

ORIGINAL

BUREAU OF MILITARY HISTORY 1913-21
BURO STAIRE MILEATA 1913-21
No. W.S. 1541

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BUREAU OF MILITARY HISTORY, 1913-21.

STATEMENT BY WITNESS.

DOCUMENT NO. W.S. 1541.

Witness

Thomas F. Meagher,
Patrick Street,
Templemore,
Co. Tipperary.

Identity.

Brigade Quartermaster, 2nd Tipperary Brigade.

Subject.

Activities of Thurles Company and 1st Battalion
Flying Column, Co. Tipperary, 1917-1921.

Conditions, if any, Stipulated by Witness:

Nil.

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Form B.S.M. 2

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STATEMENT BY MR. THOMAS F. MEAGHER

Patrick St., Templemore, Co. Tipperary.

(formerly Quartermaster, 2nd (Mid) Tipperary Brigade).

I was born on 24th June 1899, at Annfield House, Golden Grove, Ballycahill, Thurles, being the second youngest of a family of four boys and four girls. My father, who was a farmer, had been associated with the Land League movement and my paternal grandfather had been imprisoned for his connection with the Fenian organisation, whilst, on my mother's side of the family, one of my granduncles - an O'Dwyer - had been transported to Botany Bay for his part in the insurrection of 1848.

Having finished my education at Inch and Roskeen national schools and at the Christian Brothers School in Thurles, I was apprenticed to the grocery, bar and hardware business in Messrs. Finn Bros. shop in Thurles. That, I would say, was about the year 1915.

At the time that I left home to commence my business career in Thurles, there was an Irish Volunteer company in existence at Inch. It was under the command of my brother Eddie - later Father Edward Meagher, now deceased - but, on account of my youth, I was not a member and cannot therefore give much detail about it. During Easter Week 1916, the company mobilised at my home at Annfield and I remember that each evening of that eventful week Jimmy Leahy (later O/C. Mid Tipperary Brigade), who was then at business in Thurles, and myself cycled out to Annfield to find out if there was any news of how the Rising was progressing in Dublin or if there were any local developments. My recollection is that the

company were awaiting orders which did not arrive and at the end of the week the men dispersed and returned to their homes. During the week they had cut the telegraph wires along the railway line.

Shortly after the Rising of 1916, Fr. Freeney and Sean Broderick arrived at Annfield from Galway. They were both on the run and were perhaps the first men on the run to be harboured at our home. They remained until 15th August 1916, when, with my brother Jack and Paddy Kinnane of Upperchurch, I accompanied them to Dublin. After parting with Fr. Freeney and Sean Broderick we spent most of that day viewing the ruins of Dublin, particularly those of Lower O'Connell St.

It was not, however, until about the springtime of 1917 that I became officially a member of the Volunteer organisation. With Jimmy Leahy in charge, a company was then formed in Thurles and I joined it at its inception. Our early activities consisted of parading weekly for drill and paying a weekly subscription. I think I can lay claim to having secured for the company its first service rifle. I bought it for 50/- from a British soldier who was home on leave and whom I contacted when he was drinking in Mixie O'Connell's shop in Thurles. He did not appear to be in any way concerned about what might happen to him when he reported back without his rifle. At the time it was customary for British soldiers to bring their rifles home with them when coming on leave. Soon afterwards, another soldier who had his rifle with him called to O'Connell's and spent some time drinking there. We learned that he was going to the railway station to catch a train. This time there was no question of offering him money for the rifle. Jimmy Leahy and I followed him and, as he approached the railway station, we attacked him and seized the rifle. After that, there were no more rifles to

be got soft as the British soldiers ceased bringing them with them when coming on leave to their homes in Ireland. We were, however, constantly on the watch for anything in the way of a piece of military equipment and another incident of that period which comes to my mind was slipping into the hallway of a house where a British officer was visiting and taking the officer's trench helmet from the hallstand.

On Monday morning, 20th May 1918, a Volunteer organiser named Sean McLoughlin, who was staying at my home in Annfield gave me a dispatch and a small box of ammunition to take to Liam Manahan, then O/C. of the Galbally Battalion. So, to avoid going through Thurles where the R.I.C. were ever on the alert, particularly at the railway station, it was decided that I should cycle to Goolds Cross, eight miles away, and take a train from there to Limerick Junction. I had cycled about three miles of my journey and was cruising down a steep gradient at Roskeen when I encountered a party of 30 or 40 R.I.C. men led by the notorious District Inspector Hunt of Thurles and Sergeant Wallace of Roskeen. They were cycling in my direction; as a matter of fact, they were on their way to raid 'Annfield'. They kept to their side of the road and I to mine but, as I passed, D.I. Hunt recognised me and shouted some orders to the policemen. Two or three of them moved their bicycles out on to the road as if to obstruct my passage, but by pedalling for all I was worth I got past them and clear. They opened fire after me, wounding me in the left shoulder. I continued cycling, took a sharp turn to the left along a byroad and, bringing the bicycle with me, entered a farm house where the late Fr. O'Donoghue had just finished saying the station Mass. I gave the dispatch and the box of ammunition to the priest who helped me out through a back window. As the police were in hot pursuit, I had to keep

under cover for most of the morning; then I forded a river and went about 5 miles across country to a friend's (Mike Ryan Cleary) house in Holycross. A doctor was got for me that evening and he dressed the wound which fortunately proved to be only a flesh one. As District Inspector Hunt knew me I considered it advisable to remain on the run and I did not resume my position at Finn's until some time in 1919.

On the night of 15th August 1918, with Jimmy Leahy, Mick Small, my brother Jack, Ned O'Reilly, Paddy Kinnane and some others, I took part in a raid on the magazine of Molloy's hardware shop in Thurles. Entrance to the magazine was gained by the assistance of either one or two members of Molloy's staff who were Volunteers. I cannot say what exact amount of stuff the raid yielded, but between explosives, shotguns and boxes of shotgun ammunition, we took away a good horse's carload. The stuff was first taken to my home at 'Annfield' and later it was hidden in a vault in Kyleanna graveyard. Much of the explosives was used almost immediately in the making of bombs for the conscription crisis which was then at its height.

Some short time after the ambush at Soloheadbeg in January 1919, Seamus Robinson, Sean Treacy, Dan Breen and Sean Hogan spent a week or so at 'Annfield' and became familiar friends of all members of our family. On the evening of 10th May 1919, one of my sisters cycled to Ballagh and attended a dance there in the home of Eamon Ó Duibhir. Robinson, Treacy, Breen and Hogan were also at the dance and, in the early hours of the following morning, Sean Hogan accompanied my sister and her cousin, Miss Bridget O'Keefe of Glenough, to 'Annfield'. Robinson, Treacy and Breen had gone to Miss O'Keefe's house earlier that same morning. A few hours later, and while Hogan was resting on a sofa, my sister

noticed a party of R.I.C. men approaching the house. She roused Hogan and told him. He left the house and ran in a southerly direction through a field. Unfortunately for him, the police were approaching the house from the south side and as he cleared the fence at the end of the field he jumped straight into the arms of six R.I.C. men who were extending out to surround the house. Had he taken any other direction he was safe. The subsequent events of that episode, culminating in Hogan's rescue two days later at Knocklong railway station, are fully covered in Desmond Ryan's "Sean Treacy and the Third Tipperary Brigade" and in Dan Breen's book "My Fight for Irish Freedom". There is nothing I could add to those accounts except, perhaps, that I believe that Sean Hogan's capture at 'Annfield' was not due to an act of treachery on anyone's part. It is my opinion that the police came that morning to carry out a routine raid on the house, an act which was then of frequent occurrence.

Later on in that year I got an attack of rheumatic fever and was laid up at home until February or March 1920, when I resumed work again in Finn's of Thurles. About two weeks later, on a Monday afternoon, I cycled with Pat O'Brien of Silvermines to Jer Bourke's of Templeberry to collect a few revolvers. It was dark when we got back to Thurles and we were halted outside the R.I.C. barracks in Thurles by some R.I.C. men who wanted our names and addresses as we had no lights on our bicycles. O'Brien gave a fictitious name and address, but as they (the R.I.C.) knew me quite well, there was no point in my doing likewise. I expected to receive a summons during the week and to be tried at the Petty Sessions Court on the following Saturday. At most, I expected to get a few weeks in jail for I had no intention of paying a fine.

On the following Saturday afternoon I was arrested at

Finn's by a party of 10 or 12 R.I.C. men and taken to the R.I.C. barracks. I fully expected to be charged with the offence of not having a light on my bicycle, but to my surprise the D.I. read out to me an order signed by Ian McPherson, then Chief Secretary for Ireland, which decreed that I was to be deported from Ireland. The deportation order was dated for the previous November, i.e. November 1919. Under escort of military and police I was taken by lorry to Limerick military barracks. As the lorry passed the Cross of The Ragg, one of my best friends, Tom O'Dwyer of The Ragg, recognised me and waved me goodbye. It was my last time to see him, for a week later he was foully murdered by the R.I.C. murder gang. We had a stop in Nenagh whilst a puncture was being repaired and, near Birdhill, we were halted by another puncture. This time the lorry, the escort and myself remained stationary until the following evening (Sunday) when an armoured car and another lorry came out from Limerick to bring us in.

From Sunday to Friday I was detained in Limerick military barracks. On the Friday afternoon I was placed in a lorry and with an escort of military and police driven to the railway station. We arrived there just in nice time to see the Cork train, which was our objective, steam out. Back again to the military barracks. Next morning, accompanied by Frank Barrett of Ennis, who was also a prisoner, I was again taken to the railway station. This time there was no mistake about the time or the train. It was a special and, with over 200 military on board, took Barrett and myself to Cork. We spent about a week or so in Cork Detention Prison and then, as members of a batch of 100 prisoners, we were taken by sea to Belfast. Then, after another week or two in Belfast Jail, we were removed at night to the docks, put aboard ship and, next day, we landed at Wellington Docks near Holyhead.

Then by train to London and to Wormwood Scrubbs Prison. There I renewed acquaintance with Frank McGrath of Nenagh and some other Tipperary friends mostly from the Toomevara district, all of whom were serving sentences as political prisoners.

On 21st April 1920, in support of a demand for unconditional release, all Irish political prisoners in Wormwood Scrubbs Prison went on hunger strike. After 17 days on hunger strike I was released and removed for hospital treatment to St. James's Hospital, Balham, London. Amongst the nurses there were some girls from the Thurles district and, after a few weeks under their care, I was able to undertake the journey home. A few weeks later I felt fully recuperated and resumed my position in Finn's and remained there until the formation of the 1st Battalion flying column, sometime about the following October. The column's strength was approximately 20 men, armed with rifles and revolvers; it was commanded by Jerry Ryan, the battalion commandant and, during Jerry's absence and after his arrest, it was under the command of the late Michael Small, then the battalion vice-commandant. After a lapse of so many years, it is now very difficult to recall the movements of the column and its engagements during the period from October 1920 to the Truce in July 1921. Thinking over things, I can now recall that I spent a good deal of time during that period moving around from area to area in company with Jimmy Leahy, the brigade O/C. Then again, I was frequently with Paddy Kinnane and the late Jim Stapleton in the 3rd Battalion area in which area my old home at Annfield was situated.

As far as I can remember, the first attempt by the column to engage enemy forces was when we prepared and occupied an ambush position at Gortnahoe to attack an R.I.C. patrol which

was expected to come from Kilcooley. There we drew a blank, for the expected patrol did not come out.

R.I.C.

There were at least two attacks on Holycross/Barracks. In the first of these, the full column was engaged and from a position on the opposite side of the road, rifle and shotgun fire was opened on the barracks. My recollection of that attack is that it was hoped that the R.I.C. garrison would surrender the post soon after fire was opened on it. The reaction of the garrison, however, was to concentrate their fire on our position and to send up 'Verey' lights for assistance which might be expected to come from either Thurles or Cashel. This attack lasted for approximately one hour and, as there were no indications of the garrison surrendering, the column withdrew from their position. The second attack on Holycross Barracks in which I was concerned was more or less of a minor nature. It consisted of a few members of the column going there and sniping the barracks. Not very long afterwards the R.I.C. were withdrawn from Holycross and we destroyed the barracks by burning it. Whilst the barracks burned, loud explosions from within it indicated that the R.I.C. had before leaving concealed trap mines or bombs in the building.

On the night of 25th November 1920, I went to visit my home at Annfield. Michael Small accompanied me as far as my home and, after arranging to meet me again next day to return to the column, Small went on to his own place. I was armed with a police carbine and a grenade which I hid before going to bed, putting the carbine into a stack of straw and the grenade under some stones on a wall. I slept that night in the barn and next morning early I was roused by my sister with the news that military were surrounding the house.

Dressed only in my shirt and trousers I made an attempt to elude the military, but was captured in the haggard. I was taken into the house and permitted to sit at the fire whilst for at least two hours the military conducted their search. To my surprise, the military, having concluded the raid, politely bid me good morning and took their departure. Later, when I went to get the carbine and the grenade, it was evident that both had been disturbed but not taken during the search. I found that the stones covering the grenade had not been replaced and the butt of the carbine was sticking out of the straw stack.

Having heard of the raid on 'Annfield', Small did not call for me during the day and I made up my mind to remain at home again that night. After nightfall I went for a walk with a friend named Matty Burke who, when I was about to part with him at our gateway, advised me strongly not to stay at home and pleaded with me to go with him to his employer's place - people named O'Connell. Rather reluctantly I yielded to his entreaties. About midnight that night, four masked and armed men called to 'Annfield' and demanded to know if Tomas O'Meachair (using the Irish version of my name) was at home. On being told that I was not, they departed again. My sister came to O'Connell's to inform me of what had happened and, with Burke and the brothers Jack and Ned Butler who were in O'Connell's and who volunteered to come with me, I returned at once to 'Annfield' but there was then no trace or sign of the midnight visitors. I have no doubt but that they were members of the R.I.C. murder gang from Thurles who that same night shot Thomas O'Loughlin and Michael Leahy at Mullaunbrack.

It may not be out of place here to mention that, in view of what was happening elsewhere and due to the persistent raids and lootings by military and police, and to the threats used

by the R.I.C., my father, mother and sisters - except one - had left 'Annfield' and had gone to live with friends.

It was, too, as far as I can now recollect, in November 1920, that members of our column in conjunction with some members of the 3rd Battalion spent the greater part of a day in an ambush position at Ross Cottage on the road between Borrisoleigh and Nenagh. Towards evening, a lorry load of British troops came from the direction of Nenagh. We opened fire on them at about 50 yards range. The lorry stopped and the troops replied to our fire with rifles and a machine gun. I would say that the engagement lasted for about half an hour and it terminated when the lorry moved off and resumed its journey towards Borrisoleigh and Thurles. There were subsequent rumours that the British troops suffered some casualties. There were none on our side.

It was, I think, soon after the attack on the lorry of troops at Ross Cottage that a few individual members of our column, in co-operation with the 3rd Battalion column, occupied a position at Ballyboy between Thurles and Shevry. Our intention was to ambush a provision lorry and its escort on its way back from Shevry to Thurles. We saw the lorry pass on its way to Shevry R.I.C. Barracks, but it returned so quickly that the time lag was not sufficient to enable us to barricade the road and to finish our preparations for the ambush. The result was that the affair ended in an exchange of shots between both parties. Jim Stapleton, vice-commandant of the 3rd Battalion, was in charge of our party that day and I remember seeing him fire two grenades at the lorry as it passed by.

In January 1921, elaborate arrangements were made and a position was occupied for two days at Milestone to ambush a

convoy of enemy forces which, it was expected, would pass on its way to Rearcross. Ned O'Reilly, with a column from the South Tipperary Brigade, occupied a position on the south side of the road, and some members of our column with the 3rd Battalion column under Paddy Kinnane and Jim Stapleton, were in position on the north side of the road. As the convoy did not come, it was decided on the evening of the second day to evacuate the position. The South Tipperary men moved off first, going in a southerly direction, and we moved off in the opposite direction, withdrawing towards Upperchurch. The going was slow, for we had to cross a hill and when going down its slopes on the opposite side we came under fire from military and police who were in extended order on our left. We heard later that this party of military and police had us under observation for about an hour from another hill over a mile away, and it would appear that they advanced in our direction whilst we were withdrawing from the ambush position. We replied to their fire and, while it is difficult to say what exactly happened as dusk had set in at the time, I can only assume that they took cover and did not advance further for, in the darkness, we continued our withdrawal towards Upperchurch which we reached safely.

On 22nd February 1921, with five others including Jim Stapleton, I was in the Rathcardan district when two tenders of Auxiliaries came there from Templemore. The road at Rathcardan, i.e., the road between Upperchurch and Borrisholeigh, had been trenched, and it looked to us as if the Auxiliaries had come out as was their practice at the time to round up people and force them to fill in the trenches. We saw them as they stopped and dismounted from the tenders. I would say that they were about 25 in number. We were armed with rifles, and Jim Stapleton decided to have a go at them.

We had little choice of a good position. The Auxiliaries showed signs of surprise, but they replied to our fire for about ten minutes and then remounted the tenders and drove away. I don't believe they suffered any casualties, for our fire could scarcely have been very effective, the range being more than 200 yards.

It was about that time too - in February or March 1921 - that the 1st Battalion column with Mick Small in charge moved south to Laffany, near Clonulty or Goolds Cross, and, with a column from the 3rd Tipperary Brigade, occupied a position along the railway line to ambush a troop train. Ned O'Reilly was in charge of the joint columns for the day. Nothing happened. No troop train came along, nor can I recollect any train having passed along the line during the time we were there, and we were there all day.

Towards the end of March or early in April 1921, Ernie O'Malley and Eamon Price spent some time in the Mid-Tipperary Brigade area. It was, I would say, about the time that the 2nd Southern Division was formed. I met both on several occasions with Jimmy Leahy, the Brigade O/C. John McCormack of Thurles, the Brigade Q.M., had been arrested some short time previously and O'Malley appointed me to fill the vacancy. That meant that I had to spend practically all my time from then on until the Truce at the Brigade H.Q. which was located in a dugout at Forgestown, Moycarkey.

The last engagement against the British forces in which I took part was the attack on Borrissleigh R.I.C. Barracks on the night of June 28th, 1921. As far as I can now recollect, we assembled about 10 p.m. on that night near Upperchurch and marched to Borrissleigh. It was from the Upperchurch area that the majority of the men were drawn

for the attack and Jimmy Leahy and Paddy Kinnane were in charge. I had nothing to do with the planning of, or the initial preparations for the operation. With Seumas Burke (then T.D. and later Minister for Local Government) I was allotted the task of carrying bottles of petrol and bottles of paraffin from the street corner where they were being filled to the laneway at the rear of the barracks from where Kinnane and company were launching the main attack on the barrack roof. A small party of riflemen posted on the opposite side of the street maintained an intermittent fire on the front of the barracks. and confined the R.I.C. and Black and Tan garrison within their post. The attack commenced about midnight and continued until dawn, when it was called off owing to our supplies of petrol, paraffin and mud bombs becoming exhausted. During that time, the garrison had maintained a continuous rifle and machine gun fire from both front and rere of the barracks and had sent up Verey lights at intervals for assistance. As far as I am aware, there were no indications at any stage that the garrison, which numbered about 20 men, were likely to surrender. Our great difficulty and, I would say, the cause of our failure to capture the barracks was the problem of getting the roof to burn properly. The distance from the laneway to the roof was the barrier. It meant that a considerable amount of force had to be used when throwing the mud bombs and the bottles of petrol and paraffin, with the result that many of them rolled back down the slates and burst in the barrack yard. Several small fires were started on the roof, but they burned themselves out without doing any extensive damage.

After the Truce I continued in the position of Brigade Q.M. which was then a fulltime job. The brigade moved its H.Q. from Forgestown to Thurles and later to the brigade

training camp at Fairy Hill, Templemore. On 14th February 1922, Sean Scott, commandant of the 2nd Battalion, took over Templemore military barracks from the British forces and the brigade headquarters staff then moved into the barracks.

In common with many of my comrades, I opposed the acceptance of the Treaty and fought with the republican forces during the civil war.

Signed: Thomas J Meagher

Date: 11th / Dec / 1956

Witness: J. Grace

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