

ORIGINAL

BUREAU OF MILITARY HISTORY 1913-21
BURO STAIRÉ MILEATA 1913-21
No. W.S. 1582

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BUREAU OF MILITARY HISTORY, 1913-21.

STATEMENT BY WITNESS.

DOCUMENT NO. W.S. 1582.

Witness

Thomas McGlynn,
Navany St.,
Ballybofey,
Co. Donegal.

Identity.

Battalion Adjutant, 1st Battn.,
4th (Donegal) Brigade.

Subject.

Activities of Castlefinn Coy.,
I.Vols., Co. Donegal, and
prison experiences
1917 - 1921.

Conditions, if any, Stipulated by Witness.

Nil.

File No. S. 2900.

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BUREAU OF MILITARY HISTORY 7913-21
BURO STAIRÉ MILEATA 1913-21
NO. W.S. 1,582

STATEMENT BY THOMAS McGLYNN,

Navany Street, Ballybofey, Co. Donegal.

I was born at Liscooly, Co. Donegal, on 17th September, 1891. I attended the Protestant School at Liscooly for a few years, as the distance to Castlefinn School was considered too great until I got older. During the period my mother attended to my religious instruction. Later on I attended the national school at Castlefinn.

My father often talked to me about the Fenians and the Irish Republican Brotherhood. He had a definite dislike to the A.O.H. organisation and never associated with it.

I joined the A.O.H. about 1914. I then joined the National Volunteers. Some time later the National Volunteers split into two groups. The group under the leadership of Eoin McNeill became known as the Irish Volunteers, and that under John Redmond as the Irish National Volunteers. At a meeting held in the district, about fourteen of us voted in favour of Eoin McNeill as leader. In this decision we were influenced by some old I.R.B. men in the locality. Following on our action we were expelled from the A.O.H. and Irish National Volunteers.

After the Rebellion in 1916 Sam O'Flaherty organised a Sinn Féin Club in Castlefinn. In 1917 a company of Irish Volunteers was organised, also by Sam O'Flaherty, in Castlefinn. I joined both organisations. Our activities at this period were confined to training and raising funds.

The A.O.H. were very antagonistic towards Sinn Féin and did all in their power to interrupt our activities. At a concert held in Clady early in 1918, they arrived in force and smashed all the windows in the hall. We retaliated later at a function held by them. Prior to the general election of 1918, Eoin McNeill addressed a meeting in Ballybofey on behalf of Sinn Féin. A large contingent of Irish Volunteers turned up for the meeting, carrying hurleys, although the carrying of hurleys was banned by the British authorities at the time. On arrival in Ballybofey, we found that practically all the business houses in Ballybofey were closed so as to prevent us getting refreshments. The owners were members of, or sympathisers with the A.O.H. The only business premises open were McLoughlin's, Main St., and Mrs. McBride, at the corner of Navany St. Mrs. McBride was later O/C of the Cumann na mBan in Ballybofey.

At the conclusion of the meeting, the Letterkenny contingent of Volunteers, under the command of Jim Dawson, formed up in column of route to march back to Letterkenny. The District Inspector from Raphoe had a strong force of police drawn across the road at the bridge between Ballybofey and Stranorlar. When Dawson's company came along, the D.I. drew his revolver and called on them to halt. When they refused, he fired over their heads. At the same time Dawson produced a revolver and fired over the heads of the police. The police then withdrew to either side of the road, but marched alongside the parade for some distance.

Shortly before the election a compromise was reached between Sinn Féin and the Nationalist party or A.O.H. to support E.J.Kelly, the Nationalist candidate, so as to

prevent splitting the votes. Otherwise a Unionist candidate would be elected. It was agreed by the Nationalists that they would not contest the seat in Derry where Eoin McNeill was a candidate. This compromise was not received very favourably and nearly smashed our organisation.

Our company was mobilised on a few occasions prior to the election for the purpose of protecting the speakers on the Sinn Féin platforms. On one occasion when Mr. de Valera, Seán MacEntee, Dr. McGinley and some others arrived to address a meeting in Raphoe, they found that a large party of Orangemen had mobilised to break up the meeting. A dispatch was sent to Castlefinn and Letterkenny for all available Volunteers to report at Raphoe immediately. A strong party from each company turned up in a short time. We marched to McGlinchy's Hotel where the speakers were staying. On our arrival the mob moved away. We were about to follow them up, but de Valera ordered us to stand fast. He told us that we were brought there to guarantee the right of free speech. He instructed us to protect the platform as the meeting was about to start. The mob made one attempt to interrupt the meeting, but ran away when we moved in their direction. We were asked to report at a meeting in Ballybofey next day, which we did, but no attempt was made to interrupt it.

In 1918 we carried out isolated raids for arms in the area. A raid was carried out on Barnscourt, residence of Hamilton, Duke of Barnscourt. The place was being used as training headquarters for the Ulster Volunteers. They were observed on a few occasions on parade, fully armed and equipped. A Catholic priest, Fr. Fox, told us that he had noticed up to 2,000 men on parade, and it was his opinion that the rifles were stored there.

Volunteers from Castlefinn, Killygordon, Clady, Sion Mills and Omagh were mobilised to carry out a raid on the place. In all, about 500 Volunteers were mobilised. We all cycled to Barnscourt, a distance of about nine miles from Castlefinn, with the exception of the Omagh party, who travelled by motor. On arrival there, we found four watch-men on guard. These men were captured. Only the staff was in residence. We carried out a thorough search of the entire premises, which occupied a period of four hours, but got no arms. All we found were a few swords in the hall, which we took away. We came away very disappointed. We had made full provision for a big capture, even to straps to carry rifles on our bicycles and haversacks to carry ammunition.

I remember an "Arms Raid", which was carried out at Sir Robert Anderson's summer residence at Greencastle, Co. Donegal, about the 2nd October, 1919. I was mobilised for that raid by my brigade officer, the late Mr. Samuel O'Flaherty, Carrick House, Castlefin, Co. Donegal, who ordered me to be at Liscooley Corner at 8 p.m. on the date in question and to have with me: -

John Byrne, Drumurphy, Castlefin - since dead in U.S.A.
 Edward Thomas Coyle, Liscooley - now Letterkenny.
 Michael Doherty, Ashgrove, Liscooley; and
 Michael Bogan, of Laught - now in U.S.A.

The order directed all of us to wear side-arms and to be provided with rations.

All of us turned up at the appointed place. Dr. Sarsfield P. Kerrigan's car met us there. The car was driven by the late Mr. John McGroarty of Killygordon. Dr. Kerrigan was in the car and came with us.

We went via Raphoe to Bridge End (County Donegal), where we joined three or four other cars. I remember one of the cars belonged to Dr. Joseph P. McGinley of Letterkenny and was being driven by Dr. McGinley himself. Another of the vehicles was a van belonging to Mr. Joseph McGrath of Omagh, Co. Tyrone. It was driven by Patrick Doherty (brother of Michael Doherty, Ashgrove) and in it were Ernie O'Malley and Samuel O'Flaherty.

A halt was made at Bridge End, where Mr. O'Malley gave us instructions as to the positions to be taken up at the house to which we were proceeding. Shortly we all moved off, we, in Dr. Kerrigan's car, bringing up the rear.

After we had gone some distance on the road to Muff (County Donegal) a man came back and halted our car. I recognised the man as Vincent Doherty, brother of Mr. Joseph Doherty, ex Senator, of Derry. Vincent Doherty explained that he had been ordered to our car as it was last, and was, therefore, more suitable for the work for which he was detailed, viz. cutting telegraph wires along the route. The late John McGroarty (who, as I have said, was driving our car), then moved up the car in which Vincent Doherty had been; Dr. Kerrigan took over the driving of his own car; we moved on again and had stops at intervals, when Vincent Doherty - an expert pole climber - got out, climbed a telegraph pole, cut all wires with a hook and then moved on again.

When we arrived at Greencastle, Mr. O'Malley went off on a tour of inspection. (The night was pitch dark and wet). After a short time he came back to us and announced that the positions as arranged were "off", as a couple of car loads had disappointed him and the local company had also failed

to report. Mr. O'Malley seemed somewhat disappointed, but he said, "We'll go on with the little game anyhow". He then ordered us to form a line, and directed each man to catch hold of the coat of the man in front, lest we should get separated in the darkness. Mr. O'Malley then led off, and I was either fifth or sixth in the line, the man immediately in front of me being the late Sam O'Flaherty.

We had not gone far when Mr. O'Malley fell down a sort of precipice near the sea. When he was pulled back, he announced that the place was too steep, and he moved us along to a place of easier descent. We then got on to what I took to be the lawn in front of the house.

Mr. O'Malley broke a window with a hatchet, and we entered what I believe to have been the drawing room. Mr. O'Malley tried the door and found it locked. He then ordered all of us out, after which he went to the front door, which he broke in. We then entered a large hall, and Mr. O'Malley detailed a man or two to search each room. The search proved fruitless, yielding only a few souvenirs of arms.

On the return journey, our car load was as leaving Liscooley, and we were again in the rear, except for the van with O'Malley and his men.

On the Merville side of Muff, we encountered Dr. McGinley, whose car had mounted a fence, his lights having fused. We stopped with him, relieved his car and fixed up his lights again.

Between Muff and Derry we came upon one of the cars, which had "failed" Mr. O'Malley. The driver had had engine trouble and was unable to reach the scene of the raid.

The car was from Letterkenny. Dr. Kerrigan offered his car as a "tow". The offer was accepted and the car was brought in tow for some distance. Unknown to us, the tow rope had broken, but the crippled car was again picked up and brought in tow by O'Malley's van. When we discovered that the tow rope to our car had broken, we stopped and were going back for the disabled car when the van came up with it.

There were three cars (including the van) on the road together at Pennyburn. It was then early morning and a number of farm carts were going to Pennyburn station with potatoes. The horses became restive at the sight of the cars, and threatened to get out of control. We stopped the cars and got out to help the men.

At this stop it was arranged that one of the men in the van should get out and cut the tow rope to the Letterkenny car at the first garage on entering Derry City. This was done; the man got his car fixed and escaped.

In the confusion at the Pennyburn stop, the cars moved off without Mr. O'Malley and Mr. John O'Flaherty (Mr. Samuel O'Flaherty's cousin), and I remember they came home by train from Derry in the afternoon.

We arrived home safely about 7 or 8 o'clock a.m.

Ernie O'Malley visited our area in 1918 as Volunteer organiser. He was not very successful then, as the election campaign was in full swing. He returned again in 1919 and organised the companies into battalions and brigades. I was appointed Adjutant of the 1st Battalion, 4th (Donegal) Brigade, which appointment I held until my arrest by British forces on the 6th December, 1920.

Some few months after the appointments were made, a despatch was received from Sam O'Flaherty, who was in Dublin at the time, instructing officers of the brigade and battalion staffs to sleep away from home at night, as he suspected that the British authorities had got hold of a list of our names.

On the morning of the 6th December, 1920, the British forces made a sudden swoop on the area in great force. J.D. McLaughlin, Brigade Adjutant, Edward McBrearty, Training Officer, J.J. Kelly, James McCarron, both Company Officers, and myself were arrested. John Flaherty was arrested on the following day.

Sam O'Flaherty was anxious to get an officer from G.H.Q. to take charge of a column in the area, as none of his officers had any training or experience in that type of tactics, but there was none available. Harry McGowan, Vice O/C of the Brigade, who had managed to escape arrest during the round-up, then formed a column. The men he selected were mostly British ex servicemen and a poor type. After some time they got out of control and only brought discredit on the organisation. McGowan and members of his column were later surprised by British forces in a dug-out at a place near Kelly's Bridge, between Donegal town and Pettigo. Two members of the column were shot dead. McGowan and the remainder were captured.

After our arrest we were sent to Derry Jail, where we were held for three weeks. From there we were transferred to Ballykinlar Internment Camp. Passing through Belfast on our way to Ballykinlar, we were subjected to a savage attack by an orange mob, mostly shipyard workers. They attacked the prisoners with pieces of scrap iron and all

sorts of missiles. A number, mostly from the South of Ireland, sustained serious injuries.

Troops of the King's Own Regiment supplied the guard on Ballykinlar Camp. Joseph McGrath, our Camp Commandant, instructed us to keep away from the boundary wire, as the sentries had authority to shoot any prisoner approaching it. They did not confine themselves to this order. On a few occasions they fired at prisoners who were a good distance away, with fatal results.

On one occasion two prisoners named Tormy and Sloane left their hut to meet some men from their home place who had just arrived as prisoners. They had only gone a short distance when a shot rang out. A number of us went out to investigate, to find the two men dying at the back of a hut, both men killed by the same bullet. It got Tormy in the neck, then ricocheted off him to kill Sloane. All the prisoners gathered and knelt around the dead men and commenced to say the Rosary. Just then one Sergeant Lee and two private soldiers stepped into the ring, although it was no part of their duty to be there. Their attitude incensed the prisoners, who were just rising off their knees to attack them when Joseph McGrath stood up and said, "Boys there are enough men outside to avenge this; all we can do now is to pray for the souls of the deceased".

British army engineers were definite in their opinion that no tunnel could be made underground in Ballykinlar, as the ground was only four feet above water level. Our engineers, prisoners in the camp, discovered that one spot could be tunnelled without reaching water level. The tunnel, when complete, would lead past a spot very near the guard room and finally come to the surface on the

Only a small selected party was made aware of the intention to attempt making the tunnel. I was one of the men selected when it was found that I had some previous experience through working in a coal mine. The first start was to lift a floor in one complete section from one of the latrines. This could be replaced at any time in a matter of seconds. The next problem was the secret disposal of the deposit taken from the tunnel. This deposit was pure sand right through. The problem of disposal was solved by some of the prisoners commencing to level off some sand on the surface a short distance away, on the pretext that it was for a ball alley floor. The sand from the tunnel was then taken up in bath pans, with which we were supplied for the purpose of collecting garbage. It was covered with old papers and spread over the place prepared for the ball alley, where fresh sand would not attract attention.

Our next problem was to prop the tunnel so as to prevent it caving in. This was done by stealing bed-boards from each hut, as required. On inspection, the bed-boards were missed. We stated that we used them for firewood. This would give rise to a lecture and a threat to withdraw them, but they were always replaced.

The work was carried out at every available opportunity. As we progressed, our trouble was to keep the right direction. The engineers instructed us to push up a marker to the surface at given places. This enabled them to correct any error in direction.

The tunnel was eventually completed. Contacts were made through our organisation and arrangements made for guides. A small number of officers, urgently needed outside, was selected to make the attempt to escape. Permission was sought and granted to hold a concert on the night appointed for the attempt. Concerts were held occasionally, and at such times there was no roll call. Consequently, absentees would not be missed until the following morning.

At this time, prisoners interned in the Curragh Camp, Co. Kildare, had completed a tunnel, using a similar ruse to ours, i.e. holding a concert to avoid roll call. The date fixed for their attempt was a few days earlier than the one selected by us. Unfortunately, the Curragh attempt was a failure. The selected men had left the concert hall quietly and made their way to the tunnel opening. Amongst the prisoners were a number of men rounded up from time to time throughout Ireland and interned in the Curragh, who were not members of the Volunteer organisation and were not amenable to discipline. They were not made aware of the existence of the tunnel or of any attempt to escape, but probably suspected what was going on. These men left the hall in a body and rushed to the tunnel. In a short time they were discovered and recaptured.

The camp staff in Ballykinlar was alerted immediately, and instructions were issued to make a thorough search for a tunnel. British parties were noticed digging a deep trench in what was known as "The dead man"s walk". This was a clear space between the inner and outer barbed wire defences of the camp. When they reached water level, they still continued on with the tunnel and eventually reached the roof and discovered our tunnel. All our work was in vain. Extra precautions were adopted to ensure that no further attempt to escape was attempted.

By this time the officers from my battalion area had information from outside sources that the Volunteers in and around Ballybofey had become entirely inactive and that the British forces were moving around freely. At a conference, it was decided that James McCarron, Company Captain, Ballybofey, an ex British soldier in receipt of a pension for a leg wound received in the 1914-18 war, should give the required undertaking to the British authorities so as to secure his release and return to Ballybofey. It was necessary to have permission from our Camp Commandant before any application for release was submitted. Permission being given, McCarron

On his return to Ballybofey, he did not report to the police, as required in the undertaking, but went 'on the run' immediately. He then mobilised a small Flying Column.

Some British officers stationed in Drumboe Castle occasionally went fishing in Trusk Lake, a few miles south of Ballybofey. They usually travelled there in a light truck, taking a driver and four or five men who acted as sentries with them. McCarron decided to ambush this party and took up a position near the lake, blocking the road leading to it. When the British party noticed the road block they became suspicious. Dismounting from the truck, they circled round and got into position in the rear of McCarron and his party, opening fire immediately. McCarron was shot dead, and a Volunteer named McAteer was wounded but managed to reach cover. Assisted by his comrades, he was able to escape when the British forces withdrew. The British forces returned to Drumboe and came back with a full company of troops. They searched the area but failed to find anyone.

The Truce on the 11th July, 1921, ended hostilities against the British forces in Ireland. I was detained with other prisoners in Ballykinlar until the 9th December, 1921 on which date we were all released.

Signed:

Thomas McCarron

Date:

15th February 1957

Witness:

James Bonney
(Investigator)

