

ORIGINAL

BUREAU OF MILITARY HISTORY 1913-21

BURO STAIRE MILEATA 1913-21

No. W.S. 1553

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BUREAU OF MILITARY HISTORY, 1913-21.

STATEMENT BY WITNESS.

DOCUMENT NO. W.S. 1553.

Witness

Colonel Liam Hoolan,  
51 Iona Road,  
Glasnevin,  
Dublin.

Identity.

Vice Commandant, Tipperary No. I (North Tipperary)  
Brigade.

Commandant, Tipperary No. I (North Tipperary)  
Brigade.

Subject.

Activities of Nenagh Company, 1st Battalion,  
North Tipperary Brigade, 1917-1921, and of  
Flying Column, Tipperary No. I Brigade, 1920-1921.

Conditions, if any, Stipulated by Witness.

Nil.

File No S.2877.

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STATEMENT BY COL. LIAM HOOLAN,

51, Iona Road, Glasnevin, Dublin,

Formerly Vice Commandant and Commandant of Tipperary No. 1 Bgde.

I would like to emphasise at the outset that, in the absence of a discussion with the other surviving members of the Tipperary No. 1 Brigade Staff, which would enable me to refresh my memory, this is not to be taken as a full factual statement of the organisation and activities of the movement for Irish Independence in North Tipperary during the eventual years of 1914 to 1921. Looking back over a period of 42 years (33 years have elapsed since I resided in the area), I can only give from memory scrappy incidents and events which occurred in that area, and I am doubtful of the assistance which this statement may be to any historian of the future who attempts to write a factual history of that period.

On the 5th May, 1914, a meeting was held in Nenagh to form a local unit of the Irish Volunteers and a committee was elected to control and organise the unit. James Nolan of Nenagh and myself were appointed joint hon. secretaries of the committee. We succeeded in establishing three companies in the town. Using wooden guns, the companies were instructed in foot drill and arms drill by two ex-British army instructors. These exercises, with some field work which was carried out on the local racecourse, continued until August, 1914, when the split in the Volunteer movement took place.

At the committee meeting at which the question of allegiance to either McNeill or Redmond was discussed, I objected to Redmondite control of the Volunteers and was supported by only one other member of the committee, Mr. Jerry O'Brien. The matter was subsequently put before the general body of the Nenagh Volunteers and there was only one loud voiced dissident, a painter named Hegarty. It afterwards became clear that there were several others who dissented from Redmondite control, but at the meeting they were overawed by the big guns of the Irish Political Party, including Dr. Esmond, M.P., who were present. Thus the control of the Volunteers fell into the hands of followers of John E. Redmond. As a unit of the National Volunteers they continued drilling and parading until they faded out in 1915, but following the split I had no connection with them.

There was no Irish Volunteer organisation, as far as I am aware, in North Tipperary at the time of the Rising at Easter Week, 1916. There was, however, some activity at Lorrha where Felix Cronin and some of his boys disrupted telegraphic communication.

Immediately after the Rising the R.I.C. arrested a few people in North Tipperary who were known to have Sinn Féin and Irish Volunteer sympathies. Amongst those arrested at the time was Mr. P. Gantley of Roscrea.

A branch of the National Aid and Prisoners' Dependents' Fund was established in Nenagh after the insurrection, and a considerable sum of money for the fund was raised by collections or through functions organised for that purpose. Incidentally, my first

meeting with Michael Collins was at the headquarters of the National Aid and Prisoners' Dependents' Fund in Exchequer St., Dublin, and if my memory is correct he was then secretary of that organisation.

As far as I can now remember, it was early in the year 1917 that Frank McGrath of Nenagh and myself got together and organised a unit of Irish Volunteers in Nenagh. We paraded and drilled in an old building in Pound St., and we were assisted by a man named Paddy Walsh who usually travelled from Limerick by train for the purpose. We increased our numbers gradually and formed a company. From that on we began receiving requests from other areas in North Co. Tipperary to assist in forming local Volunteer units, with the result that during the remainder of 1917 Frank McGrath, Edward O'Leary and myself were continually on the move at night-time and at week-ends on organisation work.

During that year, too, I was actively engaged in forming Sinn Féin Clubs and was often called upon to address open air meetings after Mass on Sundays and meetings in halls at night-time at which the clubs were formed. Later I was appointed hon. secretary of Sinn Féin for the North Co. Tipperary area.

As the Volunteer movement developed, the companies were formed into battalions and the battalion areas were defined. The 1st or North Tipperary Brigade was comprised of seven battalions based on and with headquarters in as follows: -

1st Battalion	-	Nenagh
2nd	"	- Toomevara
3rd	"	- Ballywilliam
4th	"	- Lorrha
5th	"	- Templederry
6th	"	- Newport
7th	"	- Roscrea.

The date and place at which the brigade was formed and held its first meeting I cannot now recall, but I am sure it must have been in Nenagh. The original members of the Brigade Staff were:

- Brigade Commandant - Frank McGrath, Nenagh.
- " Vice Comdt. - Liam Hoolan (myself).
- " Adjutant - Seán Gaynor, Nenagh.
- " Q/M - Frank Flannery, Nenagh.
- " I/O - Edward O'Leary, Nenagh.

During 1917 and 1918, in addition to the usual parades and drill practices there were occasional minor activities such as raids on private houses for arms. Some further arms were procured by seizing them or purchasing them from British soldiers who were home on leave.

In October, 1917, Frank McGrath was arrested by the R.I.C. and charged with illegal drilling. He was sentenced to a term of imprisonment but secured his release by going on hunger-strike. He was re-arrested in April, 1918, and detained until April, 1919, when he was released from Durham Prison.

In April, 1918, when Frank McGrath was first arrested, I was fortunate to escape capture. Through Mr. Denis Horgan, the Petty Sessions Clerk, I received information from a friendly R.I.C. man that my office at the Courthouse, Nenagh - I was then an official of the North Tipperary County Council - was to be raided and that my name was on the list of those to be arrested. I went "on the run" for a period of about three months, during which time I continued with the organisational work and I went to Offaly and Waterford City to assist the Sinn Féin candidates in the by-elections which took place

in both constituencies at the time. I was, however, arrested in June of that year and spent six months in Belfast Jail and was there during the famous breaking up of a wing of the prison by the political prisoners under Austin Stack at Christmas, 1918.

Two amusing incidents of that term of imprisonment in Belfast Jail come to mind. One was that in which a prisoner, Dan Hogan (afterwards Major General Hogan), was refused admission to the prison when he returned off parole at 10 p.m. one night. He proceeded to a hotel and later presented his hotel bill to the prison authorities, which, I believe, they paid. The other incident concerned myself. On the date on which I was due to be released I refused to leave but feigned sickness and remained in the prison for four days over my time. This was due to the fact that I had received information that the British authorities intended to re-arrest me outside the jail gates and to deport me. I came off the sham sickness when I learned that the practice of re-arresting prisoners and deporting them had ceased.

Before leaving the prison I received instructions from Austin Stack to report to Michael Collins when I reached Dublin and to enquire from him why his (Stack's) plans for a prison break had been called off by G.H.Q. In no uncertain terms, Collins told me where Stack and I got off. Amongst other things he told me that G.H.Q. had not been given sufficient details by Stack of the proposed break to justify them in approving of the plans and risking the lives of a number of prisoners. I was familiar with all the details of the plans and I believe it would have been successful. It would have been

excellent propaganda in the middle of the 1918 election campaign and would have meant the restoration of many useful men to their own areas.

Drilling, field training and raids for arms continued during the year 1919. Meanwhile, Cumann na mBan had been organised in the brigade area. I think it was in 1918 that the first branch was established in Nenagh by a Miss O'Rahilly, a Cumann na mBan organiser from Dublin, and, following this, branches were rapidly established throughout the area. They did excellent work, such as caring for the wants of prisoners and their dependants, intelligence work and carrying dispatches. They continued to carry out those duties right up to the Truce in July, 1921.

In December, 1919, I was again arrested, this time with Jack O'Brien of Silvermines. I spent six months in Limerick Prison.

On my return to Nenagh after my release on July 6th 1920, I learned that the Brigade Staff had made arrangements to attack Borrisokane R.I.C. barracks at the following week-end. I took part in the attack and was in charge of a party of rifle and shotgun men who operated from a house opposite the barracks. After some hours and before the barrack building caught fire, Frank McGrath, the Brigade O/C, decided to call off the attack. One of our men, Michael Kennedy, was seriously wounded and he died shortly afterwards.

Following the attack on Borrisokane barracks, Frank McGrath, whose health was impaired due to the hunger-strikes he had undergone in prisons, wished to be

relieved of his post of Brigade O/C. I visited Dublin and discussed the general position in the brigade area with Dick Mulcahy and Diarmuid O'Hegarty. Mulcahy proposed that I should take over the brigade, but I suggested that Seán Gaynor, the Brigade Adjutant, should be appointed Brigade O/C. Eventually, in September, 1920, G.H.Q. appointed Gaynor Brigade Commandant and Edward O'Leary Brigade Adjutant. Frank Flannery and I retained our posts as Brigade Quartermaster and Brigade Vice Commandant respectively.

Prior to Gaynor's appointment as Brigade O/C I represented the brigade at a conference in Dublin of Munster brigade officers. One of the matters discussed was the formation of flying columns in each brigade. The O/C of the East Limerick Brigade stated that he had established a flying column fourteen days previously and that the column was billeted on the people of the area. He was questioned very closely by Michael Collins and Dick Mulcahy as to how the column was received by the people, and he replied that they were well received and welcomed. Mulcahy then emphasised the necessity for not imposing too much on the people and that it was absolutely essential we should have them with us in every area.

In October, 1920, we formed a Brigade Flying Column in Tipperary No. 1 Brigade area. Seán Collison was appointed column leader. The column was at first billeted on the people in Windybarn, near Moneygall, where its members underwent a period of whole time training.



At that time, Terence MacSwiney, Lord Mayor of Cork, was dying on hunger-strike in Brixton prison, and G.H.Q. issued an order that should MacSwiney die, no retaliatory action should be taken against the enemy forces until after his funeral. I think it was during the week before MacSwiney's death that a Volunteer named Ayres brought a bag of mail to Edward O'Leary and myself at the County Council offices in Nenagh. The bag of mail had been found by a woman in a field near the town where she had been collecting firewood. On examination it proved to be a bag of British military mail which apparently had been lost from an aeroplane on its route from Cork to Dublin. It included a report from the G.O.C. British Army, Southern Command in Cork, outlining what might be expected from the I.R.A. in each area if Terence MacSwiney died. We were amused to read that he expected no trouble in North County Tipperary. At the time the Brigade O/C had issued orders that attacks were to be made on R.I.C. men and Black and Tans found outside their barracks on the night of November 1st. After reading all the documents, we dispatched them by special messenger to G.H.Q.

Another item worth recalling is that on various occasions we used an empty space in the woodwork underneath the judge's chair in Nenagh Courthouse as a dump for storing revolvers and ammunition. We derived a certain amount of amusement from walking in to the Assize Court and listening to the judge dispensing British justice whilst he sat over an I.R.A. arsenal in a courthouse crowded with members of the British forces. This goes to show how little actual knowledge the British authorities had of what was happening under their noses.

On the night of November 1st 1920, in accordance with the Brigade O/Cs' orders, the local Volunteer unit shot up some Black and Tans and R.I.C. men found outside barracks in Nenagh. The Black and Tans and British military retaliated by burning some houses in the town. The Brigade Staff were of the opinion that the enemy forces would also attempt to wreck the creamery, and arrangements were made to intercept them if they approached it. An ambush position was prepared in its precincts and occupied by a strong party of Volunteers from the local units, but neither police nor military came near the creamery that night.

On the following evening the column ambushed some lorries of military at Latteragh, but after a brief skirmish the military succeeded in getting away in their lorries.

Captain Hambleton, the British I/O at the military post in Nenagh, was shot dead that night by some members of the column as he was going into Nenagh on his motor cycle. We looked upon his death as a good riddance, for he was very active and he worked hand in glove with the District Inspector of the R.I.C., who afterwards appeared to suffer from cold feet.

For some time the whole Brigade Staff had to keep on the move from place to place, but eventually a permanent Brigade Headquarters was set up at O'Brien's house at Faunlough about two miles from Nenagh. This headquarters continued to be used almost continuously until the Truce. It was never raided by the enemy, although early in 1921 the only son of the house, Bill O'Brien, was arrested in his office in Nenagh and was carried in enemy lorries as a hostage. It was a great

tribute to the people living in the vicinity that the members of the Brigade Staff and the dispatch carriers could move freely around the area without any leakage of information to the enemy. One of our most trusted dispatch carriers was a poor woman named Mary Tuohy, who walked out from Nenagh each morning to work at O'Brien's. At the creamery each day she collected the day's dispatches from a Volunteer named Ayres who worked there, and when returning to her home at night she carried the dispatches from Brigade H.Q. to the dispatch centre. It is difficult to pay sufficient tribute to this poor woman.

Another reason why perhaps the location of the Brigade H.Q. was never suspected was that Denis Horgan, an ex Head Constable of the R.I.C. and who at that time was the local Petty Sessions Clerk, was a son-in-law of the owner and he visited the house regularly in the evening time. It was often amusing to listen to Horgan's remarks when he entered O'Brien's kitchen and saw two or three rifles stacked against the wall and to think that his occupation in life included daily interviews with the Resident Magistrate and with members of the R.I.C.

During the winter of 1920-21 the brigade's activities included attacks on police and military patrols. Road blocking and trenching was also a feature of our activities. The Brigade Flying Column was very active, but it was rather disheartening for this unit that on numerous occasions, after carefully preparing ambush positions and waiting in position for long periods, no enemy forces appeared, although the roads selected for the ambushes were frequently used by them.

I remember on one occasion when returning from a visit to G.H.Q. in Dublin I arrived at the Kingsbridge Station with two suit-cases containing revolvers and ammunition. On the platform there I saw the County Inspector of the R.I.C. for County Tipperary. I knew he would recognise me, so I moved quickly along the platform and entered a carriage in which I had seen four R.I.C. men armed with rifles. I placed my cases on the rack and started a friendly conversation with them. I learned from their conversation that they were from Limerick and had been to Dublin as an escort for the O'Brien brothers of Silvermines. When we arrived at Nenagh railway station I had to do some quick thinking to decline the courteous offer of one of the R.I.C. men to assist me with my cases. I feared that their heavy weight would arouse suspicion of their contents. The local R.I.C. detective was present at the station and his eyes certainly goggled as he saw me alight from the carriage and bid adieu to my travelling companions. He made no attempt to interfere with me, but I certainly did enjoy the joke later when the cases and their contents had been safely stored away.

In the spring of 1921 Captain Michael McCormack, an organiser from G.H.Q., arrived in the brigade area. After reviewing the position generally in the area, I took him to where the flying column was billeted. We arranged some ambush positions, but without success, for no enemy forces came our way. McCormack then arranged a training camp for battalion officers which he personally conducted and which lasted for a fortnight. The camp was held during the first week in a valley at the foot of the Keeper Mountain, and during the second week in the

townland of Ballywilliam. I remember during the second week whilst McCormack was giving a lecture, scouts reported that enemy forces were commandeering labour in the vicinity to fill in road trenches. We manned hasty positions near the camp, but the enemy did not come in our direction so we returned to the class and McCormack finished the lecture.

On June 3rd 1921, the flying column, supported by members of the local battalion, ambushed a strong force of police and military at Modreeny near Cloughjordan. The operation was carried out under the command of Seán Gaynor, the Brigade O/C. It was the most successful attack carried out on enemy forces in Tipperary No. 1 Brigade area and resulted in losses to the enemy of four R.I.C. men killed and five wounded.

In May, 1921, G.H.Q. formed the 3rd Southern Division. It embraced three brigades, those of Laois, Offaly and Tipperary No. 1. The Divisional Staff appointed were: -

Divisional O/C - Capt. Michael McCormack  
 " Adjt. - Seán Gaynor  
 " Q/M - Austin McCurtain.

I succeeded Seán Gaynor as O/C of Tipperary No. 1 Brigade. Felix Cronin (afterwards Major General Cronin) replaced me as Brigade Vice-Commandant, whilst Edward O'Leary and Frank Flannery retained their posts of Brigade Adjutant and Brigade Quartermaster respectively. The seven Battalion O/Cs. at the time were: -

1st Battalion - William Flannery  
 2nd " - Patrick Kennedy  
 3rd " - Patrick McDonnell  
 4th " - Martin Haugh  
 5th " - William Hanly  
 6th " - Thomas McGrath  
 7th " - Edward Quinlan.

These appointments continued until after the Truce on July 11th 1921.

After a visit to G.H.Q., McCormack informed us that Michael Collins was of the opinion that if the fighting men could hold out during the long bright days of that summer of 1921, we stood an excellent chance of winning the struggle. He emphasised, however, that the enemy pressure was very severe in some of the southern brigade areas and that other brigades should intensify their activities so as to relieve the enemy pressure elsewhere.

As regards intelligence, it was always very difficult to get in advance any worth while information of the enemy's movements. The old R.I.C. men appeared to be anxious to live long enough to draw their pensions and would not take the risk of passing on any useful information. We did receive information through Denis Horgan that when the Auxiliaries arrived in the area they inspected the report books in Nenagh R.I.C. barracks and wanted to know why the R.I.C. were not able to secure more information about the "Shinners". The older R.I.C. men then decided to sit tight and let the Auxiliaries find out for themselves. We did, of course, receive certain useful information by raids on mails, from members of the local post office staff and through day to day observation of the enemy's movements.

Turning to what might be described as the civil side of the movement. In 1919 the Dáil Éireann loan was launched in North Tipperary at a meeting in Nenagh of representatives of the Sinn Féin clubs. Michael Gleeson of Nenagh presided and I acted as secretary.

Father Pat O'Halloran, C.C., started the ball rolling *with a subscription of £25. That was followed* by subscriptions of £200 and £100, and the chairman quietly whispered to me to put him down for £50. Each club then arranged to carry out the collection in its own area, with very good results, but I cannot now recall what the final figure was.

The Dáil Courts, or Sinn Féin Courts as they were called, when once started carried on very smoothly and successfully. The local solicitors of every creed and colour brought their cases to them. We were lucky in securing the services of Mr. Paul Dempsey, secretary of the Technical Committee, and a local farmer and County Councillor named Rody Cleary as judges for the district court. One of its first cases was an action by a business man, a Mr. Seropian, against a farmer named Collins. Seropian was an Armenian by birth and at the time was the Persian Consul in Ireland. The hearing of the action lasted for some days and the court's decision was in favour of the Armenian. The case created a good deal of local interest and the decision was looked upon as a very fair one, with the result that litigants were anxious to have their cases dealt with by the Sinn Féin Court. The two judges, Dempsey and Cleary, came under the notice of the enemy and their houses were raided by Black and Tans on a night in October, 1920. Both were, however, sleeping away from home at the time and thus escaped capture. Unfortunately, two Volunteers who were sleeping in Cleary's house that night were captured by the Black and Tans and were shot dead by the latter before they returned to their barracks. Seropian afterwards offered his house as a safe place for men on the run to sleep in, but I do not think that his hospitality was ever availed of.

When Dáil Éireann decreed that local authorities should break away from British control, the North Tipperary County Council appointed a small committee from their members to make the necessary arrangements. As I was then a member of the Council's staff, I was appointed secretary to the committee. We closed the Council's account with the bank and appointed three priests as trustees - one in Nenagh, one in Roscrea and one in Thurles - whose names were known only to the committee and to the rate collectors. The rate collectors agreed to lodge the rates as collected to these clergymen's accounts, and I drew on the money as required to pay the roadworkers and the Council's accounts. One of my first difficulties was how to pay the officials' salaries at the end of the month. I surmounted that difficulty by lodging public monies in a personal account of my own and then drawing cheques against it for the officials' salaries. I remember the surprise of the County Secretary and the County Surveyor when they received my personal cheque in payment of their salaries. Both were Unionists and Freemasons, but they never placed any obstacles in my way. When I was arrested, another official named William O'Brien (afterwards the Brigade I/O) carried on as secretary to the committee. It may be of interest to record here that after the State was established, the local government auditors who audited the Council's accounts for the years 1919 to 1921 could only find a discrepancy of 3/6d which was not accounted for.

Looking back over the years, I often think of the various characters of the men, especially amongst the fighting men, which the movement embraced. For instance,



we had Paddy Ryan (Lacken), an individualist who had a very strong love for his country and for its language and who was never happy except when engaged in a fight with the enemy. His activities carried him into at least three counties. He became the darling of the local population, and at one time a local poet eulogised him as "King of Ireland". Then there was Paddy Kennedy, the O/C of the 2nd Battalion and a member of the flying column. He was an exceptionally religious man and it was said that at the Modreeny ambush he was seen close up to the enemy, using with effect a shotgun loaded with buckshot while his Rosary beads hung around his neck. What an intense love of country sent a man like that there? He died last year (1955) and one of his last requests to his colleagues on his death bed was that he did not desire a guard of honour or a firing party at his funeral. He only reluctantly agreed that the national flag should be placed on his coffin. ~~It~~<sup>May</sup> the sod lie lightly upon him.

It should not be assumed that the years 1918 to 1921 were all grim. They had their lighter side too. I often saw the flying column after perhaps a day and a night on the march and then after a meal in their new billets, make the kitchens ring with dance and song.

Finally, I wish to place on record the highest possible tribute to the good people of the Tipperary No. 1 Brigade area in the towns, in the villages and in the countryside for their loyalty and devotion to the movement. Without their assistance and help, the man with the gun could not have carried on. He could sell his life as dearly as possible if cornered, but the people who gave him

shelter put their families and their homes in peril. Yet, they gladly took the risk and were proud to do so. If proof of their loyalty and devotion to their country were needed, we have it in the fact that it was never necessary to execute one of their number for spying for the enemy.

Signed: Liam Hoogan

Date: 21<sup>st</sup> December 1956

Witness: J. Grace  
(Investigator).

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