

ORIGINAL

W.S. 1579

BUREAU OF MILITARY HISTORY 1913-21

BURO STAIRE MILEATA 1913-21

No. W.S. 1579

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COSANTA.

BUREAU OF MILITARY HISTORY, 1913-21.

STATEMENT BY WITNESS.

DOCUMENT NO. W.S. 1579

**Witness**

Seán Ua Luasa (Seán Lucey),  
4 Upper Janemount,  
Sundays Well,  
Cork.

**Identity.**

Captain, D. Company, 1st Battalion, Cork I Brigade.  
Quartermaster, Cork I Brigade Flying Column.  
Assistant Brigade Quartermaster.

**Subject.**

Activities of D. Company, 1st Battalion,  
Cork Brigade, I.R.A., and Brigade Flying  
Column, 1917-1921.

**Conditions, if any, Stipulated by Witness.**

Nil.

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BUREAU OF MILITARY HISTORY 1913-21  
BURO STAIRÉ MILEATA 1913-21  
No. W.S. 1,579

STATEMENT BY SEÁN UA LUASA

4 Upper Janemount, Sunday's Well, Cork.

I was born in Ballyvourney, Co. Cork, and was educated in the Presentation Brothers' College, Cork. From my earliest years I have been a member of the Gaelic League and a fluent Irish speaker.

When I finished school I was employed as a clerk in the well-known Cork firm of Sutton's, seed, manure and general merchants, South Mall, Cork. It was while I was in Sutton's that I contacted a member of the Cork Volunteers and through him I joined C/Company, Cork City Battalion, in the month of September 1917.

A man named Daithi Cotter was the company O/C. at that time, but my stay in C/Company was brief, because, as a result of the reorganisation of the Cork City Battalion into two separate battalion areas, viz: the 1st and 2nd Battalions, I found myself a member of D/Company, 1st Battalion. To the best of my recollection, this reorganisation took place early in the year 1918. We had about 60 men in D/Company. Daithi Cotter, already mentioned, was our company captain; Paddy O'Sullivan, 1st Lieutenant, and, later on, Con O'Callaghan, 2nd Lieutenant.

The company area was bounded on the south by the River Lee from Pope's Quay to portion of Camden Quay, and northwards via Leitrim St., John St., the end of Watercourse Road, Gerald Griffin St. (Cathedral end) on to Fair Hill, from Fair Hill to Shandon St. (and the lanes leading off it at the upper end) but excluding Blarney St. The company area could be said to cover, approximately, three square miles.

We drilled in the open country at Fair Hill usually on a Sunday. Here we had target practice with a .22 rifle, field exercises and general training.

During the conscription threat in June 1918, we had a big influx of recruits. A fair proportion of these remained with us when the conscription crisis had passed, which brought the strength of the company up to about 150.

At this time (1918) we had very few guns. There were a couple of rifles not surrendered in 1916 and about a dozen revolvers. The latter were acquired by various means. Some were bought from the brigade, some came from men employed on ships coming into the Port of Cork, and some were taken by railway workers (who were members of the Volunteers) from the luggage of British army officers travelling by train. The guns were, at first, kept in the houses of Volunteers, but, as raids by enemy forces became more frequent, it was decided to construct a dump into which the weapons were put. The dump was in a farm outhouse. It was a cavity lined with concrete. The guns were greased and cleaned regularly and the dump was never discovered by the British authorities. Not all guns were put into this dump. A few revolvers were always retained by individual Volunteers in case they were required in an emergency.

The years 1918-19 were mostly occupied in general training. It was, I remember, in September 1919, that I was appointed captain of D/Company, 1st Battalion, Cork I Brigade. Terence McSwiney, then the battalion O/C. and vice-brigadier, presided at the election which made the appointment.

Early in the year 1920, instructions were issued by the brigade to the effect that all evacuated police barracks should be destroyed to prevent their reoccupation by enemy forces. Successful attacks on R.I.C. barracks had been carried out early in 1920 by our 4th Battalion in East Cork, and, as a result, the British evacuated several barracks with small garrisons and concentrated their forces in larger barracks

which would be more difficult (from our angle) to attack and capture. One such small barracks in D/Company area was that at Commons Road. In this instance, the barracks, after evacuation, had been taken over by a family for occupation and it became necessary to remove the occupants and all their possessions before the building could be destroyed. This was done; our engineers exploded a charge of gelignite and we completed the job by setting fire to what remained of the premises.

#### Attack on Blarney R.I.C. Barracks.

On the night of 1st June 1920, Blarney R.I.C. Barracks was attacked by men of the 1st Battalion, Cork I Brigade. Blarney village, in which the barracks stood, is about six miles from Cork and four miles from Ballincollig. In both places there were stationed thousands of British soldiers, and, in addition, there was at Ballincollig a considerable concentration of R.I.C. who had been brought in from evacuated or captured barracks. The capture of arms by us was a secondary consideration in the Blarney attack, our main object being to compel evacuation of the barracks because it menaced one of the main lines of communication between our brigade headquarters in Cork city and the 6th, 7th and 8th Battalions with headquarters in Donoughmore, Macroom and Kilnamartyra, respectively.

In order to fell trees and raise obstructions on the many small roads (and the main road) leading to Blarney from both Cork and Ballincollig, a very large number of men from the 1st Battalion area was employed. The actual attacking party, however, were no more than about 30 in number, of which I was one. The barracks was not in an isolated position. It stood between the Courthouse on one side and Smith's Hotel on the other. It was a substantial building with loop-holed walls

with steel-shuttered windows and sandbag defences. The garrison consisted of a sergeant and eight men. In charge of the attacking party on our side was Dan ('Sandow') Donovan, O/C. 1st Battalion, and Florrie O'Donoghue, brigade adjutant.

The plan of attack was that a breach was to be blown with explosives through the wall between the public bar in the hotel and the barracks, and, if possible, the breach would be rushed and the barracks captured. Owing to the close proximity of enemy forces, probably not more than an hour would be available for a sustained attack, and, therefore, the only hope of complete success lay in making a breach large enough for the attacking party to get through into the barracks quickly. The men from my company assembled that night about 8 p.m. at Faggot Hill and Commons Road (at the western boundary of our area) to await motor cars to bring us to Blarney. When the cars came along, Daithi Cotter, Liam Og O'Callaghan and Mick McAuliffe and myself got into a car together. I was armed with a shotgun and the others had either revolvers or shotguns. We drove to within a short distance of Blarney village where we left the cars and entered the village on foot. We then took up a position in a public-house overlooking the barracks and about 50 yards from it, our job being to open fire when we heard the explosion going off. There were other parties like mine in positions covering the barracks.

Shortly after 10 o'clock, a terrific explosion was heard and bricks, broken glass and plaster fell in all directions. Immediately, we opened fire on the barracks and the garrison replied with rifles and grenades. A cloud of dust and smoke came from the hotel which bore the main brunt of the explosion. Firing on both sides was continuous for upwards of half an

hour, when we received the order to withdraw. We then left the village, got to where the waiting cars were and returned to our own battalion area safely.

The barracks was evacuated on the following day and, on the same evening, was completely destroyed by lads from the Blarney Company. We suffered no casualties on this occasion. I cannot say whether or not any of the R.I.C. were killed or wounded.

I estimate that we had approximately 400 men engaged on protective duty the night of the Blarney Barracks attack. Some of these men came from the 6th Battalion area, the headquarters of which was Donoughmore; in fact, a party of the Donoughmore Company engaged a force of military advancing on Blarney while the barrack attack was in progress. Being compelled to leave their lorries because of trees felled across the road, the military advanced on foot in the direction of Blarney and were met with fire from the Donoughmore men at Healy's Bridge about two miles south west of Blarney. After an engagement lasting half an hour, the soldiers retired towards Leemount and awaited reinforcements. They, subsequently continued the advance to Blarney and entered the village about midnight. By that time, all of our men had left the area and none was captured.

It may be well to explain, at this stage, why the attack on Blarney Barracks was not pressed to a successful conclusion.

As I have already stated, it was not the primary object of our 'command' to take the barracks by assault; its destruction was the main object. However, there was a party of our men in the adjoining hotel who were prepared to rush the barracks through the breach made by the explosion, if this was feasible. Actually, the explosion did blow down a large area of the dividing wall, but there was no opening into the

barracks visible after the explosion. The reason was that the explosive (guncotton) had been placed on the hotel side of the wall opposite a point in the barrack building where a cross-wall joined the side-wall and against which two corner fireplaces had been built. Our lads had, unfortunately, attacked the most solid block of masonry in the whole building.

Having regard to (1) the failure to breach the barrack wall, (2) the inability for lack of proper weapons to take the place by a frontal or rear assault, (3) the proximity of large enemy concentrations, and (4) the large number of our men (many of whom were unarmed) engaged in the operation outside the village, it was deemed advisable to call-off the attack in the circumstances I have indicated.

#### King Street R.I.C. Barracks Attack.

It was mid-1920 when King St. (now McCurtain St.) R.I.C. Barracks was attacked by about 10 or 12 men from the 1st Battalion, in charge of Dan ('Sandow') Donovan, Battalion O/C. This barracks was situated in what might be termed the 'heart of the city' and was within half a mile of the main Cork military barracks now known as Collins Barracks. Here again, as in the case of Blarney, the idea was to breach the barrack wall by explosives laid in the house adjoining and, in this instance, to take the building by assault. However, we had less luck on this occasion than we had at Blarney.

I remember going direct from work to King St. after 6 p.m. on the particular evening. I was armed with a revolver. In the vicinity of the barracks I met the rest of the boys standing here and there in ones and twos. Not long after my arrival, a bread van, owned by Messrs. Simcox of Cork and driven by one of our lads named Tadhg Lehane, drew up at the house adjoining the barracks and delivered a parcel of guncotton to a few of our fellows (Con Sullivan and Eugene O'Neill).

who were waiting to receive it. They went into the house and cleared out the occupants, preparatory to exploding the charge against the dividing wall of the barracks and dwelling house. While this was happening and, as we waited for the explosion, a policeman came along and one of our lads on the road outside had a shot at him with a revolver. The R.I.C. man dashed into the barracks and closed the door. This incident completely upset our plans, as the element of surprise was now gone and the garrison were fully alerted to the possibility of attack. In the circumstances, 'Sandow' Donovan called the whole thing off. The lads with the explosive did, however, blow a large part of the dividing wall down to such an extent as to make the barrack building dangerous for its inhabitants. As a matter of fact, it was evacuated shortly afterwards, so that we did, to some extent, accomplish our purpose.

Following the murder by police of Tomas McCurtain, Lord Mayor of Cork, and Brigadier of Cork No. 1 Brigade, in February 1920, the brigade decided to put armed protection parties of Volunteers in houses of prominent men who might suffer a similar fate. I was on several of these parties, but nothing happened. The practice ceased after about a month or two.

A feature of our company activities was an effort to make bombs. A house off Shandon St. was selected as the venue for this home-made 'bomb' factory. Empty cocoa tins were used for the purpose. These tins were lined inside with concrete then filled with scrap metal, a centre opening was provided to insert the charge to which a fuze was attached. When tried out, these crude bombs proved to be only fairly effective. So far as I am aware, they were not used in action against the enemy.



It should also be recorded that frequent raiding of the mails was carried out during the years 1919-21. Postmen were repeatedly held up, the mails taken and examined for enemy correspondence or communications from enemy agents in our midst. Any incriminating letters discovered were passed on to the brigade and, as a result, a number of spies were discovered and suitably dealt with on orders from the Brigade O/C., Sean Hegarty.

Mention of Sean Hegarty calls to mind the fact that he succeeded Terence McSwiney as O/C. Cork I Brigade, following his (Terence's) arrest and imprisonment in August 1920.

As things began to get 'hot' in Cork City, the enemy 'stepped up' his raiding and searching. My digs was frequently raided by police and military and inquiries made for me. On one of these occasions I was unlucky enough to be caught by Black and Tans who asked me if my name was 'Lucey'. I said 'No' and gave a false name. After being searched and nothing being found, the Tans allowed me to go. I now decided that my luck could scarcely last like this indefinitely, so I decided to get out of town and contact the brigade column then being formed. The time was about the end of January 1921. I contacted the column at Ballyvourney in West Cork and was appointed quartermaster.

This column comprised Cork city men and some men from the 8th (Ballyvourney) Battalion. The O/C. was Dan ('Sandow') Donovan (replaced in May 1921, by Mick Murphy, O/C. 2nd Battalion, when 'Sandow' returned to Cork city on instructions from the brigade). Other Cork city men were: Patrick ('Pa') Murray, who acted as column adjutant; Sean Murray (ex Irish Guards), training officer; Dick Murphy (captain of G/Company, 1st Battalion); Sean Culhane (brigade intelligence officer); Jim Gray (brigade transport officer); Miah Gray (brother of Jim); Con O'Sullivan (assistant brigade engineer); Michael McAuliffe (Lieutenant, D/Coy. 1st Battalion); Jeremiah

Mullane, William Deasy, Patrick O'Connor, William O'Brien and Stan Barry. Sean Hegarty, the brigade O/C., was also with us. All the men had rifles and the column also had two Lewis guns. Our party from the city linked up with some of the 8th Battalion (Ballyvourney) and formed a column of about thirty.

We went first for a period of training at Clountycarty about a mile north of Ballymakeera, Ballyvourney. A disused house was our headquarters for the time being. The men were billeted in houses in the locality.

Training consisted, in the main, of drilling in open formation, practising in the art of taking cover and exercises calculated to improve our efficiency as guerilla fighters. Our instructor, Sean Murray, who had seen active service with the British army in World War I, was a most useful man in this respect.

My job was to arrange billets, keep a check on arms, ammunition, and to see generally to the welfare of the men.

The column was divided into several sections with men deputed to act as section commanders. We were augmented from time to time as we moved to ambush positions by some men of the local company. Other local men acted as scouts at night so that the column would be fresh for action when the time came

#### Ambush at Coolavohig, Co. Cork.

Very early on the morning of 25th February 1921, the column left Clountycarty (as it had done many times during the preceding fortnight) and moved north east across country, eventually fanning out to occupy a quarter mile stretch of the Macroom-Ballyvourney road at Coolnacahera which adjoins the townland of Coolavohig. Here our column occupied the full length of the ambush position, while on the southern side of the road a small column from the 7th (Macroom) Battalion under Dan Corkery, were also in positions. I was posted

on the extreme western flank of our position, where we had a farm cart ready to pull across the road if, and when, the expected military lorries came along from the east (Macroom). As the country-side here is of a very rocky nature, we had excellent firing cover with a good field of fire. The plan of attack was to allow the enemy force to penetrate fully into our position until it reached the end at which we would have the road blockready; then, and not till then, the British would be raked with rifle and Lewis gunfire by our column on the north side of the road and also by the Macroom men on the south side.

We were in position a comparatively short time when word was passed along the line that enemy lorries were approaching from the east (Macroom). We waited tensely for the lorries to appear when, suddenly, two shots rang out and then firing became general. I could discern the noise of our Lewis gun in action, but, so far, there was no sign of the enemy coming up to our position. This went on for quite a considerable time during which we failed to sight the Auxiliaries (for such they were) who were being engaged only by our men at the eastern end of the ambush position. It became obvious to us that something had gone wrong with our plan, the enemy had not walked fully into the trap laid for them.

A message now came to us to leave our position and work our way up towards where the actual fighting was in progress. When we got close enough to see what was happening, we saw that the Auxiliaries had left their lorries and, having failed to hold their positions on the roadside, had retired across the south side of the road behind stone fences which surrounded plots of ground adjoining two labourers' cottages about 40 yards apart. They did not, however, reach this cover without suffering many casualties amongst whom was

their O/C. - a Major Seafield Grant - who was shot dead early in the fight.

The 'Auxies' got a Hotchkiss gun into action and opened heavy fire with it. The gunners were promptly engaged by one of our Lewis guns and the Hotchkiss party were forced to retreat further back towards the cottages. The firing went on for about an hour when we noticed that the enemy's defence was weakening and now and then one of the 'Auxies' made a dash for the cottages. Many lay dead and wounded on the road and in the ditches.

We now noticed one of the lorries (there were seven in all, plus a private car) being turned about on the road, obviously heading back to Macroom for reinforcements. Fierce fire was opened on it, but it got away at high speed in the direction of Macroom.

We could now expect enemy reinforcements to arrive. It transpired that they were on their way in any case. Meanwhile the 'Auxies' were crowding into the cottages. To make more firing positions, they started to break loopholes in the cottage walls. These loopholes offered an excellent target for our rifles and shotguns.

We were now called on to follow up the enemy and move closer to the cottages where the remnants of his force were still holding out. It was obvious the 'Auxies' were in a bad way. Their total strength of the morning must have been nearly 90 men. Apart from those strewn on the road and further afield as casualties, the remainder, about half the original number, were in the cottages or lying close to cover around outside them. Now and again one of these would rise and dash for the door of a cottage, but no 'Auxie' succeeded in getting in.

The time was now about noon. We had been engaging the

enemy since about 8 a.m. and it was now decided to come to closer quarters with the Auxies in the cottages and force their surrender with grenades, Lewis gun and rifles. We were awaiting the order to advance when Sean Hegarty saw, approaching from the east (Macroom), a long line of lorries, 36 in number. We fired at long range on the convoy and then slowly drew away to the high ground north of us as it was hopeless for us to engage such vastly superior forces with any hope of success. However, we had accounted for fourteen of the original Auxie party killed and 26 wounded. Were it not that relief arrived for the enemy when it did we would have been completely victorious. We suffered no casualties on our side.

#### Engagement at Coomnaclohy.

We retired over high ground in a north-westerly direction until we crossed the mountain road from Ballyvourney to Millstreet. A branch of this road runs into the Glen of Coomnaclohy. The glen is a cul-de-sac. Here we rested while and had a much needed cup of tea in Dinneen's farmhouse. We had scarcely finished our hurried meal when the alarm was given that a convoy of military lorries was approaching from the south east. We watched their progress, not being certain whether they would take the road leading to where we were. They came on in our direction.

We took up firing positions behind a fence parallel to the road and back a few hundred yards. The lorries, which carried soldiers of regular army, stopped on the road opposite us, possibly they may have seen some of us moving. They left the lorries, deployed and advanced in open formation across a field towards our position. We opened fire. The enemy took cover and replied. Then, rising, they again rushed forward. It was seen that their flanks extended beyond our

line and we were in grave danger of being encircled by superior numbers. We withdrew up the hill behind us, firing as we went, reaching a 'cumar' or bed of a stream which ran slantwise to the enemy; we obtained cover to enable us to withdraw to safety. The soldiers continued to fire, but did not attempt to follow us up. Three soldiers were wounded in this engagement and one of our lads received a slight wound in the hand.

While the shooting lasted, and for some time afterwards, enemy lorries 'stood' a few miles south of us on the Killarney road. Had they the will to do so they could have actually driven up behind us.

Auxiliaries from Dunmanway arrived at Kilnamartyra, a few miles south of Coolavohig, early in the forenoon of that day, when the fighting (at Coolavohig) was in progress. Instead, however, of going straight to the scene of the battle by a very direct road which could bring them out on the western flank of the column (where I was positioned early on) they continued further westward to Renanirree four miles away. Turning north, they then went in the general direction of Ballyvourney by intricate byroads arriving at Coolavohig in time to be late. It later transpired that 52 lorries of regular soldiers and Auxiliaries were present at, or near, the scene of the fight shortly after our retreat at noon on that day.

Excepting the troops that entered Coomnaclohy, the others showed no great inclination to follow us up. Instead, they burned the two cottages which had sheltered the Auxiliaries and, indeed, had saved them from destruction. Haysheds and two farmhouses in the vicinity were also burned and an unarmed Volunteer was shot and severely wounded north of Ballyvourney village.

Following the engagement at Coomnaclohy, the column moved westwards towards the Kerry border where we rested for some days. It was, I think, late in the month of March 1921, when we again came eastwards to the district of Ballingearry. While there we took up ambush positions repeatedly, but failed to contact the enemy.

Some time in April 1921, 'Sandow' Donovan was recalled to Cork city and was replaced in the column by Mick Murphy, O/C. 2nd Battalion, (Cork City).

From this period onwards, we were located mostly around the West Cork-Kerry border area. Enemy activity had increased and everywhere we were compelled to retire in face of vastly superior numbers. The countryside seemed to be swarming with troops who appeared to concentrate on the district in which we were located. It was obvious that an all-out effort was being made to round us up and wipe out the column; consequently, we were compelled to take evasive action in view of the tremendous odds against us and the scarcity of our supply of ammunition. Having regard to all the circumstances, the brigade decided, early in June 1921, to disband the column, at least for the time being. The men dispersed to various parts of the county, some returning to Cork City. Being a native of Ballyvourney, and knowing the geography of that particular area very well, I remained there, staying in the houses of friends and moving on elsewhere when danger threatened. I was in the Ballyvourney district when the Truce came in July 1921, when, incidentally, I was appointed to the post of Assistant Brigade Quartermaster, Cork I Brigade.

Signed: Sean O'Leary

Date: 19<sup>th</sup> Feb 1957

Witness: [Signature]

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