared that all members of this organisation should take an Oath of Allegiance to the Republic. All our members subscribed to this Oath. At first the Tang Company demurred about taking this Oath and refused to take it. On investigation it was discovered that they were being misled about it by one of their officers and when this was rectified they all subscribed to it. The Sinn Féin organisation was well established now and they quickly got the Sinn Féin Courts and

Arbitration Courts functioning. Father Casey acted as Judge in the Courts. The people quickly gained confidence in the Courts and took their cases for litigation to them, and the old established British Courts were practically deserted. The Solicitors and Barristers took up practice at the Sinn Féin Courts. At first the Courts were held in public. At the first Court that was held in Moate some thousands of people assembled in the town. The Volunteers did duty in the Courts and in the town. The R.I.C. did not put in any appearance that day and did not attempt to interfere, but later on they did and then the Courts had to be held secretly. We did have to make some arrests locally. One such arrest was for attempted murder. Men who were arrested were detained in other areas where they were not known to the local Volunteers. This was a safety precaution so that such persons could not give information to the British Authorities, on their release, about where or by whom they were detained, should they be inclined to do so. Although the R.I.C. tried to follow up this avenue of information they never got very far, as the persons concerned would not talk. Generally the persons who were arrested by the Volunteers and detained for some time, never gave any more trouble after their release. We maintained a place of detention for the people arrested in the Athlone area and held some prisoners there. Such work was a great nuisance to the Volunteers as it meant keeping a continual guard on such place and providing food and sleeping accommodation both for the guards and prisoners. Police work of this nature was the principal preoccupation of the Volunteers during the year 1919 and early 1920 and, although it was a bit of a nuisance to us, it had its advantages in that it helped to build up a tradition and morale in the Volunteer Force

and a spirit of confidence in the Volunteers by the general public. It had always been asserted by a certain section in this country that we were not capable of governing ourselves and this was now given the definite lie. We now had our own Government and Forces to maintain law and order and were doing it very efficiently under very difficult circumstances.

While all this police work was being carried on we still did not lose sight of our main object which was to clear all the British Forces out of the country, and training and trying to arm ourselves went ahead. We all realised that there was a major struggle ahead of us at some time in the future. To get arms was our big trouble. A collection or rather a levy had been put on all property by owners in the area to raise money for this object and this realised a good sum. General Headquarters in Dublin could only help in this respect in a very limited way. Occasionally we could purchase a rifle and some ammunition from some members of the English Military garrison in Athlone, but this source also was very limited and dried up altogether when a few rifles were found missing.

A friend of mine named Thomas Keaveney was working in Athlone as a pawnbroker's assistant. He was a Volunteer and his employment brought him into contact with members of the British garrison who were notorious for pawning things. This man bought a few rifles off British soldiers. He brought me one with fifty rounds of ammunition and then after about a lapse of fourteen days he arrived one evening with another which he had concealed under his overcoat. A party of R.I.C. under the famous Sergeant Craddock, who was afterwards shot in Athlone, was raiding the house at the time. Keaveney was coming up the avenue or lane to our house when he ran into this raiding party who were just leaving. They halted him and asked him his business.

He replied that he was a relative of people who lived locally and that he came out here every Saturday to spend Sunday and Sunday night at a neighbour's house to dance. Sergeant Craddock ordered him to be searched for dispatches. Keaveney opened his coat including the inner jacket, saying "I don't know what you are talking about". I could hear all this from where I was standing near my own door. In opening his jacket Keaveney had continued to conceal the rifle between his outer and inner coats. They searched his inner pockets but did not discover the rifle and let him go. Immediately they had left he dumped his rifle over the hedge in case he would meet any more of them. When the raiding party had cleared off I got the rifle which was not damaged in any way.

About the 1st March, 1920, it was planned to attack and capture Ballymore R.I.C. Barracks which contained a garrison of about five R.I.C. and a Sergeant. A party of selected men were mobilised for this and concentrated at a point near Ballymore. Another party, who had been detailed to bring the rifles to this point, failed to turn up in time and the attempt had to be called off in consequence. This party heard lorries which they took to be military lorries and went into hiding. By the time they discovered that the lorries were civilian ones it was too late to start the attack and the Athlone men had gone home. They would have to get back to town early. The barracks was not fortified at the time and we had paraffin oil and materials assembled with which to set the roof alight. We had shot-guns available but these would have been no use without the rifles to keep the garrison pinned down.

In the end of 1919 and early 1920 the R.I.C. began to evacuate most of their small outlying stations and concentrate the force in larger ones which were of strategic importance. There had been a

number of R.I.C. barracks attacked throughout the country at this time by the Volunteers and some of them had been captured. Moyvore and Meaghra were evacuated in our area. On Easter Saturday night 1920 we destroyed those barracks by burning them. This was a country-wide operation carried out by the Volunteers, and some hundreds of such places were destroyed.

Early in February, 1920, the Brigade planned to attack and capture Streamstown R.I.C. Barracks and about fifteen men from our Battalion were selected for this affair. The plans to capture the place were two-fold. Two of the garrison were wont to go on Sundays to Mass at Boher some distance away and it was planned to hold up these two police and strip them of their uniforms. Two of our men, Costello the Brigade O/C., and Tormey who was afterwards in charge of the Brigade Active Service Unit and later still was killed by an enemy bullet, were to dress in the uniforms and proceed to the barracks. They were to pose as policemen from another barracks and in this way get admission to the place. Meanwhile, a party of our men were to be in hiding close by and their job was to rush the barracks when the door was opened. Other parties were to be in a covering position on the railway embankment and other positions. Should this ruse not prove successful there was an alternative plan to take the barracks by direct assault. A large bomb or mine was available with which it was hoped to blow a hole in the gable end wall of the barracks and ladders were available for getting on to the roof. Holes were to be made in the roof and paraffin oil and other saturated material thrown in to set the place on fire.

A big number of men were mobilised for this attack and assembled near Streamstown on a Sunday morning. There were about twenty rifles available and a good supply of shotguns. The rifles were the ones we had not surrendered after the 1916 Rising plus a few others that

had been collected here and there since. The police were held up and deprived of their uniforms, and Costello and Tormey went to the door but failed to get it open. There were loopholed steel shutters on the windows and the police pushed a bomb through one of those, and Tormey and Costello were very lucky to escape being killed or injured. That was the end of plan number one. Fire was now opened on the barracks to which the police replied with vigour. The mine was placed in position against the gable wall but when the fuze was lighted it failed to burn, being apparently damp. The police had dummy loopholes unknown to us in the blind walls of the barracks and by firing through those they prevented any attempt from getting the ladders in position to get on to the roof and to set the place alight from there. So that ended plan number two. Fire was kept up on the barracks by our men for about half an hour or longer, but as there was no hope of capturing the barracks in this way we were ordered to withdraw and disperse, which we did. None of our men suffered any injuries and I don't think any of the garrison did either as they were well protected. The police evacuated the barracks the next morning and transferred the garrison elsewhere, and that night the Rosemount Company burned the premises. The police continued to occupy Ballymore barracks which they fortified and strengthened.

In the autumn of 1920, General Headquarters ordered a general raid for arms throughout the country. Headquarters had information that the British Authorities were going to collect all the guns and other arms in the country immediately, and ours was a race to forestall them. We visited every house where there was a shotgun or other weapon. We collected a large number of shotguns of various types, some old horse pistols and a few revolvers of different calibres. We were only a day or so ahead of the R.I.C. and Military who were

on the same mission. In nearly all cases it was only a matter of asking for the weapons and the people handed them up as they were becoming a source of trouble. In a few cases a little persuasion had to be resorted to to procure the weapons, but in no case had any shooting to be done and the whole operation passed off without serious incident. The guns were placed in dumps already selected beforehand.

In September, 1920, a Brigade Active Service Unit or Flying Column was started and nine or ten men from our Battalion joined this unit, including the Battalion Commandant Dick Barthles. I also volunteered but was instructed to remain and look after the Battalion in the absence of the Commandant. We received orders to compile a list of friendly houses who would be prepared to keep men 'on the run' or billet members of the Column when the unit would be in the area. We also were told to erect dumps to take arms and to construct a dugout where men could shelter, and this we did. The principal dump for our battalion was at Drumraney. The Tans were in force from the country and there was a large force of them concentrated in Athlone, Moate, Ballymore and other centres.

The Brigade Column were only a very short time formed when they staged an ambush at Parkwood near Moate. They lay in ambush at this spot on the main Dublin/Athlone road in the hopes of getting one or two lorries of enemy troops but, unfortunately, they got embroiled in a fight with a large convoy of Black and Tans who were proceeding from their Camp at Gormanstown, County Meath, to Galway. They were very lucky to be able to disengage themselves from this affair and get away without suffering any casualties. After this there was a period of inactivity by the Brigade Column who were more or less disorganised.

We of our Battalion felt that something in the nature of active harassing of the enemy forces should be started and I prevailed on our Battalion O/C. to go to Dublin and get G.H.Q. to send an order to our Brigade to have the rifles, which were all taken from us, to arm the Column returned to us. We were anxious to start a column in our Battalion area. Barthles succeeded in having G.H.Q. order a distribution of the arms amongst the Battalions in the Brigade. However, we only got four rifles returned to us. Our idea was to have a number of men who could be assembled easily, rather than having a full time service unit. This would be much easier to maintain as the men could stay at home or at their places of employment.

We decided to start our activities on the 2nd November, as a reprisal for the death of Terence McSwiney, Mayor of Cork. We decided to stage an ambush at Auburn on the main Athlone/Ballymahon road. A watch had been kept on this road and it was ascertained that a couple of lorries or tenders, as they called their small lorries, of Tans travelled this road nearly every day in the forenoon. The position selected was not an ideal one but it was the best available. We mobilised about twenty-five men and moved into the ambush position before daylight in the morning. We had four rifles and the remainder were armed with shotguns. There were also a few Mills type bombs and a few revolvers.

We expected an enemy force to come from the Athlone direction but prepared to meet one from either side. The road here runs through a cutting and we took up position on one side only. The other side was, because of its conformation, of no use to us. We did not block the road as, being a main road, a block could be sighted by the enemy and any hold-up of normal traffic would put them on their guard. Instead, we sighted two of our riflemen near each

flank of the position, whose specific instructions were to shoot the driver of the leading lorry and thus, by jamming the road, bring the other or others to a halt inside our position.

We were in position some hours when two tender-loads of enemy came from the Longford side. Fire was opened on the driver of the leading tender by the riflemen on that flank. The driver was killed by the first shot but another man, who was sitting beside the driver, showed great presence of mind and immediately took over the driver's position and drove the lorry, with all speed, through our position followed by the second lorry. As they passed through the position our men raked them with fire from the shotguns and, as they passed through, at the other flank our men in position reported that there were only a very few of the occupants of either cars to be seen in a firing position. It was, therefore, presumed that a large number of them were knocked out being either killed or wounded. Our men also threw three hand-grenades into the lorries but, for some unknown reason, none of them exploded. Had any of the grenades exploded it would probably have brought them to a halt and we would have a capture. The delay in changing drivers in the first lorry gave an opportunity to our shotgun men to get in two volleys of shots. Our riflemen tried to shoot the driver of the second lorry but missed him. The lorries were travelling about two hundred yards apart. Some of the shotguns failed to eject the cartridges when fired. This was a regular occurrence and was caused by the cartridge casing which was made of compressed paper becoming damp and swollen, but a good many of our men were able to get in a second shot. Our grenade-thrower was an ex-British Army man and was experienced in such weapons. The enemy fought hard from their lorries, firing through the embankment, and several of our men had narrow escapes, just not being in the right position to collect one.

One of our men, Volunteer Finn, unfortunately was caught in this fire and was killed outright. Finn's body was taken by a party of our men to a house near the ambush position where a nurse was in attendance and a priest was got to attend to him, but it was too late as he was already dead. The enemy had three killed and several wounded. I think all the occupants of the first lorry were knocked out as they received the first and complete volley from our shotgun men.

The rest of us were now ordered to disperse and report back to our different Company areas. We were to bring our arms with us and conceal them and to report to our Company parades centres the following night at the usual time. A large force of enemy came into the area after the ambush and the whole district around was cordoned off and searched. They found Volunteer Finn's body which they took to Athlone Military barracks. They made some arrests and raided a large number of houses including ours. Of the men arrested, only one was a Volunteer and he had not been at the ambush and these men were detained but were not charged or courtmartialled. They succeeded in identifying Finn's body somehow. The occupants of the house may have known Finn and told the enemy forces who he was. That night they raided Finn's house looking for his brother and vowed they would shoot him when they got him. Needless to say, he was not at his house when they arrived. A farmer's house near the scene of the ambush belonging to John Flanagan was burned and also some out-offices of Doolan's of Meaghra, but the dwelling-house somehow escaped. Several men whom they found on the roads locally were beaten up by them and generally ill-treated, and around Meaghra the people had to go into hiding to escape them. Finn's body was handed over to his uncle by the military for internment.

Elections for the County Council, Westmeath County, were held in June, 1920 and in this the Sinn Féin organisation went all out to get control of the Board as well as the other Local Government bodies. The Sinn Féin Republican candidates were returned for the County Council by an overwhelming majority. There were also a few Labour representatives elected and also a few Unionists. The first action of the new Council, of which I was a member, was to rescind a resolution which had been passed by the then County Council in 1916 which condemned the Rising and called on the British Government to deal with the matter swiftly and effectively, or words to that effect. I proposed that the minutes containing this resolution be removed from the Minute Book and burned and this resolution was passed unanimously. The resolution condemning the Rising had been sponsored by the Unionist element in the Corporation at the time. In after years I was sorry for having proposed that the minutes containing that resolution should be burned when some of the Unionist members of our new County Council started to object to politics being introduced into the affairs of the Council. They did not object in 1916 when it suited them not to do so. The County Council now decreed that all members of the Council Staff would have to take an oath of loyalty to the Irish Republic. All the staff except one Rate Collector subscribed to this oath. This man was a member of the United Irish League or Redmondite Party and he resigned sooner than take the oath. There were some Protestant members of the Council Staff, but they all took the oath.

The new County Council soon found itself in financial trouble. As they would not recognise the British Local Government Board and gave allegiance to the Dáil only, the Banks would not give them an overdraft and there was no money available to pay the staff. A

meeting was held to consider the situation and at this meeting the Labour members wanted us to rescind our previous resolution and to pass one recognising the British Local Government Board. The Council, by a majority, refused to do this. Some of the members of the Council including - to their credit - Unionists and men of position and stake in the country and also some farmers and business-men undertook to go security for the money required until such time as the Rate monies would be collected. In this way we got over our financial difficulties of the times.

I should have mentioned earlier that when Liam Mellows went to the U.S.A. after the Rebellion he got in touch with one of the priests in the Carmelite Friary in New York. In 1920, Father O'Flanagan from Sawmills House, Moate, came home from the U.S.A. on a visit to his home and he gave me a message - a dispatch in fact, from Mellows encouraging us to continue in the fight for freedom. Father O'Flanagan told me all about Liam Mellows and what he was doing for "Dark Rosaleen" in America.

My brother, John McCormack, was organising for the I.R.B. in Westmeath and Kings County and other counties from 1913 onwards. He held office as Brigade O/C until Seamus O'Mara was appointed.

After the ambush in Auburn the Battalion Column dispersed, the men going to their homes and locations but continuing to meet for the usual parades for training. Road trenching and blocking and the cutting of communications now became general throughout the area. In the end of January, 1921, plans were made to ambush a lorry of Tans in Ballymore. This party were in the habit of travelling by lorry from Moate to Ballymore R.I.C. Barracks with the pay for the garrison there. We mobilised the Column to ambush this party but, unfortunately, on that morning a terrific snow storm came down and

we had to abandon the attempt. So severe was the storm that the Tans did not travel that day either.

In March, 1921, we made plans also to lay in ambush in Ballymore.. The Black and Tans in Ballymore were going round night after night raiding houses and terrorising people generally. They robbed houses and were particularly keen on killing and stealing fowl. We went into Ballymore and lay in ambush for them but they did not come our way that night. We repeated this operation on three occasions but did not succeed in making contact with them. The Tans found out that we were after them and gave up their night raiding around Ballymore, so our attempts had that good affect at least.

In March of that year the payment of dog licences was due to be made. We put up notices on all the Chapel gates in the area, requesting the people not to pay such licences. We gave an undertaking to the people that they would not get into any trouble for not paying. On the whole the people responded very well to this appeal and very few paid. To show the people we were in earnest about the matter we took action in the Glasson district where we surrounded the Courthouse and held up the Court Clerk and staff and took away all the money that had been paid together with the records and books. A party of Black and Tans were patrolling in Glasson at the time but we waited until they had gone out the Benow Road and then raided the Courthouse behind their backs. Quite a good number of people were summoned for not paying by the R.I.C. and their cases were due to be heard before the British Court in Ballymore the following June. We mobilised our men again and collected a supply of petrol and paraffin oil for our requirements, and on the morning of the day that the Court was due to be held

we went into Ballymore and burned the Courthouse, so no Court was held. The people never heard any more about the summonses that had been served on them.

The Republican administration was carried out very effectively throughout the County Westmeath and the County Council and other local bodies which were now effectively in the hands of Sinn Féin were operating very successfully and British administration in this respect, now, practically did not exist. The Sinn Féin Courts were also operating successfully although their activities had to be carried out secretly.

I had now been on the run for a long time and although enemy forces were continually looking for me I had succeeded in evading them so far. They were continually raiding my home for me, both night and day, so much so that even my sisters had to go on the run as they were fearful of what might happen to them during those raids, particularly at night. I generally returned to my home during daylight hours but never stayed there at night-time. I had several narrow escapes from being caught and on a few occasions even when they got a sight of me I succeeded in escaping.

On the 14th April, 1921 David Daly and my brother Patrick were in our house. Daly was on his way to the Mullingar area in connection with organising work for the I.R.B. He was also a 'wanted' man by the enemy. I was outside and some distance from the house keeping watch for the approach of enemy forces. My sister came to where I was posted and relieved me to have some dinner. When I was about to return to my look-out post, I asked my brother and Daly to hurry up and get away as quickly as possible. Daly said he had to shave and get ready to start for the Mullingar area. I said "Don't be long" as I knew they were in grave danger while in the house. I was only just back to my post when I observed a cloud of dust on the

road about a half mile away. We had an arrangement to give warnings by using bottles with the bottoms removed. When you blew hard into the bottle neck it emitted a horn-like sound of a dull type but which could be heard a long distance away on a normal day. This day, however, was not normal in that it was very stormy with a very strong wind blowing and the bottle blowing was not effective. I could not even hear the sound of the lorries approaching, which one normally could, while they were still a good distance off.

Realising that our signal arrangements would not work I had no alternative left but to make for the house to warn Daly and my brother that the enemy were coming. To do this I had to cross about three hundred yards of rough ground. I got to the house before the Tans and told Daly and my brother that enemy forces were almost upon us. We left the house immediately and made to get away. In the meantime the Tans had surrounded an area around the house. They could do this quickly as they were well acquainted with the surrounds. We had only got about two hundred and fifty yards from the house when a hail of bullets ploughed up the ground around us. We continued to run despite the rifle and machine gun fire which was concentrated on us, and got to a certain place which gave us good protection from fire, but it was apparent to us now that we had no chance of escape. Daly had some documents on him connected with the I.R.B. and we scraped a hole in the mud in the bottom of the dyke where we were, and put them in this hole. We then covered them over with mud and flattened it out so that the water would run over it.

I suggested that we move further along the dyke where we were sheltering so that when we got caught they would not search this

spot, and this we did. We also hid some money with the documents. There was no hope of us getting away any further as it was flat open ground with no chance of getting across it under fire. We waited in our position until we saw the Tans coming towards us. One Tan carrying a rifle pointed at our position and wearing running shoes was quite close to us. I realised that if we remained concealed in the dyke they would probably shoot us out of hand; so I stepped up and put up my hands and shouted that we were surrendering at once and were not making any resistance and that we were not armed. The Tan with the running shoes said "You are my prisoner now". Daly and my brother were now taken from the dyke by the main body of Tans who had closed in. The Tans beat them with their rifles and used colourful indecent language to them. They knocked them down with bangs of the rifle butts. So far I had not been molested. While this was happening the Tan with the running shoes who was standing guard on me remarked to me, "This is not fair. You are a prisoner of war. You are fighting for your country and I fought for England in France against Germany. I was captured by the Germans and treated as a prisoner-of-war and got fair play from them. We were not treated as you people are. I would rather resign than strike you. I was in charge of men too, but your time is coming; I won't be in charge of you all the time. See your own Irishmen (pointing at the D.I. and some R.I.C.) as bad as ours. You will be alright while I am with you". We were now taken up to the lorries on the road. On our way up to the road I was ordered to open a gate which was bound up with barbed wire. I could not manage to open it and a big Black and Tan gave me a kick on the hip knocking me on to the gate which collapsed under me. I got entangled in the barbed wire on the gate and had some trouble in getting myself clear of it.

On reaching the road we were again asked our names and the rank we held in the I.R.A. etc. etc. A neighbour of mine was working in a field close by. They took him out of the field to identify us. He refused to do so saying that he never saw us before. They gave him a good beating and then let him go free. When we got to the road they had my two sisters also there and on a lorry. The Tans had taken hen-eggs from our yard and they now pelted us with those eggs and we were quickly in a mess. Each of us was now taken individually and asked for information about who were our officers and so forth and about men on the run such as Seamus O'Mara, Dick Birthles, T. J. McGiff and others. They threatened to shoot us if we did not give the required information and while a Tan took aim at us with a rifle we were given three chances to do so. This man stood back seven or eight yards from me. The officer stood by him and counted slowly, "One; Two; Three" but as he said "Three" he tilted the Tan's rifle upwards with his stick, and the shot passed overhead.

My running-shoe Tan who was escorting me was now ordered to get back to his own lorry and the driver of one of the lorries got out of it and came over to me and struck me with his heavy driver's gloves in the face, saying "You . . . " "Take that you big Captain you". He gave me several blows in the face and head and then went off. Another Tan armed with a rifle came over to me and said, "I suppose you will escape if you get the chance; but while I have a rifle you wont" and he gave me a pucker of it on the head. He then left the rifle standing against the lorry and beside me. The rifle fell and I automatically made an attempt to stop it falling. The Tan shouted at me, "I knew well you would escape. You would snap that rifle and get away, would you". I then received several blows of the rifle on the head. The blood started to run down my face and into my eyes and was blinding me.

They now put us on the lorries and took us to Ballymore R.I.C. barracks for identification. Here Sergeant Quinn, who knew me well, put out his hand to shake hands with me. I refused to shake hands with him and the Black and Tan who was beside me remarked "You are very clever Paddy, and your Sergeant is a so and so idiot. You fellows play the game with each other". We were next taken to Moate R.I.C. barracks, as this was Daly's district, for the R.I.C. there to identify him. While there the local Cumann na mBan girls made tea and brought it to us, but when they approached the lorries the Tans drove them off. A man who was a relation of Daly's brought a bottle of whiskey but the Tans took the bottle and broke it. I suppose they did not like to drink it as they were being watched by a number of people. They told the man to clear off or they would arrest him. The man replied, "You can arrest away, I don't care a damn about you". They took no further action against him. We had no overcoats and it was bitterly cold. A friend of mine came along with overcoats for us but the Tans would not allow us to have them. We were now driven to the R.I.C. barracks in Athlone where we were given the usual questioning again and received another beating. We were put in what is commonly called "The Black Hole", a cold, draughty place. There was a low wooden bare bench on which you could sit or lie down. We were not given any bedding. Our photographs were compulsorily taken. We had not been allowed to wash and had a mixture of blood and eggs and dust on our faces and must have looked a sorry sight. During the night we were taken out individually and threatened again with shooting if we would not give information. Daly was taken to the bank of the Shannon and here they threatened to shoot him into the river. This attempt having failed they informed us we would all three be shot at dawn, saying that they were sure we would love to have our names appearing in tomorrow's issue of The Irish Independent as "Irish heroes".

They questioned us about our past life and what we were doing and in this way tried to get information out of us. We were taken out of the cell into the room where the Tans were and one of the Tans threw some explosives on the fire. We threw ourselves flat on the floor. I think that they expected us to make a run for the door which was open. I could see a Tan with a rifle covering off the door. I am sure they would have shot us down and then said, "Shot while trying to escape" - which was a usual habit of theirs. But we were not falling for that at this stage. We were in this barracks for two days and two nights. The Catholic Curate and some Cumann na mBan girls from Drumrany arrived at 7 o'clock in the morning looking for us, but would not be allowed in. They had parcels of food and cigarettes for us. Father Claven was the Priest. The gates to the barrack yard were opened to allow a lorry out and Father Claven and the girls took advantage of this and forced their way into the yard as the lorry was moving out, and they were allowed to see us. Father Claven heard our Confessions and when I remarked that we were not going to be murdered, he said, "I would like to be sure of that". As a matter of fact, instructions had, I believe, been issued to the R.I.C. and Tans that I was not to be taken alive. A friendly policeman in Ballymore Barracks had told Father Casey this and asked him to tell me.

We were now transferred to the Military barracks in Athlone. There was a big number of prisoners detained there. On the way from the Tans to the Military barracks the running-shoe Tan was again my escort. He remarked that he was glad to see that I was still alive and that I was very lucky I was not dead by now. When the other prisoners saw us coming they started to shout "Spy" and other names at us. They did not recognise us as we looked more like Tramps in

our dilapidated condition and it was only when Peter Malinn, who was a cousin of mine, recognised my voice that they realised who we were. We were still in our bloody, dirty condition. Doctor Byrne was one of the prisoners there and a number of others were well known to me also.

After about three weeks in detention there, we were taken before Captain Tully who was the British Intelligence Officer. The photographs taken in the Tans' Barracks were produced and I was shown what I was supposed to be by my photograph. I said I did not know the person in the photograph. He would not let it into my hands. I agreed with him that it was my photograph if he said so, but insisted that I did not recognise it. Captain Tully asked me if I would accept anything less for the country than a Republic and suggested Home Rule or a status of that of Canada or South Africa. I said nothing less than a Republic was acceptable to which he replied that I would accept less and that I would stay in jail until I had done so. He said "You are a 1916 man" and I said "Yes" to this. He said "Mick Collins is a 1916 man; what do you think of him?" and I replied "Alright". I believe that Tully was really sounding the prisoners to find out what their feelings regarding a settlement were. A peculiar coincidence was that I did remain in jail until I accepted less than a Republic.

We three and other prisoners were transferred later to the internment camp at the Rath outside the Curragh Camp. David Daly escaped from there during the Truce period. On leaving the Military barracks, Athlone, for the Curragh, we were handcuffed but these were removed when we reached Kilbeggan. We had an armoured car as part of our escort. The Clara road was blocked so we could not travel by that way which was the direct route.

Several times detours had to be made to get around road-blocks and broken bridges and it was interesting to us to see the amount of demolitions that had been carried out. The escort tried to travel via Tullamore but this road was impassable and they had to detour by Edenderry. Even this road was broken and planks had to be used to get across trenches on it. On leaving Edenderry, the road crosses a railway and this bridge was also badly damaged, and escort and prisoners had to be dismounted off the lorries to get across safely. We were travelling from 8 o'clock in the morning until 8 o'clock at night, doing what is a comparatively short journey, owing to the demolitions on the roads and we were like snowmen with white dust from the by-roads. I was in the Rath Camp, Curragh, until the 10th December, 1921, when we were all released on the general amnesty of that date.

During the period April, 1921, Dick Birthles, our Battalion O/C, waited in several prepared ambushes in the Ballymore area in an attempt to ambush patrols or lorries of cycling parties of enemy forces. This operation went on over weeks but he had no luck and did not make contact with them. He was eventually arrested and T.J. McGiff was now appointed Battalion O/C. and took charge of activities until the Truce, which included the burning of the Courthouse, as already mentioned. He fired at a Black and Tan going to Church in Ballymore but the Tan intermingled with the people and it was impossible to finish him off. Early in July McGiff sent three men armed with rifles into the Drumryaney area to obtain information regarding enemy movements in that area. McGiff was only eighteen years of age at this time and had formerly been in charge of the Fianna boys in the area. McGiff's three men saw a large motor car halted on the road and containing a number of

British Military Officers including the famous Captain Tully. The officers had a man named William Moran in the car whom they were carrying as a hostage. Because of Moran being in the car the Volunteers could not fire on the Officers in the car without endangering Moran's life. The Volunteers retired to the old school beside Drumraney Church and from here they could observe the road on which the car was halted. They could see a road block being cleared by civilians about three hundred yards away from them. The local people were commandeered by the military to clear the block. The Volunteers remained at the old school, keeping observation on the military officers. They observed Captain Tully climbing up the hill towards where they were located. One of the Volunteers fired at him and apparently hit him as he fell backwards, but he was quickly up again and under cover. The fact that Tully fell backwards when fired on and then did not seem to be injured tends to confirm the belief which then existed that he always wore some type of armour. Had the particular Volunteer known this at the time he could have got him in the head as he was a very good shot with a rifle. Captain Tully and other officers now engaged our men with rifle fire and succeeded in closing to within about fifteen yards of their position. The fight lasted about twenty minutes and the three Volunteers then retired as they were running out of ammunition. As the Volunteers retreated they covered each other off, one man remaining in a firing position until the other two got back. They repeated this tactic until they were safely away. What our men did not know was that Captain Tully and the other officers were also retreating at the same time and using the exact same tactics. Collins had ordered the shooting of Captain Tully at an early date and, as far as I know, this was the nearest that our men got to getting him. G.H.Q. complimented our Battalion on this operation and in later years the Military Service Pensions Board recognised it as a major ambush for pensions purposes.

The Tubberclare Company of our Battalion ambushed a party of British Officers near Benown in which General Lambert of the British Forces was killed. About fourteen men took part in this ambush. The British Forces carried out a number of reprisals for this and burned a number of houses in the area. As a counter reprisal our men burned Moydrus Castle the residence of Lord Castlemaine and this put a curb on the British Forces resorting to reprisals in the future. Tang Company had a good many men on the Active Service Unit.

It was a great pity that Commandant McGiff was not of mature years at an earlier date. He was endowed with plenty of energy and initiative and was of a very high standard of intelligence and, although at this time was still merely a boy, he had a wealth of commonsense. Had he been old enough to have been Battalion Commander earlier, things would have been different in our Battalion area. It was he who made the bomb which was used in the attack against Streamstown Barracks which took place much earlier on. Tang Company did excellent work in blocking roads and disrupting communications and were praised for this work by Headquarters.

We manufactured powder in the area very successfully and this was used for ^{the} re-filling of shotgun cartridges. Some of these cartridges were used after the fighting was over for game-shooting and were still very good. A large amount of shotgun cartridges were filled with buckshot and we also made bombs out of paint-cans. These were filled with gelignite and nuts and scraps of iron missiles and had a length of commercial fuze attached to a detonator for ignition purposes. They were more suitable for attack on station ^{any} targets rather than ambushes where speed was not an essential factor. No mines of any type were made in the area.

One of the policemen, an R.I.C. man stationed in Ballymore, was friendly to the Volunteers and used to pass on to them little bits of information regarding impending raids and the names of Volunteers who were on the police lists to be arrested and so forth. We had, of course, our intelligence organisation within the Battalion and they were successful in keeping watch on persons who were suspected of collaborating

with the enemy and in tabulating enemy movements in the area and thus determining which were regular patrols or activities that would lend themselves to ambushing.

The Cumann na mBan organisation in the area did an amount of work in the way of carrying dispatches and looking after the welfare of our men who were arrested and were detained in British camps and prisons. They organised social functions and made collections to provide themselves with funds for this work. My sisters often travelled to Dublin with dispatches. There was a local girl on the staff of the Gresham Hotel, Dublin, who used to send dispatches to a covering address for my brother John and later on she delivered dispatches personally for Mick Collins. My brother was in close touch with Volunteer Headquarters in Dublin all the time and acted as a guide for country officers, taking them to Headquarters when they went to Dublin.

There was only one person from our area executed as a British Spy. Although this man, who was named Blagriff, was from our Battalion area he was executed by the Athlone Battalion. He worked in that area and all his activities took place there. I am not aware of why he was executed or what his activities for the British forces were. I was never satisfied Blagriff was a spy.

Signed: Micéal Mac Coirre

Date: 27th September 1956

Witness: Matthew Henry Cost

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