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ORIGINAL

BUREAU OF MILITARY HISTORY 1913-21
NO. W.S. 1504

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BUREAU OF MILITARY HISTORY, 1913-21.

STATEMENT BY WITNESS.

DOCUMENT NO. W.S. 1504.

Witness

Seumas O'Meara,
50, Connaught St.,
Athlone,
Co. Westmeath.

Identity.

O/C Westmeath Brigade, I.R.A.

O/C Athlone Brigade, I.R.A.

Subject.

I.R.B., I.V. and I.R.A. activities,
Athlone, 1912-1921.

Conditions, if any, Stipulated by Witness.

Nil.

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ORIGINAL

BUREAU OF MILITARY HISTORY 1913-21

BUREAU STAIRS MILITARY HISTORY

STATEMENT BY MR. SEANUS O'MARA

NO. 113

1,504

50 Connaught St. Athlone, Co. Westmeath.

I was born at Connaught St., Athlone, and went to Deerpark National Schools. In July 1912, I was sent to Drogheda to serve my time to the victualling business. I joined the Irish Volunteers in Drogheda in 1914, I cannot remember now who was in charge of the Volunteers there, but I was not very long a member when I was ordered by my boss to give up my membership and I had to do so. When you are apprenticed to a business you sign a certain undertaking or contract and you are bound by the articles contained in this contract, so I had no option but to obey his orders.

As far as I know, at the time of the split in the Volunteers almost all of the members of that body gave their allegiance to the National or Redmond Volunteers in Drogheda and the Irish Volunteers ceased to exist. However, the Irish Volunteers were again reorganised in Drogheda about September 1915, and, as I was now out of my apprenticeship, I joined this organisation. There were then about 12 or 14 members and we used to meet at a premises owned by Feely's of James's St. Prior to the rebellion in 1916, I think the strength would be about 30. Sean Neeson was our company captain, but he retired from this position about November 1915, and Philip Monaghan was then appointed captain. Joseph Carr was second in command, and Larry Walsh - now Mayor of Drogheda - was third in command.

Our only armament at this time was one .22 sporting rifle which Sean Neeson had secured for us. We had done quite an amount of target practice with this weapon. We did training at a premises in narrow West St. which belonged to the Stanley

family. We also used this premises as a gymnasium and had a boxing ring erected there. About St. Patrick's Day, or early March 1916, Patrick Weafer came to Drogheda and started working in Lipton's Branch premises there. Patrick Weafer was a brother of Tom Weafer who was killed in Dublin during the rebellion. Patrick was a member of the I.R.B. as well as the Irish Volunteers, and he immediately set about starting a circle of this organisation in Drogheda. There was, I believe, a circle in existence in Drogheda previous to this, but this was composed of old men who were well beyond taking any active part in an open rebellion or anything of that nature. It was decided to let this old circle carry on and it was also decided to organise a new circle of young active men. Joe Carr, Larry Walsh and I were enrolled in the new circle and were sworn in by Donal O'Hannigan who was organising for the I.R.B. and who afterwards took charge of the Louth and Meath contingents in the rebellion.

Weafer now gave me a revolver of .38 calibre and, soon after, he supplied two or three more to our members. Just before the rebellion we had three or four revolvers and the .22 rifle. On Easter Saturday night 1916, Phil Monaghan got a new shotgun which, I think, he purchased at Collins's shop in Drogheda. Joseph Higgins had promised to join the I.R.B. but he had not been sworn in prior to the rebellion.

We did our own military instruction as best we could and also our own rifle practice with the .22 rifle. In this we were assisted by articles which appeared regularly in the paper "The Irish Volunteer, which was the official organ of the Volunteer organisation. When Weafer had asked me to join the I.R.B. he had informed me that it was the intention of headquarters to rise in rebellion in the near future. This

would be about five or six weeks before Easter Week. On the Sunday before the rebellion there was a meeting in Ardee and Joe Carr and I represented Drogheda at this meeting. There I met Patrick Hughes and Sean McEntee from Dundalk; also Philip McMahon from Ardee, Jimmy Lang and one or two of the Butterly brothers from Dunleer. There was a general discussion on improving the armament position of the Volunteers. One of the Butterlys told us how they had successfully substituted home made lead bullets for the shot in sporting gun cartridges and how, on trial, this missile had penetrated ^{INCH BOARD} ~~an inch~~ at 300 yards. The lead for making the bullets was secured by raiding a vault in the graveyard in Dunleer. As far as I can remember, there was no mention then of a forthcoming insurrection.

On Good Friday night the Drogheda Volunteers paraded and were taken on a short route march along the Boyne in the direction of Slane. On the return journey they were halted and Philip Monaghan, our captain, announced that there would be extended exercises during the coming weekend in conjunction with the Dundalk and other companies. He said it was quite possible that the R.I.C. would interfere and that if they did they would not be allowed to get away with it and we would put up a fight. As a safety precaution, he advised all the men to go to confession and Communion on the coming Saturday night and Sunday morning. The assembly point for our mobilisation for the exercises would be Mell Bridge and each man was to carry two days rations and all arms and ammunition that he had. I was instructed to bring my butchering implement. There were about 18 Volunteers on this parade.

Late on Easter Saturday night we were told that Sunday's parade was cancelled. On Easter Sunday I met Joe Higgins at about 1 p.m. and he told me the parade was on again and that

the mobilisation was at Mell Bridge, as already ordered, and at the same time. At about 2.45 that afternoon, I left Shop St. where I was staying, for Mell, carrying my equipment and butchering tools, as ordered. As I was proceeding along narrow West St. I met some of the local boys with whom I used to play football. They started jeering me and shouting: "Look at the toy soldier". I was at Mell Bridge at about 2.50 p.m. Then 3 o'clock arrived there were 10 men present - Phil Monaghan, Larry Walsh, the two Malones - Frank and Jim -, "Bandy" Brannigan, Joseph Higgins, Paddy Miles, myself and a man called Tuite from Tullyallen who, I think, was not a Volunteer. There was also one other man whose name I cannot remember now.

At about 3.15 p.m. we were about to move off when a motor car arrived with Dr. Bradley's son in it and he had another strange man with him. This strange man had come apparently with orders cancelling our parade and operations. Monaghan now dismissed us and told us to proceed back to the town by different routes to avoid causing suspicion, which we did. I believe our orders for the initial stage of the Rising was to proceed to Slane and hold the bridge over the Boyne there until the contingent from Dundalk passed over, and then proceed to Tara where all the Volunteers from Louth and Meath were to assemble. Subsequently, I understand, our area of operations was to be the country lying between the Great Northern Railway and the Midland Great Western Railway on the outskirts of Dublin. The Rising was timed to start at 7 p.m. on Easter Sunday.

Philip Monaghan went to Dublin on that Easter Sunday night. Nothing further happened in Drogheda during the next few days and I turned in to work as usual, all the time wondering what was wrong and what had happened that we were not mobilised.

On the following Friday Francis Bates informed me that Donal O'Hannigan had left word with him that any man who could get through was to do so and proceed to Co. Dublin and join up with Thomas Ashe and the Fingal men or any other body of rebels they could meet. "Bandy" Brannigan had started to walk to Dublin on the previous Tuesday. He did get to Dublin but did not succeed in making contact with any of the rebel units there. When I got this message from Bates on the Friday I tried to organise a party to go through to Dublin. Joseph Higgins, Paddy Miles and David Blood agreed to go. We arranged to go to early Mass on the following Sunday and afterwards to start for Dublin. We met at the Tholsel on Sunday morning, all turning up except Blood. By now, Pearse's surrender Order had been posted up around the town by the police so we decided to postpone our attempt for the time being and try in the meantime to ascertain what was happening. We arranged to meet again in the afternoon. By the afternoon it was apparent that the surrender of our men in Dublin was true and was generally accepted by the people as being the correct situation; so that was the end of our adventure.

Following the rebellion, there were a number of men arrested in Drogheda, but only a couple of the men who mobilised on Easter Sunday afternoon were amongst this lot - Larry Walsh and Philip Monaghan. There were about fifteen or sixteen arrested all told. I was not arrested.

All Volunteer activities and suchlike were now dead but, about September 1916, when it became apparent that England might now enforce conscription on the country, things began to happen again. O'Higgins and Seamus Murphy & I were discussing what could be done to meet this threat. Murphy had not been in the Volunteers previously, but had become very interested at this stage. We decided to start a hurling team in the town and under this disguise to reorganise the

pledged by us to resist conscription at all costs. We planned to arm ourselves with slash-hooks which could be used as pikes. I took charge of the hurling club which was an innovation in Drogheda where football was always the popular game.

After the general release of the prisoners from the English jails and internment camps, Monaghan came back to Drogheda and he took charge again. Larry Walsh was second in command and I was third. We now decided to spread discussion on Irish subjects and history amongst the people of the town in order to get them thinking along national lines and, for this purpose, we formed a Gaelic Literary Society. Members used to give lectures on historical subjects and suchlike and sometimes we were able to get outside speakers. This was all propaganda to get the people around to our way of thinking on Ireland's problems, the main one of which was Irish independence. This attempt was very successful and our meetings were well attended and very popular with the townspeople and we definitely made marked progress towards our objective.

When I was leaving Drogheda on my return to Athlone I was presented with a medal by the society. I left Drogheda and returned to Athlone on 11th April 1917. In Athlone, the Volunteers were not officially reorganised at this time, but the Longford election was on then. The Sunday following my return, a party of Volunteers made up of the pre-rebellion men got together and went to Ballymahon to encourage the people there to vote for McGuinness and I went with them. At the end of May or early June 1917, Sean Hurley reorganised the Volunteers in Athlone and I became a member then. A meeting of certain members of the old Volunteer organisation was held and a discussion took place on the methods to be

adopted to reorganised the force. I think seven section leaders were appointed at that meeting and each leader was authorised to recruit and build up his own particular section. Sean Scanlon, Frank O'Connor and John Blayney were appointed for the Coosan area; John O'Brien, Thomas Cummins, Brian Martin and I for the Athlone Town area.

Sean Hurley used to hold classes for the officers or section leaders, as they then were, and, in return, we held classes of instruction for our men. Some time after this, Moate was reorganised, but a split occurred there over who was to be in charge - or captain - and things went bad there for a while. Drumraney area was also reorganised. I had the biggest section in the town, my section strength being around 22. We were very careful about the men we enrolled then and we had to know them well and be satisfied that they could be trusted. We ran a football team known as "The Sean Costellos" and this was used as a recruiting medium. So far, we were just organised in sections, and Sean Hurley was captain over the whole lot.

About November 1917, I decided I would go to Dublin so as to get more advanced military instruction. I secured employment in Dublin for a period of three months and I used to drill and attend instructional classes at Blackhall Place with the Dublin Volunteers. Actually, I became a squad leader while there and acquired a good knowledge of drill, arms drill, bayonet fighting and guard duties and so forth before I returned to Athlone.

A big Sinn Féin meeting was held in Athlone in March 1918, at which Arthur Griffith and several other leaders of Sinn Féin spoke. For this meeting, the Volunteers took over the policing of the town. My section was detailed to guard the platform the night before and portion of the Irishtown area. The Irishtown

area of Athlone was inhabited to a great extent by the families of men who were serving in the British army and were drawing separation allowances from the British War Office. These people were hostile to the Volunteers and Sinn Fein, but there was also a number of people living there who were in sympathy with us and when the pro-British element started their hostile demonstrations, our sympathisers usually attacked them, so that they usually cancelled one another out, to our satisfaction.

We also paraded at Clara and Tullamore during the election in that area. We provided a cyclist company from Athlone for the Clara parade. At Tullamore, Mr. de Valera reviewed the Volunteer parade. The section commanders acted as company captains and Sean Hurley took charge of the whole parade.

There was also a big meeting in Mullingar to which the Athlone Volunteers marched, bivouacking at Ballymore on the previous night. The Moate and Drumraney sections or companies joined us there. This was on a Saturday night and the meeting was the following day, Sunday, and we marched into Mullingar on that day. Sean Hurley was again in charge of the parade in Mullingar which was a very big one. Hurley expected to be arrested after the meeting, so he deputised me to take charge of the Volunteers then. We had ordered a special train to take the men back to Athlone, Moate and other areas after the meeting. When the train arrived from Dublin the carriages were labelled "Military only". I paraded the men from the meeting and entrained them at Mullingar station. I also had a guard put on Hurley and there was no attempt made to arrest him.

When Thomas Ashe died, the Athlone Volunteers paraded publicly through the town and Sean Hurley addressed the Volunteers at the Dispensary and spoke very strongly. There

were some members of the R.I.C. present. At the Manchester Martyrs Commemoration, the Volunteers again paraded through the town. Those were the first public parades of Volunteers in Athlone since 1916 and between 50 and 60 men paraded on each occasion.

By March or April 1918, a battalion was organised in the Co. Westmeath area. Sean Hurley was the battalion commandant. I was appointed vice O/C. of the battalion. Sean O'Farrelly was adjutant and I think Thomas Noonan was the battalion Q.M. The battalion was known as the Athlone Battalion and included the Athlone, Summerhill, Drumraney, Moate and Bealnamullagh areas. There were skeleton companies in all those areas with Athlone much the strongest, having a strength of about 80. The Athlone Company of which Sean Scanlon was captain drilled and trained in the Coosan area. I visited all the company areas on a cycle.

About April 1918, an order was received from G.H.Q. to organise a brigade in the Co. Westmeath area and a meeting was held at Shannon Bridge or Banagher which Paddy Rigney attended for Banagher. Sean Mullaney and I attended. Birr was represented by Eamon Morcan and Bulfin, and Shannon Bridge by Tommy Dolan. After a discussion, it was decided to hold a further meeting at Moate at which the Mullingar and Castlepollard areas would be represented. A split had occurred in the meantime in the Athlone Volunteers. I should have mentioned that prior to this Sean Hurley had been arrested and I was now in charge of the Athlone Battalion.

When I became acting O/C. of the battalion I had arranged that what arms we had would be taken out of Athlone Town and dumped in the Coosan area. I did not consider that the Town was a safe place for them and, as there was a threat of conscription at this time, they would be better placed for us in the country convenient to the town. I also organised companies in the Clonown, Taughmacconnell, Drum, Moore and Curraghboy areas and these became part of the 11th

Battalion. Tom Noonan and the adjutant decided to raid Lecarrow railway quarries for gelignite and they organised some Volunteers to go with them. They secured arms from our dump and crossed the lake on a boat. It was a very wild night and it was very lucky that the Volunteers and their arms were not lost in the lake. Some of the local officers who realised this danger refused to go with them. Apart from the loss of lives that might have ensued, the loss of our arms at this stage would also have been a tragedy. They had no authority from me or the battalion staff to embark on this episode and endanger both lives and armament as well. I was very annoyed about this when I learned of it. If we were going to get anywhere, we must have direction and planning from one head source, and we must have discipline. If individuals were going to be allowed to act like this on their own authority, we would soon be only an undisciplined mob, killing one another, and the laughing-stock of our people as well as being an easy prey for our enemies. I reprimanded the officers concerned and insisted that operations should not be carried out without the prior sanction of battalion headquarters. The officers apparently resented being reprimanded by me. When Hurley was released from jail, they went to him and complained that when they had made an attempt to get armament I had reprimanded them for doing so. Incidentally, the raid only succeeded in obtaining some commercial fuze.

Hurley did not come to me, but, instead, called a parade of the Athlone Volunteers and addressed them. He blamed me in his address without mentioning my name for having reprimanded Volunteers for trying to obtain arms. When Hurley had finished speaking, I saluted him and requested permission to address the men, but he refused to allow me to do so. I now tendered my resignation as a Volunteer officer to Hurley, in writing. At a subsequent meeting of battalion officers, at

which my resignation came up for consideration, the officers held that I was right in my actions and that discipline and control must be maintained. Hurley now resigned, with the result that there was no senior officer from the Athlone area at the meeting which was held in Moate to organise the brigade, and the meeting was adjourned for another month or so.

At a subsequent meeting which I attended, I was elected battalion O/C., Sean Scanlon was elected vice O/C. and George Manning was appointed adjutant. Farrell dropped out altogether. Diarmuid O'Hegarty was present at the meeting in Moate and represented G.H.Q. there. Subsequently, at the brigade meeting in Moate, I represented Athlone, John McCormack - Drumr~~aney~~^{ney}; Joe Kennedy - Mullingar, and Thomas Dolan - Shannon Bridge. They were the senior officers from those areas. From this meeting the officers to form the brigade staff were appointed, I was appointed brigade O/C. and John McCormack was vice O/C., George Manning was appointed brigade adjutant and Peter Malinn, brigade quartermaster.

The battalion commanders appointed were:- Athlone - David Daly; Mullingar - M.J. Kennedy; Drumr~~aney~~^{ney} - Dick Birthles; Shannon Bridge - Thomas Dolan.

At this time there was great action in expectation of conscription being enforced and, as there was a large portion of the brigade on the Connaught side of the Shannon, there was a danger of them being cut off from us if things came to a head and the brigade became divided. I organised companies on the Connaught side of the Shannon and I went and met Joseph Finlay who was second in command of the Roscommon brigade and arranged with him that if conscription was enforced, that after the initial orders received from G.H.Q. and if there were no definite further orders, this battalion would fall back on him

and he would take them over. I had by now organised a battalion on the Connaught side of the Shannon. This battalion now became the 1st Battalion, Athlone Brigade. The late Barney Gaffey was appointed O/C. of this battalion. Athlone now became the 2nd Battalion; Drumroney - the 3rd; Mullingar - the 4th and Shannon Bridge - the 5th.

We had a bit of luck this time. Two soldiers of the garrison in the military barracks in Athlone got in touch with a local priest, Father Morris. They were two Irishmen, one a Corkman and a bombardier; the other was a Sergeant Flanagan. They asked the priest to get them in touch with the Volunteers which he did through Walter Walsh. These soldiers said that if there was going to be a fight, they were Irishmen and would be with their own people. I accepted them and, in a discussion with them, we made temporary plans for them to blow up the magazine in the barracks, ^{WITH OUR ASSISTANCE} if they could get the time when conscription was passed. These two soldiers now started to bring out ammunition from the barracks to us. They used to bring out the web bandoliers of ammunition wrapped around their bodies. I used to meet them at the old Batteries and take it from them. In all, they took out about 4000 rounds of .303 ammunition. Of course, we compensated them for their work. Meanwhile, on the instructions of G.H.Q., our 5th Battalion was transferred

Dublin. Paddy Daly, who was a ticket checker on the railway, heard about this officer being arrested. He handed over his duties on arriving in Athlone on the train, as was normal; he then travelled on the train to Dublin and warned Michael Collins. Had it not been for Daly's action, the British would probably have made a great swoop and G.H.Q. and all the brigade officers throughout the country would have been captured.

Immediately the meeting had started in Fleming's Hotel Michael Collins announced what had happened. He gave great praise to Daly for his intelligence and initiative which had saved us all. We all now left Fleming's by different routes and went to Blackhall Place where the meeting was held. As I was entering Fleming's I could see police patrolling around the place. The Volunteers were also guarding the hotel. At the meeting in Blackhall Place, Collins informed us that the danger of conscription had passed for the time being. I understand that the British forces raided Fleming's Hotel that night but did not get anybody.

At this time we were building up the Volunteer force. I held a review of a large portion of the brigade at the Hill of Uisneach in the autumn of 1918. This was really a display to show our strength. Now and then we were able to procure a few rifles from members of the British military garrison in Athlone Barracks. Members of the Volunteers arranged this individually with members of the garrison. At no time was there anything like an organised attempt to procure arms in this way as we considered that anything of this nature would be too dangerous and would probably dry up the source altogether and put the British authorities on the alert. It was felt that a dribble of arms from the barracks was better and would not be noticed. We continued to drill and train as best we could.

A general election took place at the end of 1918 and the Volunteers were kept busy for some time in connection with this. They were busy canvassing and organising on behalf of Sinn Fein which was the political wing of our movement, and in guarding speakers at meetings and so forth, and, of course, on polling day in personating on behalf of the Sinn Fein candidate. On the whole, the election went off quietly in the area and there were no serious clashes with the opposite forces. The opposition to Sinn Fein was twofold. There was, firstly, the Redmondite or Nationalist Party, and then there was the British garrison comprising the British military and the R.I.C. both of which were openly hostile to Sinn Fein. The R.I.C. in particular showed their hostility and blindly allowed disorderly conduct on behalf of the Nationalist Party. There was at this time a big element of hostility in the families of men who were serving in the British forces.

The Dáil, in meeting in January 1919, reaffirmed and declared established the Republic declared on Easter Monday 1916, and commanded the allegiance of all Irishmen and women to it. The Dáil now floated a loan to finance its undertakings and here again the Volunteers assisted Sinn Fein in collecting and canvassing for this loan, which was a huge success. Sinn Fein did most of the work in connection with the loan in Athlone, but in the country district the work was mostly performed by the Volunteers.

The Dáil now took control of the Volunteer force and established them as the army of the Irish Republic. All ranks were now required to subscribe to an oath of allegiance to the Irish Republic. All our officers and men took this oath with very few exceptions, and anyone who did not automatically ceased to be members of the force. Nearly all the officers of the brigade were at this time also members of the I.R.B.

and with a lead from those officers no trouble was encountered.

After Hurley had resigned and I had been appointed brigade O/C. I saw Michael Collins and pointed out to him that I thought it was unfair that Hurley was not brigade O/C., considering the amount of work and time he had put into the organising of the force in the earlier period of its existence after the rebellion. There is no doubt about it that he was a terrific worker for the Volunteer movement and had shown great skill and energy in his organisation. I offered to resign the command of the brigade in favour of Hurley, but Collins would not have it so and said that they wanted Hurley in Sinn Féin where he was very useful. Hurley joined Athlone Company as an ordinary Volunteer.

A public meeting was billed to be held in Athlone on behalf of Sinn Féin and was to be addressed by Laurence Ginnell amongst others. This meeting was proclaimed by the British military authorities. I ordered a mobilisation of the Volunteers of the 1st and 2nd Battalions and ordered them to parade to the meeting. I took charge of the parade personally. The meeting was held outside St. Mary's Church. The British military broke up the meeting with a bayonet charge. No one was injured, but some arrests were made on the following Sunday night. On the following Saturday, the American delegation who had come over to study affairs in Ireland arrived in Athlone. The Volunteers again paraded and formed a guard of honour from the railway to the platform which was outside the railway station. There was no interference from the military or police.

The following Sunday night I was in Faheran organising the company there. Coming into Athlone the following morning about 7 a.m. I was stopped on the street and told that the military were raiding my home for me. They had arrested Owen Sweeney and Michael Dillon who was not a Volunteer. This would

be about the end of May 1919. As a result of this raid I had to go on the run. The R.I.C. were still patrolling the countryside and it was not easy to find places to stay where one could be safe, as a result, so I decided to go to North Tipperary and stay with some friends there. I used to come back to Athlone every second Sunday or meet someone from Athlone in Banagher and in this way I was able to keep in touch with the brigade in Athlone. I received dispatches through Sean Gaynor, Nenagh, and Jim Nolan.

I was arrested on 12th July 1919. I had returned to Athlone and gone to bed in my house, but apparently the police were informed and I was caught. I did three months in Mountjoy having been found guilty of drilling and giving military commands and so forth. I was in Mountjoy for the big smash-up there when the prisoners almost wrecked the jail, and for portion of the big hunger strike which took place then. I was released from Mountjoy, time expired, while I was still on hunger strike and was re-arrested as soon as I got outside the gates and charged with the destruction of Government property, i.e., breaking up the furniture in my cell, etc. There was a Tipperary man and a Kerryman in the same position. We were taken to the Bridewell prison near the Four Courts. No one was allowed to see us except to arrange for our food. I was subsequently charged and found guilty and fined £2 or £3. I asked what was the alternative to not paying the fine, but would not be given any information except that I would be told if I did not pay. I was then released. Needless to say, I never paid the fine.

About six weeks later Sergeant Henderson of the R.I.C. called to my house to collect the fine. I told him I did not intend to pay it as I felt justified in what we had done when some of the prisoners were not given political prisoner treatment. The sergeant

told me he would have to arrest me if I did not pay and then what would become of my business. He tried to get my mother to pay, but she said no, that the boys would kill her if she did. The Head Constable from the barracks called on my brother and told him that I would have to be arrested again if the fine was not paid. My brother told him he would ^{not} pay for me and that I would not do so either. The Head Constable said that all this was making the police unpopular and he told my brother to tell me to call to the barracks. I did not go near the barracks.

Just before Christmas 1919, I was called to a meeting at G.H.Q., Dublin. This was the Wednesday before the Christmas market. I travelled by train from Athlone. As the train was moving out of Athlone, a detective officer boarded the train and got into my carriage. I concluded this meant that I was going to be arrested when I got to Dublin. My family was well-known and popular in Athlone and they did not want to arrest me there and turn public opinion against them. I pretended I did not know the detective and stood him a drink at Portarlinton. All the time I was thinking of how I could escape. The carriages from Portarlinton to Dublin on the train were of the communicating type. The detective now sat further up the train where he could keep a watch on me. When we arrived at Kingsbridge station there were about twelve of the Dublin police lined up on the platform and the detective went towards them. I left the carriage and moved down along the train as if to collect luggage, but turned shortly and burst out of the station by a side entrance. Who should I find running alongside me but Warder Reilly from Mountjoy Prison. Reilly shouted at me to come quickly and that the place was full of G-men, meaning Dublin detectives. We jumped on to a cab and drove straight to the Coombe area of the city. I knew this area well and was satisfied that they would not

get me there. I do not know if they followed us. I don't think they realised I had got out of the station.

I attended the meeting of G.H.Q. and at this we were informed that it was time the Volunteers became more active. I was asked if I could arrange to attack a police barracks early in 1920 and I agreed to do so. On my return to Athlone I called a meeting of the brigade staff and at this we decided to attack Ballymore and Castletowngeoghegan Barracks on the night of February 20th. The Mullingar Battalion undertook to do the barracks at Castletowngeoghegan. Ballymore Barracks was in the Drumreaney battalion area and was primarily their responsibility, but I agreed to assist them.

I mobilised about 20 picked Volunteers from the Athlone Battalion and also some from the 1st (or Summerhill) Battalion for this attack. During the week prior to the attack all the rifles and ammunition we had and which were located in the Athlone Battalion area were transferred to Drumreaney and the Drumreaney men were to have them at a selected assembly point on the night fixed for the attack. We travelled to Drumreaney and were met by a man from there who guided us to an assembly point near the barracks. We waited in this position for the party who were conveying the rifles to turn up, but they did not do so. The attack was to take place at midnight. John McCormack from Drumreaney eventually arrived at 3 a.m. and informed us that the rifle party had seen lights of lorries and, thinking it was a party of military from Athlone, had run into the bogs and hidden. I asked him to go and get them then and we would still attack, but he claimed that he could not contact them. It subsequently turned out that the lorries were not military lorries at all. One of our men from Athlone, who was not able to cycle and who was very keen to take part in the attack, had walked out from Athlone

to Drumreaney on the previous day. This man had joined the rifle conveying party and he informed me afterwards that the men with the rifles were all the time located at a point only two fields away, but would not be allowed to come forward to us. I believe they did not want the local barracks attacked in order to avoid having any trouble in the area. We stayed there until after 6 a.m. the following morning and then withdrew. The men with the rifles never turned up. In Castletown-geoghegan something similar happened. Here, I understand, some of the Volunteers got drunk and the affair had to be called off. They did fell a tree across the road and that was all.

About the end of 1918, Peter Malinn had to be dropped as brigade quartermaster as he was not active. Jim Tormey was now appointed brigade quartermaster. After the fracas John McCormack was dropped as brigade vice O/C. and was replaced by Con Costello. About March 1920, orders were received from G.H.Q. to burn or otherwise destroy all vacated police barracks in the area. A number of these posts had been vacated by the R.I.C. and their garrisons concentrated in larger stations. I called a Brigade Council meeting and made arrangements for the burning or destruction of all such places in the area. The responsibility in each case was that of the local battalion commander. Bealnamullagh, Creggan, Irishtown, Littleton and Mount Temple were some of the barracks I remember were to be destroyed. The Excise Office in Athlone was also to be raided and the records and documents destroyed. This particular operation of destroying the records in the Excise Office was not carried out, as the men detailed to do the job thought they had been noticed and cleared away. The date fixed for the burnings of the barracks was Easter Saturday night and it was to be a country-wide operation staged more for propaganda

purposes than for its military value. After all, practically any house in the country districts could be taken over as a barracks by the enemy and would be as suitable as the one destroyed.

About a fortnight previous to the date fixed for the burnings, I was arrested again. It appears that the enemy had raided some office in Dublin and captured some files amongst which were the ones containing the covering addresses of certain officers in the country. Collins sent word to me and I notified the covering addresses I used, to expect a raid. They raided the houses on the following night but got nothing. The following Saturday night the military and police raided my house. They thoroughly searched the place, pulling up the floors and ripping up furniture and so forth, but did not find anything. When the raid was finished, the military officer in charge apologised to me for having disturbed my sleep and was about to depart when Sergeant Craddock of the R.I.C. said that I was to be taken. The officer told me to get myself a change of linen to take with me. I asked him if I could go to my mother's house which was next door to where I was residing to get the linen, but he would not let me go. The military officer now gave orders to Sergeant Craddock that he was to inform my mother that I had been arrested the first thing in the morning. Sergeant Craddock did not do so.

I was now brought to the military barracks where the orderly officer took my cheque book from me. I gave him a note for my mother telling her where I was and he promised to have this delivered, which he did about 12 o'clock next day. The military were decent to me. Several of the military officers visited me saying that they wanted to see what an I.R.A. officer was like, and they generally treated me and spoke to me as an officer. The following Monday or Tuesday

I was transferred to Galway Prison. Here I met Jim Tormey and Bill Murray from our brigade. Sean Cawley and Hubert Wilson ^{Tom REDDINGTON} and several other men whom I knew were also prisoners there including 'Baby' Duggan of Galway, and Mick Martin.

I was about four or five weeks in Galway jail when one of the clergymen who attended to our spiritual wants told us about the hunger strike in Mountjoy Prison. Just previous to this we understood that we were going to be deported to some English prison. We now decided to go on hunger strike also. We put up notices in the lavatories telling the other prisoners to follow our lead and to keep a watch out for what was going to happen.

When out on exercise and under the supervision of the chief warder, we were supposed to keep five yards apart. After a number of our men had passed the chief warder they started marking time and then marched off in a group despite his orders. We were now ~~released~~ into the exercise yard which was locked and the warders withdrawn. After some time the prisoners were brought into the prison in small groups. Seven of us were left in the yard and from the persons left it seemed as if we were the ones selected for deportation. A fresh wing of the prison at the far end had been opened for us and, late that evening, we were moved in there. In our party of seven there were three Co. Westmeath and three Co. Longford men and another chap named Fahy who was a teacher and probably from Galway.

The Governor of the prison now came to us and wanted to know what the trouble was about. I pointed out to him that since I was arrested some weeks ago no charge had been preferred against me and I had got no trial and that this was contrary to the Constitution or usage in law. He said that this was a matter outside his control. We claimed that if we

were not charged we should be released. He suggested that we should write a minute to the Chairman of the Prisons Board and that he would have it forwarded. We agreed to do this and Sean Cawley ^{REDDINGTON} ~~Redington~~ and I drew up a memorandum for that gentleman, which we gave to the Governor. In this memorandum, or whatever you like to call it, we set out our position and demanded a trial on preferred charges or our release. We gave the Chairman of the Prisons Board 24 hours in which to give us a reply.

When the 24 hours had elapsed and no reply was forthcoming, I ordered a hunger strike, assuming leadership of the prisoners. When we were on strike for a short period, we were offered political treatment to come off it, but I ordered our men to carry on, as our demand was for trial or release. At this time, Mick Martin was a prisoner-patient in the prison hospital. He had started a hunger strike previously on his own and had stuck it for eight days but had then failed. He had now learned somehow that we were on strike and was very annoyed that we had not included him and he informed me that he also was going on strike. We had no contact with the other prisoners in the jail, but 'Baby' Duggan and some others learned of our effort and went on hunger strike also. The warders put barley in our drinking water and our men were pleased, as it made the water sweet to the taste. I pointed out to them that this was food and that we could survive on it for a long period. From that on we drew our own drinking water.

After a period of six days on hunger strike, the prison authorities apparently thought that Tormey and I were going to crack up and they decided to release ^{ALL SIX OF US} ~~us~~. They wanted us to give parole but we refused to do so. We were now told that we would have to report back in two months' time. We did not

give any undertaking to do this either and had no notion of doing so. We were now released and arrived in Athlone on a Sunday night, where we found a torchlight procession awaiting us and I was escorted by this procession from the railway station to my home.

About a week or ten days after my release, I arranged to have the Excise Offices in Athlone raided and also some ex-R.I.C. barracks, which had not been previously burned, destroyed. I personally took charge of the operation at the Excise Office. We entered the office, holding up the caretaker at about 11 p.m. and remained there until 3 a.m. Amongst the men accompanying me on this mission were Thomas Mannion, George Manning, Brian Mulvihill, Frank O'Connor and Michael Conniffe. We destroyed as much records, files and documents in the place by burning them, as we could, in the time available.

At this time we were striving very hard to get arms for the brigade. A party of military used to leave the barracks each night and go out and mount a night guard on the premises of a man named Johnson at Baylinn. I do not know why they went there. It was probably some trouble over land. We decided to attack and disarm this party at Fassaugh on their way out. I mobilised 35 or 40 men and took up a position on the hill at Fassaugh under cover. We had about 15 rifles and some revolvers and shotguns. We hoped to do the job without having to resort to shooting and that the military who travelled on cycles would surrender when they found themselves entrapped. We intended to rush them. We waited until about 11.30 at night, but no military came.

This was the first night since they had commenced this guard or patrol that they had not gone out. I learned the next day that the military party, instead of going on to Johnson's place, had instead gone to Glasson where they lay

around the police barracks all night expecting that place to be attacked. Sergeant Loftus of the R.I.C. informed some of my men that he had heard, around Athlone, that the barracks in Glasson was going to be attacked. Loftus's wife lived in the barracks and he said he did not want any fighting or trouble on that account. I did not realise at the time that this was a neat trap Loftus was preparing for us. He had the military diverted to Glasson and concealed in a position to attack us in the rear when we went to the barracks under the impression that it would be surrendered quietly to us.

Previous to this, two events took place - an attack on Streamstown R.I.C. Barracks and a raid on the up and down mail trains. We held up the trains at Fassaugh Bridge. There was only an interval of ten minutes between the up and down mails arriving at this spot, so we were able to do both trains practically at the same time. We unloaded the mails from both trains on to a motor car which was then driven via Ballinahown to the Big Bogs. Here the mails were transferred to a boat and taken across the Shannon to the residence of Barney Gaffey at Gorrynagowna. It took a week of nights to censor the mails there, each letter being closed and marked "Passed by I.R.A. Censor". The mails were then taken back across the Shannon and deposited outside the Post Office in Ballinahown. There was nothing of much value in the mails in the way of information, but it served as a warning to people who might be inclined to write in information to the enemy.

About the end of May 1920, or early June, I had decided to attack and capture Streamstown R.I.C. Barracks which contained about six or seven police under a sergeant. The barracks was not fortified as yet but had steel shutters on the windows. Athlone, Moate and Drumraney Battalions were instructed to mobilise selected men for this attack. In all,

about 80 men were mobilised although there were only arms for about 20 to 25. On the Saturday night before the attack, which was to take place on Sunday forenoon, we commandeered two cars outside Athlone. One belonged to Michael Clyne of East-hill. These were to take the Athlone men to Streamstown. On Sunday morning we travelled by the cars to Streamstown, Andy McCormack driving one car and George Manning the other. Our plan for the capture of the barracks was to hold up some of the police on their way to Mass at Boher Chapel, two miles away, and then to have our men dress in the policemen's uniforms and, in this way, get the barrack door opened. A party of our men would be lying in concealment close to the barracks and would rush the door when it was opened. Meanwhile, others of our men would occupy covering positions near the barracks. We succeeded in capturing three policemen who were armed with revolvers. One of our cars passed out the police on the road and then stopped while the other car came up behind our men then jumping from the cars and holding them up. They made no resistance. The police were then taken to a house where they were deprived of their uniforms into which George Manning, Con Costello and Jim Tormey got dressed.

The police in the barracks must have noticed some of our men getting into position near the barracks, because they closed the steel shutters on the windows. They also apparently noticed some of our men going into the signal box on the railway station. When our bogus policemen arrived at the barracks they would not be admitted and, instead, the R.I.C. started firing and our bogus 'policemen' had a narrow escape in getting away. We gave them covering fire from our positions on a hill overlooking the barracks while they were getting back. As our plan had not worked, we opened a frontal attack from the

hill and I took six or seven men and moved around to try and gain an entrance from the rear. We had a few home-made bombs which were constructed of fruit tins filled with gelignite and fitted with short lengths of fuze. We placed one of these on a window sill at the rear of the barracks hoping to blow in the window and steel shutters. The bomb failed to explode. We kept up fire on the barracks for about three-quarters of an hour and I then ordered a withdrawal. There did not seem to be any likelihood of our capturing the place or the garrison surrendering. I also believed that the police had been in communication with their H.Q. and that reinforcements were en route and this would place us in a nasty position. All our men got away safely and had only done so when reinforcements arrived from Mullingar.

We had no casualties and I don't believe that the police had suffered any either. For the attack we had 15 rifles of mixed type, also shotguns and some revolvers. Our gains were three service revolvers and our losses some valuable ammunition for our rifles. The three policemen who had been held up by our men had taken note of the number of Clyne's car and this gave the idea to the police that the attackers had come from Athlone. The police demanded of Clyne to know who took his car. He said he did not know the men, who spoke with a Tipperary accent and had threatened to shoot him if he notified the police. Clyne knew the people who took the car all right. On the Monday following the attack, Streamstown Barracks was evacuated and within a day or so was burned down by the local Volunteers. The police made great efforts to trace the attackers, but did not succeed in doing so.

A bazaar and races were held in Athlone to raise monies for church funds. The Volunteers took over the policing of these events. The races passed off quietly, but at the bazaar

some of the R.I.C. had to be ejected at closing time. They were very annoyed at this and vowed that they would not be put out the following night. In view of this threat I had 16 armed men standing by on the Fair Green ready to enforce reinforce our men who were on duty in the bazaar should the R.I.C. or military refuse to obey orders given to them. Neither the R.I.C. nor the military interfered, so we had not to use our armed men.

At this time the Brawny Barracks in Irishtown, Athlone, was vacated by the R.I.C. and I ordered it to be destroyed on the last night that the bazaar was being held. The Athlone company under Captain O'Connor carried out this operation. The Volunteers in Co. Westmeath were doing general police work throughout the county. In the course of their duty Joseph Cunningham and some of the Mounttemple Volunteers put the R.I.C. out of Berry's publichouse at Mounttemple. Some nights afterwards the R.I.C., under Sergeant Craddock, beat up Cunningham and his brother. Joe was almost beaten to death and was a wreck of a man for ever afterwards. Later on, they burned down his house.

The Sinn Fein Courts were now well organised and operating successfully throughout the area. One night a Court was being held in the Courthouse, Athlone, and the military raided it and arrested the Judges or Arbitrators - Sean Hurley, Stephen McCrann and Pat Macken. They were held prisoner for two days and then released. The local solicitors, including Joseph Dixon, used to practise at the Sinn Fein Courts. After the arrests at the Courthouse, no further Courts were held in the town; all sittings of the Courts were then held in the country areas. This was the situation until the end of the fighting. The Volunteers had to do duty in connection with the Courts

in the way of enforcing decrees, arresting and detaining prisoners and so forth, as well as scouting and mounting guard over the Courts when they were in session.

The British Intelligence officer in Athlone was a Captain Tully. This man was believed to be a dangerous enemy and we were instructed by Michael Collins to have him shot. Tully had the reputation of wearing chain mail or some type of body armour. I pointed out to Collins what Sergeant Craddock had done to Joe Cunningham and what he would do to Athlone in the event of Captain Tully being shot. Collins then told me to shoot Craddock first and Tully afterwards. Craddock was a very nasty type and was continually looking for or trying to make trouble. At this interview with Collins I was appointed Competent Military Authority for County Westmeath with power of life or death. This meant that I could have a person executed without reference to G.H.Q. I would, of course, have to be sure of my ground and be responsible for my actions to G.H.Q.

There was a slight change in the brigade now. Collins asked me if I had any objection to the Mullingar Battalion receiving its orders direct from G.H.Q. The battalion would still remain an integral part of the brigade. The battalion in Shannon Bridge was now transferred to the Offaly Brigade and I should have stated that at the end of 1918 the company in Corraghboy had been transferred to the Roscommon Brigade. I agreed with Collins that the Mullingar Battalion should receive its orders direct from G.H.Q. Geographically it was more convenient to Dublin than was Athlone and it was awkward for us keeping communication with them. This arrangement gave rise to a misunderstanding which still exists today. Volunteer officers in the Mullingar area believe that the

Mullingar area became a brigade much sooner than it did. This arrangement took effect about July or August 1920.

I now decided to have Sergeant Craddock eliminated and made plans accordingly. The following men volunteered to shoot Craddock:- Jim Tormey, George Manning, Brian Mulvihill, Con Costello and myself. I think Bill Murray was also a volunteer. The scouts who were to watch for Craddock and report his movements were George Cosgrave and Sean Rattigan. No one else knew anything about the affair. On six different occasions we thought we had Craddock but he seemed to be lucky and avoided us. These were at the Flat Bridge, outside the Post Office, and outside the R.I.C. Barracks. He used to post the mail at the Post Office but, although we waited there for him on three nights, he never turned up. On a Friday night we arranged to meet the following Saturday night at a dance in the Foresters' Hall to make further arrangements. The men asked me if they got a chance to do the job on Saturday, should they do it, and I said that any time they got a chance they should take it. Craddock was on patrol on Saturday night, being in charge of about eight police on duty, so the boys gave up hope for that day. While some of them were on their way home on that Saturday night, they chanced to see Craddock going into the Soldiers' Club, apparently having finished his patrol duty. This seemed to be a good chance and they contacted Con Costello and some of the other boys who waited outside the Club for Craddock to come out. About midnight, Sergeant Craddock, accompanied by Constable Mahon, came out of the Club. Fire was opened on him by our men with revolvers and he was instantly wounded, but continued to fight it out with his revolver until he was shot dead. Mahon got away. George Manning received a bullet through his trousers. Jim Tormey was first to hit Craddock and then

followed Mahon who had bolted to his house. Tormey fired three shots at Mahon but each time his gun misfired. The men who took part in this incident were:- Jim Tormey, Con Costello, George Manning and Brian Mulvihill. The shooting took place at the front gate of the military barracks, Our men made their getaway safely.

Constable O'Meara of the R.I.C. now contacted Archdeacon Kane and told him he had received a letter, signed I.R.A., threatening him with death. He told the Archdeacon he had only two years to serve and did not want to resign now. I suspected this was a trap to implicate me with the shooting of Craddock and a yes or no from me would have put me on the spot. I pointed out that anyone with a grievance against O'Meara could have sent the letter and that I knew nothing about it. I said as long as O'Meara behaved himself and did not go around with the Tans, he should have nothing to fear. Within a few days, O'Meara was going around with the Tans. I suspect that it was the Tans had sent him the letter.

I was now told by Father Gallagher not to sleep at home as the police wanted to get me on the quiet, so as not to be seen doing it during daylight hours. From thence on I used to sleep in different houses out in the country each night. The Black and Tan murder gang now came to Athlone and the famous Constable Igoe came with them. This was the night before the Shannon ambush. They went to Sean Hurley's house but he succeeded in escaping before they spotted him. He pulled himself on to the roof of the house by means of the gutters and lay there all night and until the next evening before he could be got down. They also called for Joe Kennedy

but he was not at home either. They now burned the offices and printing works of the "Westmeath Independent" newspaper.

On the Sunday following this I was at 10 o'clock Mass. I was informed that a party of military had commandeered Coen's motor boat on the Shannon and they and some police had gone up the river to the lake on a raiding episode on the islands. I decided to attack the boat on its return down the Shannon. I sent a message to Frank O'Connor of Coosan to mobilise all the men he could and collect the rifles from the dump which was then in the Coosan area and bring them to the bank of the Shannon where the river leaves the lake. I also collected what men I could in Athlone town and sent them out there. I then went and inspected the damage that had been done to the printing works and then proceeded to Coosan. I got the men armed as far as the arms would go and put them into position to await the return of the boat. We took up position at the mouth of the river near the White Buoy. I had about 25 or 30 men available armed with rifles and shotguns. We were lucky in our mobilisation in that Commandant David Daly, who was the local battalion commander, was reviewing the local company at the time and the company was assembled for this.

We considered trying to string barbed wire across the river to halt the boat, but as this would entail the use of a boat by us, and we did not know how much time we had, we decided against this. We also might have been observed carrying out this work. Instead, we decided to concentrate our fire below the water line of the boat and try and sink it and here we made a mistake. We did not realise that it was not that easy to sink a boat by rifle fire. When the boat came down the river there were a big number of men on deck, but

we ignored them and concentrated our fire on sinking it. This did not succeed and the engagement became general. The enemy had a machine gun aboard and brought this into action, but it ceased firing after a very brief interval, the gunners being apparently knocked out. The boat halted and fought for a while and then sped on towards Athlone and we followed along the bank as far as we dared, firing at it. We could not go too far as the military barracks was on the opposite bank and we were not so far from the town, so I called the affair off. In all, the engagement, I would say, did not last longer than twenty minutes and by this time the boat was getting out of effective range. We now dispersed and dumped our arms.

The enemy had at least six wounded - one Major being very seriously wounded. We had no casualties. Had we concentrated on the men on the decks, instead of trying to sink the boat, their casualties would have been much higher. Sean Hurley was still in his abode on the roof top from which he could see the enemy taking their casualties off the boat. Hurley was taken down that night by using ladders. I crossed the river and returned to town by the Connaught side so as to indicate that I was not in the engagement.

Previous to this, in May or June 1920, there was a very large raid by the enemy on the Coosan area, six lorries of troops and two marching companies taking part. Our arms were dumped in the Coosan area and I was afraid they might find them. I got word of this raid from a soldier in the barracks through my brother. About four of us went out to Coosan and with the local Volunteers collected the arms. We spent the night dodging enemy patrols and raiding parties. It was a very ticklish affair moving across stone walls and all sorts of terrain without making a noise. Several times we could hear the enemy talking quite close to us, but we succeeded in evading them. As things

went, they would not have got the arms as they did not raid the place where they had been concealed. They had been in an old house, the property of Andy Moore, who was a loyalist. This house was not raided.

Previous to the Shannon ambush, I foresaw that a number of our men would eventually be forced to go on the run. I realised that we would have to keep together for our protection. I knew we would require some money to maintain ourselves and I ordered a collection to be held in the area to raise funds for this purpose. Just at this time an order was received from G.H.Q. to organise active service units in all brigade areas, so we were in a position to start organising such a unit at once. A Brigade Council meeting was held at my home and there we selected the personnel for the active service unit, or flying column. Seamus Tormey was appointed O/C. of the column. I told Tormey I would operate under him for a start, but that I expected to go to Mullingar and organise a column there also. Brigade or other officers would serve on the column as ordinary Volunteers while retaining their ranks in their own battalions or other units and would be allowed to return to their own units as necessary.

The first engagement planned for the column was an attack on a military party which used proceed to the Workhouse to relieve the military guard there. This was planned for a Monday night, but, as the Shannon ambush which was a rushed improvised affair took place on the Sunday, I cancelled the ambush at North Gate Street. The column assembled at Faheran immediately after this proposed ambush. The assembly took place on the following Tuesday and Wednesday nights. We billeted in a shed, the property of Father McGee at Tobber. On the following Thursday or Friday, David Daly, Jim Tormey and I went out to pick a possible ambush position on the main

Dublin-Athlone road. We selected a position at Parkwood as being the best available. In this we hoped to contact a single lorry or perhaps two which often travelled this road. We had available 13 rifles and one shotgun. Some time previously we had received a small amount of bombs or grenades from G.H.Q. which had been made in one of their secret factories in Dublin. We carried out a test of those bombs and found that they were faulty. The striker mechanism was defective. David Daly was detailed to travel to Dublin with the defective parts and have them replaced, so he missed the ambush at Parkwood.

On the morning selected for the ambush and on a Friday we occupied our position. As our men had little or no experience of using their rifles with the exception of a few ex-British army men, who were members of the column, we decided to occupy a position close to the road which would give us practically point blank range. We placed men behind the road fence on each side of the road, but the main body of our party was on one side. Con Costello and George Adamson were on the other side of the road in a position to deal with any enemy who might cross out on to that side, or take cover under the road fence on our side. We placed a scout out on the Dublin side where he had a view of the approaching road. He had a whistle on which to blow a blast when he spotted an enemy force approaching from that side. We could keep the road towards Athlone in view ourselves from our position. The scout on the Dublin side had a good view of the road for about 600 yards.

After being in the position for some time, a tender of Black and Tans drove through our position, having come from the Dublin side. We had heard no whistle blast from our scout and they had gone through before we could do anything about it.

Almost immediately we heard a whistle blast and another tender came into our position within a few seconds. Our orders to our men were that their initial shots were to be concentrated on the driver of the vehicle so as to halt it. Fire was opened on the tender and the driver was killed immediately, the tender coming to a halt in the ditch on our main body side. Almost immediately, several other tenders came up to our position and halted in rear of the disabled one, the occupants jumping from them and making for cover and firing wildly as they did so. Instead of the one or two enemy vehicles we had expected, we had clashed with a large convoy of Black and Tans who were proceeding from Gormanston Camp, Co. Meath, to Galway.

It was quite apparent that we had bitten off something we could not chew, so Tormey ordered us to withdraw, as the odds were too heavy against us. We pulled out and got away safely as got on to the road near Tobber. Here we found a civilian lorry parked on the roadside. We commandeered this lorry into which we all piled and made the driver drive us to Doon near Ballycummin. As we went along, the local people were working on the land and, while some of them cheered and waved to us, others turned their backs, probably thinking we were Black and Tans. At Doon we dismounted and told the driver to proceed back to Ballinahown and we took cover in the wood at Doon. Macken and I left the wood to scout and find out our exact position, which we did, and then returned to Tormey and the other men. We decided that the column should remain under cover in the wood until nightfall. In the meantime, Macken and I went across country and made arrangements to have the column transported across the Shannon by boat that night and arranged for billets for them in Gorry. We crossed the Shannon that night and went into billets in the Gorry area. That night the Tans shot a man dead while they were passing through Athlone. He was not a Volunteer.

The Black and Tans made no attempt to follow us from Parkwood. In fact, I learned afterwards that they were in a complete state of confusion and scattered wildly around the area firing wildly as they did so. They were evidently only concerned with saving their lives, and discipline or order was set aside. This indicated that their morale was none too high.

The column stayed at Gorry for the next fourteen days where Tormey put it through a course of training. Most of our rifles were Martinis or the old long Lee Enfields and we were very anxious to secure proper armament for the column. Small convoys of enemy forces were wont to travel the Athlone-Ballinasloe-Galway road, so we proceeded over there and for three days occupied ambush positions, but no enemy force ever turned up. We now left Gorry and, skirting Athlone on the Connaught side, we crossed the Shannon at Coosan. We intended to go towards Ballymahon in the hope of getting something in that area. En route we held a courtmartial on a prisoner held by the local Volunteers who was accused of being responsible for some trouble of some sort. We found him not guilty and released him.

We now proceeded to Ardnareaney^{CR} House near Tang and billeted in a hayshed there for three or four days. We decided to try and stage an ambush on the Ballymahon-Athlone road. Harry O'Brien and I scouted the road to Ballymahon but could find no position which was suitable, while Tormey and Costello went in the Auburn direction and drew blank also. We now returned to Gorry again by re-crossing the Shannon and marching all the way. While there we spent a few more days in ambush positions on the Galway road, but no enemy turned up.

It was now decided by the brigade officers and Tormey, that we would return to Faheran again and from there go into Moate and attack any patrols we could find there. If we could not get patrols we decided to attack the barracks there. We had no ideas about capturing the barracks but to attack it for nuisance value. The column reached Tobber about three in the morning, halting near the "Cat and Bag" publichouse. The men were detailed to billets in houses around the area. Before the men were dismissed to their billets I informed the column that I wanted it to assemble outside the publichouse that evening at 7 o'clock.

At 7 o'clock that evening Harry O'Brien, who was billeted with me, and I went to the place of meeting, but there was no one there except Paddy Macken. After waiting for an hour or so and no one had turned up, I suggested that we three should try and get some tea at the publichouse. We went to the house and asked the woman there for some tea. She gave us the tea but with very bad grace, so I offered to pay for it, but she would not accept any money. We wondered what was wrong with her. We returned to our appointed meeting place and at 11 o'clock that night Con Costello and Tormey turned up. They informed me that the publichouse had been raided the previous night for drink and cigarettes and that they had been out looking for the culprits and that was the reason they had been late in turning up at the assembly point. The raid had been carried out by the members of our column and some of the local Volunteers. Tormey now stated that it would be impossible to hold the column together and maintain discipline and I agreed with him. I decided to split up the column into sections.

m At this time Lord Mayor McSwiney was dying in Brixton Prison and orders had been received from G.H.Q. that members of the R.I.C. and Tans or any enemy personnel were to be shot

wherever they could be got. I detailed five men to go into Moate and shoot any police they could there. Five more were detailed for Athlone to try if they could get anything there. Casey and Birthles were to go back to Drumraney and shoot up the police or carry out a local ambush in that area. Macken and I would go to the Summerhill area on a similar mission. Tormey explained that he wanted to go to Mullingar on some private business and I agreed to this. Con Costello asked for permission to go to the west of Ireland to visit some friends and I also agreed to this, but told both of them not to go until our attacks came off.

Nothing happened in Moate, no contact being made with the enemy there. Tormey and Harry O'Brien and the other three went into Athlone. Tormey was of very fine build and looked like an ex-British army officer or perhaps a resigned R.I.C. man and, as such, drew attention to himself which was a disadvantage in those times .

Some Black and Tans were attracted by Tormey's appearance and started to follow him and O'Brien. He and O'Brien went into the Royal Hotel in an effort to shake them off, but the Tans - whose numbers had increased by now - followed them in there. Tormey and O'Brien got out the back way of the hotel and started to walk towards the Pig Market, but the Tans picked them up again and again started to follow them. Just as Tormey and O'Brien reached Maguire's shop and premises, one of the Tans jumped forward and shouted at Tormey: "Come here, big fellow, we want you" and ignored O'Brien who was smaller in comparison. James Dalton was also with O'Brien at this stage, having joined them en route. Tormey jumped into Maguire's publichouse and opened fire on the Tans from a revolver. One Tan ran to the side door of the premises and took up a position there as if to prevent Tormey escaping

by this route, but O'Brien, who was unnoticed up to now, fired at this Tan with his revolver which he drew from his pocket and hit him, wounding him in the hand. The Tan fell to the ground. O'Brien made good his escape down Irishtown, the Tans pursuing him, but he eluded them and got away. Tormey retreated up the stairway to the second storey of Maguire's premises and joined Mr. Maguire in the sitting room. In the meantime, the Tans entered Maguire's shop underneath and set it on fire. As the Tans were all around the place, Tormey had to stay put until the military fire brigade from the barracks arrived on the scene. The soldier crew of the fire brigade began carrying out sides of bacon and boxes of all sorts of provisions to salvage them from the fire. Tormey saw in this a chance for him to escape, so he went down and started to assist and direct the soldiers as to what should be salvaged. The soldiers did not know him and, apparently, accepted him as a military officer in mufti and, after a while, he walked away to safety. Maguire's shop and premises were burned down.

In the 1st Battalion area I arranged for small ambushes on any police to be got on the different roads around the area. We had only shotguns and a few revolvers in this area. Four men were placed at Thomastown under the command of Barney Gaffey with instructions to shoot any police that came along the Ballinasloe road or who could be found in the publichouses in that area. Two police came along and they opened fire on them, but the cartridges were damp and ineffective. Although the range was close enough, the police were not knocked out and they escaped. Barney Gaffey was a natural good shot and used to shooting game and he could not have missed. He tried a second shot, but that was also ineffective.

Near Athlone, at Kielty, I was with another party. We also had cartridges out of the same dump. Constable Doyle came along the road and at about six yards range we fired at him. We filled his coat with lead and pockmarked his face, but no pellets entered his body. Again the cartridges were faulty. Hundreds of pellets entered his clothes and face, but otherwise he was not hurt and got away safely, taking refuge in a house. Some of our men wanted to go after him, but I would not allow them. Doyle was not a bad sort of fellow and it was only the circumstances - reprisals for McSwiney - that induced us to fire at him. He had undergone the ordeal of being ambushed at close range and Providence had saved his life and I considered he had enough.

Con Costello had now gone off to Galway, and Tormey had gone to Mullingar. We used to sleep in dugouts in the bog and in billets in Bealnamulla. When things quietened down around Christmas, I tried to reorganise the column again. I arranged for an ambush at Thomastown Wood. I had about 20 men available for this, some of whom had been on the column previously. A patrol of about eight police used to patrol to Miller's publichouse from ~~Ke~~enark Barracks. We occupied an ambush position but no patrol turned up. We were mostly armed with shotguns, but had a few rifles and one duck gun.

Previous to this and on 8th December 1920, I was instructed to report to G.H.Q. in Dublin to meet Collins and to bring two senior officers of the brigade with me. I took David Daly and Birthles with me. We travelled by the goods train on the night of the 7th, getting into Dublin on the 8th. We met the Adjutant General, Gearoid O'Sullivan, in Parnell Square, and Dick Mulcahy in Dominick St. This area was cordoned off at this time by British forces as they had just

discovered ~~one of~~ the ~~several~~ bomb factories in Parnell St. a couple of days previously. As a result of this, we were a little ^{late} in our appointment with Collins. When we arrived we explained to Collins why we were late. At this stage, Collins had grown a moustache and had given up smoking. He had been a chain smoker. He carried cigarettes which he offered to us. He arrived at Fleming's at 8 p.m. on his cycle and had no bodyguard as far as I could see. He stayed about an hour discussing the situation in our area with us and impressed on us the necessity of keeping up the pressure on the enemy. He asked me if I had any objections to Mullingar being organised as a separate brigade. I had not; in fact, I was pleased as I could never, owing to the circumstances and the distance involved, give the attention I should to that part of our brigade area.

Collins now informed me that they had almost reached terms with the British Government through the intervention of Archbishop Clune, but that Galway Co. Council had, by their famous resolution - also a few other centres - spiked it for the time being. The British Government had assumed we were weakening in our fight and withdrew their offers. He appealed to us to keep up the pressure and the British Government would be forced to seek peace in a short time.

We returned to the brigade area by passenger train. David Daly got off at Mullingar and Birthles and I at Castletown. After some delay in Castletown, we proceeded towards Ballymore via Streamstown. At Kelly's publichouse we could see the lights of a car approaching. It was then dark and we hurried to the road junction in order to get a lift or seat in it. The car stopped at the road junction and we could see a number of policemen alighting from it, eight in all. We walked past them, saying good night to them, and they did

not interfere. We went on to Streamstown and called at Tracey's publichouse to get some refreshments. When we entered the place there was no one on the immediate premises. We could see the place was littered with half-empty glasses. After some time, a lady appeared and we asked her what had happened. She informed us that the place had been raided by the I.R.A. I asked her how many policemen had been at Streamstown when the train from Dublin arrived and she said two. We had seen at least eight on the road. It was pretty obvious that the place had been raided by the police in civilian attire posing as I.R.A. This was now, I knew, part of their activities to discredit the I.R.A. and turn the people against them, and from further inquiries made, I know my assumption was correct.

In January 1921, we planned to ambush a lorry of enemy forces at Drumreaney. This was a lorry which used to take the pay from Moate to the other barracks in that area. We marched from Gorry and were to be met by a man from Drumreaney who was to take us to billets in that area. No man met us at the point arranged. I took the men to McCormack's house in Drumreaney where we slept on the floor for the night. I had about sixteen men who were the nucleus of a new column. Next morning I sent men to look for the battalion commandant, Birthles, but he could not be found until long after the lorry would have passed. We were unaware of the route the lorry travelled. The men of the column were very disappointed at this debacle and their morale and confidence had got a bad shaking. We now returned to Carrick. To raise the morale of the men, I marched them along the Moate road and through the Irishtown part of Athlone. It was amazing how this raised their morale. The very fact that they could march without hindrance under arms through their own town, which contained

so many of the enemy, made them feel very proud, and gave their morale a great boost. It was venturesome taking an armed party into Athlone, but then the enemy would not be expecting us there, and we would have the element of surprise in our favour. We crossed the Shannon at Golden Island, billeting in Carrick.

We had tried, unsuccessfully, many times to get Captain Tully, and we now concentrated on this task. Three picked men were sent into the town each night, but failed to contact him. The military held dances in the courthouse, and we thought this might be a chance to get him. We contacted a Miss Eva Fitzgerald who used to attend the dances and was friendly with the British officers. She agreed to give a signal to our men waiting outside when Captain Tully was leaving. She did this, but Tully came out surrounded by a number of other officers, and as our men did not recognise Tully, they could not shoot. The orders at this time were that Athlone was to be kept quiet until Tully was got. Our men could have shot some of the officers, as they often could have done previously, but then our hope of getting Tully would have vanished. Our men went through the curfew patrol with the officers, in an attempt to identify Tully, but could not do so in the darkness. Tom Halligan, George Adamson and Ned Doolan were on duty that night.

I now gave instructions to all the members of the original column who were not with us then to meet me on the 1st February at Summerhill. The only men who turned up were John Lennon, Ned Dowling and George Cosgrave. I intended to stage an ambush on the Athlone-Ballinasloe road.

I selected the roadside at Mountflorencia to try and get a police patrol. We cut a hole in the ditch so that John Lennon, who was a local, could recognise any police that came the way in case they were in civilian attire. One man came along in civilian clothes and Johnny passed back word that he was like a policeman from Clonart Barracks. I told him to make sure of this and covered the man as he came along. Lennon did not tell us again whether he was sure that the man was a policeman or not, but when the man had passed by, Lennon went to go train his rifle on him. I ordered him not to fire, but he did and missed. I jumped up on the fence to try and get the policeman before he got round the bend on the road, but he did so and got away. We stayed there for some time, but, as nothing else came along, we retired to billets at Bealnamullagh.

I now discovered that Lennon wanted to shoot the policeman himself for personal reasons and this was the reason he did not confirm his original indication.

Next day, Tormey, the two Tom Halligans and George Adamson went over to the same road. They had come to join us and were billeted about half a mile away from us but had not contacted us. They took up a position about 500 yards further away from Athlone than where we had been the previous day. About 3 or 4 p.m. a party of 8 or 10 police came along the road. Tormey, seeing that the party was too strong, decided not to attack and ordered the others not to fire. After the police party had passed by, for some unknown reason, he suddenly rose up and opened fire on them. Tormey's brother had been murdered by the enemy in Ballykinlar Camp a few weeks previously, being shot by a sentry there for no reason, and this had upset him very seriously.

I suppose he could not resist the urge to have a crack at the enemy now. He had lost the advantage of surprise and getting the first volley in. The engagement now became general with our men. Unfortunately, the main body of police which they were engaging were followed by a rear guard party and Tormey and his comrades were unaware of this. This rear party halted and deployed down a side road or boreen placing themselves on the flanks of Tormey and his party. Tom Halligan "Leix" shot the cap off one of the policemen of the main party and, immediately afterwards, the foresights were shot off his own rifle. Tormey now decided to retreat and he was first to the ditch in rear of them. Tormey was shot immediately he got back to the ditch. Halligan "Pat" covered off the retreat of the remainder and they succeeded in getting clear back to Clonown. In the meantime, the Volunteers in Gorry had heard the shooting and, under Barney Gaffey, ran to their dump and got some shotguns and rushed to the assistance of Tormey and his men, but by the time they got to the spot, the R.I.C. had left the area. Gaffey and his men collected Tormey's body and brought it back with them. The police had not searched the area of the fight or they would have found the body.

I went to Carrick that day to try and contact Tormey and the others, and it was only when I got there that I heard of the engagement and Tormey's death. I made arrangements for a coffin and burial. We buried Tormey the following night at the old cemetery in Clonmacnoise, taking the coffin down the Shannon on a 'cot' which is a flat type of boat used to carry hay and turf. Two days afterwards an enemy force went out to the cemetery and dug the coffin up and took it to the military Barracks, Athlone. Some form of inquest or inquiry was held here and then Tormey's body was handed over to his relatives

and was interred in the graveyard at Mountemple alongside his brother who was shot in Ballykinlar Camp. Lying beside them is George Adamson who was later killed during the Civil War and, sad to relate, their graves are grossly neglected, being covered with weeds and dirt. There is no monument or anything to mark the place.

At this time our men were getting very much out of hand and were doing things without the sanction of higher authority. About a week after Tormey's death, some of them undertook, without authority, to stage an ambush at the head of ^{UGHT} ~~St. Athlone~~ ^{St. Athlone} on a police patrol. The brigade had previously decided that nothing should take place in Athlone until Captain Tully was shot and the place was to be kept open in that respect. This attempt at an ambush was contrary to brigade orders. Nothing took place as no patrol turned up, so they decided to try again the following Saturday night. I heard of this and decided I would join the party although it was an unofficial job. I declined to take charge of the party, but said I would assist them. My idea in taking part in an unofficial operation was to refute suggestions which were being bandied around amongst Volunteer circles that I did not want anything to happen in Athlone in case my home and the premises of my people would be burned. All that happened was that two soldiers were held up. No patrol turned up.

It now became only too clear to me that discipline had to a great extent been lost and that things were getting into a dangerous state when individual officers and Volunteers were taking on operations of their own accord without authority or co-operation of their headquarters. This, I could foresee, would end up in a big lot of young men being arrested, some of them under arms and suffering the consequent death penalty.

I also could see what arms we had being lost and a collapse of the movement in our area. I gave the matter considerable consideration and concluded that the best course was to write to G.H.Q. Dublin, and place the whole matter before them. This I did, and in my report I asked that a reliable and suitable officer, who was a stranger to the area, be sent down by them to take charge. I said in my report that I would be prepared to fight in any grade or position under this officer and I tendered my resignation as brigade O/C.

About the end of March or early April, Simon Donnelly arrived from G.H.Q. I met him at Moyvore and brought him through to the Athlone area. A meeting was held at Coosan and James Martin, captain of the Berries Company, was promoted vice-commandant of the battalion. I cannot remember whom he replaced. A further meeting was held at which all brigade officers as far as possible, including company commanders, were present. My resignation came up for consideration. Simon Donnelly wanted me still to carry on, but I pointed out that after the affair of the column and what was happening this was impossible and would be unfair both to the brigade and me. I again expressed my desire that a strange officer be appointed to the brigade, but the local officers did not want a stranger. An election was held and Con Costello was appointed **Brigade O/C**. I offered to go back to the ranks as a Volunteer. Simon Donnelly wanted me to take on as vice-O/C. of the brigade, but I would not do so. He insisted that I remain on the Brigade Council or staff, and from thence on it was understood that I held the rank of brigadier attached to the brigade staff.

I had not had any rest for a long time, and I now asked to be allowed some time off for a holiday and was given three weeks leave of absence. I spent the period in the brigade

area. Almost immediately afterwards, G.H.Q. sent down Gerald Davis - now Dr. Davis in the army - as an active service officer, to take charge of the operations in the brigade. He continued my policy of trying to get Captain Tully, but enlarged it to include any R.I.C. man in the town. Davis was not too long in the area when he was arrested. I was now staying at Taughmaconnell. I heard there was going to be an ambush at Glasson and I offered my services and travelled into that area, but was not able to contact any ambush party. A tinker or travelling man of the road named John Ward gave away the house I was staying at - ~~Mc~~Carthy's of Taughmaconnell. He was making inquiries about me and I became suspicious and slept elsewhere. A couple of lorries carrying enemy forces came looking for me. I watched them raiding the house I had been staying in. The military called to my brother's shop before coming out to Taughmaconnell, but he was not there, having gone to the farm to make hay. However, they met my brother some distance from the house and Captain Tully put him against the wall and threatened to shoot him unless he stated where I was. My brother was hot-tempered and told him to go to hell. At this Tully laughed and walked away.

There were numerous raids on my house and that of my mother, some of which were carried out by enemy forces with blackened faces which were to prevent identification or recognition. They generally smashed up the places and took away the key of the safe. They also stole our account books and ^{BROKE} the cash register and some jewellery and so forth.

I should have stated that after I divided the original column, Birthles, who was O/C. of the Drumreaney Battalion, carried out an ambush at Auburn on the Athlone-Ballymahon road with the men from that battalion. They attacked two

lorry-loads of Tans coming from Ballymahon, using rifles, shotguns and bombs. This was after the death of Lord Mayor McSwiney. One Tan was killed and several others wounded, One Volunteer named Finn on our side was killed. I understand - and this was the report submitted to me - that the bombs which were thrown into the lorries failed to explode. Had they done so the enemy casualties would have been much greater.

There was also a second raid on the Lecarrow Quarries; this time an official one, a short time before the attack on Streamstown barracks. A consignment of explosives arrived at Athlone for the quarries. This was usually escorted the following day to the quarries by military party from the barracks. We planned to take over the quarries prior to this party arriving and to attack them when they did so and capture both the explosives and their armament. We commandeered Mr. Jones's motor boat and embarked on this taking Mr. Jones with us to man the boat. We sailed up the Shannon and took over the quarry, making prisoners temporarily of the workmen there. We concealed ourselves in the quarries which are extensive and awaited the arrival of the military with the explosives, but they never came, so we had to disperse. I cannot account for why they did not travel that day.

After the Truce came into force I attended an officers' training camp in ^{DRUMRANEY} ~~Athlone~~. It now looked probable that we would have a regular Irish army and I had to decide whether I would take to soldiering as a career or go back to my business, which, by compulsion, I had neglected during the preceding years. I decided to go back to my business and I tendered my resignation to the Brigade O/C. - Con Costello. In doing so, I promised him that should the fight with England be resumed, I would take my place again in whatever sphere he

deemed best for me.

There was a man named Maher who was an ex-British officer living in Irishtown. He had a wooden leg, but travelled extensively throughout the country. He was under suspicion of spying for the British for a long time, and we had been keeping him under observation. He was arrested by George Adamson and Ned Doolan in Carrickbyrne and courtmartialled and sentenced to be shot. He had a small pension from the British Government, but claimed that he lived principally by begging, but our information, which was backed up by the evidence of the men who had been keeping watch on him, was that he was never known to have done any begging. He was found guilty by the courtmartial and sentenced to be shot. He was shot and his body was thrown into the Shannon. We did not want his execution to become known so as to avoid reprisals by the enemy on Carrickbyrne ^{RIEN} and that was why his body was given to the river. We forgot about the wooden leg and this kept the body afloat in the river where it remained for a considerable time. It was then hauled in and buried on the bank of the river by some of our men. I personally took charge of the execution party.

Another man named Blagriff was shot in the Glasson area. This man worked around this area with the local farmers and personally knew a lot of the Volunteers and their activities. Some letters, I believe, were found in a raid on the mails which indicated that this man was going away to join the R.I.C. and it was considered that his knowledge was too dangerous to allow him to do so, so he was picked up and shot by the local Volunteers as a matter of urgency. This was an unofficial execution and had not my sanction.

There was another man named Johnston also executed for spying. This man was a Protestant and an extensive property

owner in the area. The matter was discussed at a Brigade Council meeting and there was little doubt that he was a spy and was a prime agent for Captain Tully. It was quite a long time afterwards before he was got. He gave his guilt away to a certain extent in that he ceased to live in his own house and was on the run, so to speak.

I saved several other persons who were also suspected of spying for the enemy from being shot. In such cases we had no actual proof, only suspicion. The procedure adopted towards such people was to send them a warning letter and this seemed to have the desired effect.

Head Constable Feeney of the R.I.C. wrote to Police H.Q. in Dublin claiming promotion to D.I. and indicating the amount of work he had done in rounding up Sinn Feiners and that he was responsible for the bayonet charge in Athlone. The letter was sent to me by G.H.Q. He was placed on our list to be shot, but preference went to Captain Tully.

Our intelligence service in the area never reached the high level of organisation desired. We had no direct agencies in the enemy forces, but G.H.Q. may have had, as Collins worked this service independently of the brigades. There was no one in the Post Office in Athlone who was of any use and we could not tap this line of enemy communication. We were able to pick up useful bits of information through the clergy and from individual soldiers from the barracks who would leave messages with my brother, He always compensated them for the information they supplied. Such messages generally concerned impending raids and round-ups by the enemy and were very useful. The Cumann na mBan were also able to pick up bits of information regularly.

The only munitions that were made were the filling of cartridges with buckshot. The buckshot was made locally. ~~William~~ ^{William} Byrne made a mould for the construction of the buckshot. We also made home-made bombs of the canister type. Those cans were filled with gelignite and fitted with a length of fuze and a commercial detonator for ignition purposes. They were really only useful for stationary or slow-moving targets. We also made a large number of pikeheads but they were never used.

When I returned to Athlone from Drogheda in 1917, I was transferred to the circle of the I.R.B. in Athlone. There were then about 18 or 20 men in the circle. Some of these were Volunteers and some were old men. Seamus O'Brien was Centre then. He was later replaced by Peter Malinn. As time went on nearly all the officers of the I.R.A. became members of the I.R.B. and also some of the men. The organisation did not really serve any great purpose except to keep a strong backbone in the Volunteer movement. There never was, at any time, any attempt to direct Volunteer activities by the I.R.B. in the area. Malinn remained Centre until the Truce. When things became really hot and principally during the period of the Black and Tans, the I.R.B. organisation became inactive and may be said to have practically ceased to exist. It was revived again during the Truce.

Signed: James P. O'MearaDate: 26.9.56Witness: Matthew Lacey Condit