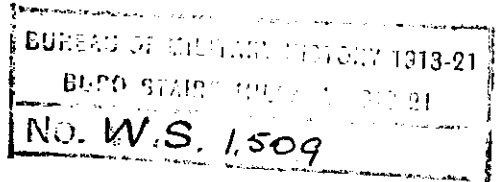


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ORIGINAL



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COSANTA.

BUREAU OF MILITARY HISTORY, 1913-21.

STATEMENT BY WITNESS.

DOCUMENT NO. W.S. 1509.

Witness

Michael Conway,
Carraghmore,
Ballycullane,
Co. Wexford.

Identity.

Survivor of Explosion at St. Kearns,
Saltmills.

Subject.

Activities of Ballycullane Company,
Irish Volunteers, Co. Wexford,
1917-February, 1922.

Conditions, if any, Stipulated by Witness.

Nil.

File No S.2847.

Form B.S.M. 2

ORIGINAL

BUREAU OF MILITARY HISTORY 1913-21
BURO STAIRÉ MILENTA 1913-21

STATEMENT BY Mr. MICHAEL CONWAY, 1509

Curraghmore, Ballycullane, County Wexford.

I joined the Ballycullane Company of the Irish Volunteers in 1917. There were between 25 and 30 men in the Company. John Timmins, who died a few years ago, was Company Captain. Meetings of the Company were held in secret twice weekly. The training included foot drill, arms drill, instruction in the use of arms, and occasionally we held field exercises.

The members of the Company were actively engaged during the 1918 General Election on behalf of the Sinn Féin candidate. We attended public meetings, canvassed electors and on polling day acted as tally clerks, and helped to transport the voters to the polling stations.

The first activity of a military nature was the collecting of fire-arms, principally shot guns, from the farmers. This operation was carried out in the Company area in one night. We just got it done in good time as the R.I.C. were on the same job two days afterwards, but they were too late as we had collected all the available arms.

The next order I got was to collect boxes of old cart-wheels and old water-piping of about two inches in diameter for the purpose of making bombs with which to attack R.I.C. Barracks and other enemy posts.

We were instructed to destroy R.I.C. Barracks which the police had vacated. The first one we destroyed was at Tintern; the second was at Fethard-on-Sea where we tested our first bombs made out of the boxes of cart-wheels. They proved to be most successful. During

this operation I got a bad fright. When we were sprinkling the floors and woodwork of the barracks with petrol I went into the day-room with two others. Then an explosion took place inside the barracks. The door banged and locked. I had the bombs in my coat pocket. As luck happened, I was able to kick out the door panels with my foot and got out on to the road. The barracks by this time was in flames. I threw off my coat as I felt the heat on my back. I then threw the bombs through the top windows into the blazing barracks. They exploded and blew the roof completely off the barracks.

Plans had been prepared for an attack on Arthurstown R.I.C. Barracks. All the preliminaries had been carried out. All roads leading to Arthurstown had been blocked by felled trees and all telephone wires cut. I was on my way down to take up my position for the attack when I was told that something had gone wrong and that the attack had been called off.

We also held up a train at Ballycullane Station and disarmed some soldiers who were travelling on the train. I was mobilised to take part in the attack on Clonroche R.I.C. Barracks. The job I was given was the cutting of telephone wires and the blocking of roads.

Our Company had taken over an old, unoccupied house at St. Kearns, Salt Mills. Members of the Company assembled there at night to make bombs to attack Foulksmills and New Ross Barracks. On the night of the 12th October, 1920, fourteen members of the Company were in this old house. They were :-

Company Captain John Timmins, Roundtown, Tintern,
Section Commander Martin Roche, Salt Mills,

Section Commander Michael Fitzgerald, St. Leonards,

Volunteer James Gleeson, St. Kearns,

" Robert Walsh, do.
 " Thomas Gleeson, do.
 " Stephen Barron, do.
 " James Byrne, Bridgetown,
 " Edward Kelly, Salt Mills,
 " Patrick Reville, Ballycullane,
 " Thomas Kinsella, Kinvagh, Ballycullane,
 " Patrick Kelly, do. do.
 " Patrick O'Grady, Tintern,
 " Michael Conway (myself), Curraghmore.

Candles and cart lamps were used to light the house and sacks had been placed at the windows to prevent the light from being seen from outside. There was a large quantity of explosive material in the house. It included tonite, gelignite, a quantity of detonators and a number of bombs prepared and ready for use. Most of the explosives had been captured some time previously at the Hook Lighthouse.

My job was cutting the wire off the detonators. I was using a pliers. I had finished my work and we were about to knock off for the night. Another Volunteer was also engaged cutting the wires off the detonators. He was using a penknife. He cut the wire too short off one of the detonators. It struck fire in his hand and he dropped it on to the floor. I was standing up at this time. I heard a report like a revolver shot. Then I saw a blue flame sweeping across the house. The next thing I heard was Captain John Timmins shouting, "Run men, we will all be killed". Almost immediately a terrific explosion occurred. I thought I was split from the top of my head down. The roof was blown up and landed some fields away. I was blown up too and I thought I was up to the stars and when I came

down again I fell on a tree which was growing at one end of the house. The bough broke with me and it broke my fall into the house again, and stones from the wall fell on me. I was at this time almost unconscious. When I came to a little I heard great moaning. I was smothering from gas and was gasping for breath. I was naked as my clothes had been burned off me and I was red with blood. All that was left on me were my two boots and they were badly tattered. With the help of other men I dragged myself out from under the stones and I was laid on the green sod. John Timmins, our Company Captain, spoke to me and asked what way I was. He said, "When you were not killed you are alright. We will go some place to see if we can get a priest: I am bleeding to death".

Timmins and I fought hard to get to a neighbour's house. Holding on to each other we staggered along, between falling down and getting up again many times, until we met Michael Gleeson who was on his way home. He helped us down to the house. He was not in the Volunteers but was a brother of Thomas Gleeson who was wounded in the explosion.

Later that night Father Scallen, C.C., St. Leonards and Father O'Rourke, C.C., Poulfur, arrived at the house and administered to us. Doctor Anglin, M.O., Arthurstown No. 2. District, and Doctor Walton, M.O., Fethard-on-Sea, No. 1 District, attended to us.

Next morning the house was crowded with people, police and military. The following evening John Timmins and I were removed by Doctor Seamus O'Ryan, T.D. and Mr. Tom O'Hanlon, to Doctor Furlong's Nursing Home in Wexford town. Sometime after being admitted to the Nursing Home I woke up as something was prodding me. I was all bandaged up. I looked up and saw four R.I.C. men

looking down at me in the bed. One said to the others "That's Conway". And pointing towards Timmins' bed he said "That's Timmins". They were two Sergeants and two Constables. Next day a guard was put on the Nursing Home. The R.I.C. did duty during the day and the military^{at}/night. They held up and questioned everyone coming to visit us. We were there for three weeks.

Plans for our escape were made by Father Mark Byrne, since deceased, Father M. O'Connor, since deceased, Miss N. O'Ryan, sister of Dr. Seamus O'Ryan, T.D., and some nuns. The nuns made a practise of coming each evening walking in twos in procession to visit us. It was arranged that when we would be well enough the nuns would bring two nuns' habits with them and that Timmins and I would dress in them and walk out with the nuns through the military guard and up to St. John of God's Convent where a car would be waiting to take us to a Doctor's residence in County Carlow.

It had been decided that we would go on a particular night and that evening the priests visited us and gave us their blessing. Shortly afterwards a nun came rushing into the ward. She was very excited and said that the hospital was surrounded by military and that there was a strong escort outside. The nun came over to me and told me to tell the military that I felt bad and she changed the medical chart. Two military doctors entered the ward. One went to Timmins' bed; the other came to me. They took out their instruments and examined us. They told the Matron to get our clothes. Four R.I.C. men came up then and a guard of military. There was great excitement in the hospital and outside it where a large crowd of the townspeople had assembled. We were carried down and put in an ambulance and got a great cheer from the people.

No one knew where they were bringing us to - just the usual - an 'unknown destination'. It was a disappointing end to us that evening as we were expected to be going out that night as two nuns. Our destination was the Military Hospital, Waterford, where we were kept for between three and four weeks.

One morning I was brought with Edward Kelly and Stephen Barron to Dummore, where we were handcuffed and put on a small boat and taken out to a mine-sweeper or 'Destroyer' which was anchored outside the harbour. The vessel called at Dungarvan, Youghal and Queenstown (now called Cobh) with dispatches. We were handcuffed on deck all day until we arrived at Cork late that night and brought to Cork Military Detention Barracks. That was the first time I was in a cell and the first time I saw a plank bed. But I was so tired that night that I would have slept on a harrow.

While we were in Cork we were constantly taken out as hostages, sometimes with large convoys of about twenty lorries, protecting petrol, ammunition and other supplies to various stations and barracks. Before starting on these journeys the officer in charge always told his men that if they were attacked they were to shoot the prisoners first. As luck had it the convoys with which I travelled as a hostage were not attacked.

After about three weeks in Cork we were brought to Fermoy. It took a long time to complete this journey as the military held up and searched motor cars etc. en route. We arrived late that night in Fermoy. Later that night a number of Black and Tans came along. They were mad drunk. They demanded the keys of our cells to shoot us. They said that thirty of their comrades had been blown up that day and that they were going to get thirty of our

fellows for them. The Corporal refused to hand over the keys to them. Fermoy at this time was District Headquarters of the Black and Tans.

After four nights in Fermoy, my two comrades Edward Kelly, Stephen Barron and I were brought by road under heavy military escort to Waterford Prison. We travelled by Kilworth, Clogheen, Fethard-on-Sea, Clonmel and Carrick-on-Suir. We were soon joined by the three other Salt Mills prisoners - John Timmins, Thomas Gleeson and Thomas Kinsella who, until then, had been patients in the Waterford Military Hospital.

We were charged with making explosives and waging war against His Majesty's Forces and were tried by courtmartial. The evidence against us was given by Sergeant Linders, R.I.C., Duncannon, and by Lieutenant Alexander, Military Barracks, New Ross. We refused to recognise the Court. Each of us stood up in turn and said "I refuse to recognise this Court". A few days afterwards we were sent for and an officer informed us that we had been found guilty and sentenced to three years penal servitude.

Of the fourteen men who were in the house the night of the explosion, five were killed, six were wounded and captured and three were wounded but escaped. The following were killed :-

- Section Commander Martin Roche,
- " " Michael Fitzgerald,
- Volunteer James Gleeson,
- " James Byrne,
- " Robert Walsh.

The following six men were wounded and captured:-

- Captain John Timmins,
- Volunteer Edward Kelly,
- " Stephen Barron,
- " Thomas Gleeson,

Volunteer Thomas Kinsella,

" Michael Conway (myself).

The following were wounded and escaped :-

Volunteer Patrick O'Grady, Volunteer Reville and Volunteer Kelly.

With the five other prisoners I was removed by rail to Mountjoy Prison, Dublin. After three or four nights there we were sent, with about 300 other sentenced prisoners, to Portland Prison, England. One of the prisoners in Portland was R.C. Barton. He refused to obey the prison rules, demanding to be treated as a political prisoner. He spent most of his time in the 'punishment cell'.

Soon after the Truce in July, 1921, we were put on a big Man-of-War on which there were about 800 Marines. It took us to outside Plymouth Harbour where we were put into small boats and brought to Plymouth. From there we were taken by rail to Dartmoor. We were released in February, 1922.

When we arrived in Plymouth on the way home we were met by a large crowd, including a number of priests. We were brought to a big hotel and entertained to dinner and given a plentiful supply of cigarettes and tobacco. The Bishop of Plymouth presided at the dinner.. In Dublin we got another big reception. We went by rail to Wexford and Ballycullane. Fog signals were blazed at the docks. A large crowd met us at the station. Candles were lighted in all the windows and a torchlight procession escorted us to our homes.

SIGNED: Michael Conway P.C.

DATE: 12.10.1956

WITNESS: Pearl Brennan Lieut. Col.

