

ORIGINAL

BUREAU OF MILITARY HISTORY 1913-21

BURO STAIRÉ MILEATA 1913-21

No. W.S. 1586

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BUREAU OF MILITARY HISTORY, 1913-21.

STATEMENT BY WITNESS.

DOCUMENT NO. W.S. 1586.

Witness

James Holohan,
Tincashel,
Urlingford,
Co. Kilkenny.

Identity.

Battalion Quartermaster.
Vice Comdt., 2nd Battn.,
Kilkenny Brigade.

Subject.

Activities of Urlingford Coy.,
2nd Battalion, Kilkenny Brigade.,
1917 - 21.

Conditions, if any, Stipulated by Witness.

Nil.

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BURO STAIRÉ MILÉATA 1913-21

No. W.S. 1,586

STATEMENT BY Mr. JAMES HOLEHAN,
Tincashel, Urlingford, County Kilkenny.

Formerly Vice-Commandant, 2nd Battalion, Kilkenny Brigade.

After a lapse of almost forty years it is now rather difficult to recall the history of the Irish Volunteer and Sinn Féin movements in this area during the years from 1917 to 1921. It was, as far as I can now recollect, in the early months of 1917 that a Sinn Féin Club and a Company of Irish Volunteers were established in Urlingford. I was closely associated with both from their formation and was a member of the Committee of the Sinn Féin Club and 2nd Lieutenant of the Volunteer Company.

The strength of the Volunteer Company in its initial stages was approximately thirty men. It elected Mr. Patrick Talbot, then of Lisduff, Urlingford, and now resident in Dublin, as its first Captain. The usual routine of Volunteer Companies of the time was carried out. We had secret parades for drilling and training. Good progress was made with organisation and new recruits were enrolled slowly but steadily. In this work of organisation we received praiseworthy assistance from the late Mr. Sean F. Gibbons, Ballylarkin, Clomantagh, afterwards T.D., Senator and for some years Chairman of Seanad Éireann.

In June of 1917, Mr. Patrick O'Brien, M.P., the Irish Parliamentary Party representative for Kilkenny City, died and his death resulted in a bye-election being held in that constituency. Mr. Liam T. Cosgrave, who was sentenced to death for his part in the Rising of 1916, was selected as the Sinn Féin candidate to

contest this election, which he won hands down. His election campaign opened with a monster meeting and public reception in the Market Place, Parliament Street, Kilkenny, and on behalf of a large number of Volunteers and members of the Sinn Féin Club who travelled from Urlingford for the occasion I was deputed to present an address of welcome to Eamon De Valera who, with Countess Markievicz and Revd. Father O'Flanagan, was with the candidate on the platform. It was within a few weeks of De Valera's great victory in the East Clare election and was, I believe, his first visit to Kilkenny.

In March, 1918, some thirty of the Volunteer Company in Urlingford, including myself, volunteered to go to Waterford to assist Dr. Vincent White, the Sinn Féin Party candidate, in a bye-election in Waterford City. With other Volunteer contingents from various parts of County Kilkenny, we were accommodated in the Volunteer Hall in Thomas Street during the five or six days we were in Waterford. Thomas Treacy of Kilkenny was in charge of all the County Kilkenny contingents and there, too, we made the acquaintance of many Volunteers from Counties Cork and Clare who were also drafted into Waterford for the week or so prior to the polling day.

I would say that Waterford was then the greatest stronghold of the Irish Parliamentary Party in Ireland and their candidate- the late Captain William Redmond who at the time was serving with the British Army - had the support of a powerful rough element comprised mainly of ex-British Army men and the dependants of British soldiers. Our duties were concerned with protecting the Sinn Féin candidate, Sinn Féin speakers, Sinn Féin election rooms and Sinn Féin meetings from attacks by the Redmondite followers. There were many clashes between the Volunteers and this element of the Redmondite supporters

and one very serious one took place in Saltypark on the eve of the poll in which two of our Urlingford men, Patrick Talbot and Michael Dowling, received injuries which necessitated their removal to hospital. Talbot was able to leave hospital next day but Dowling's injuries were of a more serious nature and he had to remain in hospital for six or seven days. Amongst other prominent men in the Sinn Féin movement, who were with us on that occasion, were the late Peter De Loughry of Kilkenny and Seán Gibbons of Clomantagh.

The threat of the British Government to extend the Conscription Act to Ireland brought about a period of intense Volunteer and Sinn Féin activity during the summer of 1918. As happened in other areas men came rushing to join the Volunteer Company but many of them remained members only as long as the Conscription crisis continued. Arms were scarce at the time and to procure them was our biggest bogey. We collected shotguns and shotgun ammunition from their owners, many of whom handed them over freely and with good will, and all members of the Company were exhorted to obtain and collect explosives or gunpowder, no matter how small the quantities, when and wherever possible. The Urlingford Company was then in 1918 attached to the 1st or Kilkenny City battalion of the Kilkenny Brigade.

Towards the end of that year of 1918, W.T. Cosgrave came to Urlingford and spent a few days with me. I remember him mentioning that he was on the run at the time. In preparation for the general election, which had ^{then} been declared, we did some canvassing for support for Sinn Féin and concentrated on priests and people of influence whose political tendencies were different from ours. Even if we did not win them over to our way of thinking it was good to notice

the respect and courtesy with which these people received W. T. Cosgrave in their homes. There was, however, no need for a canvas, for no opposition candidate was put forward and Cosgrave was re-elected unopposed.

1919 was a slack year so far as activities were concerned. Training and organisation were continued and some additional arms, shotguns and small bore rifles were procured. In this year the Kilkenny Brigade, which had been formed the year previous, undertook a new scheme of organisation of the Brigade area. In the reorganisation the Volunteer Companies of Urlingford, Tullaroan, Graine, Clomantagh and Galmoy became the 2nd Battalion and the following Battalion officers were elected :-

- Battalion Commandant - Patrick Talbot, Urlingford,
- Battalion Vice Commandant - Simon Walton, Tullaroan,
- Battalion Adjutant - Patrick Loughlin, Urlingford,
- Battalion Quartermaster - James Holahan (myself),

Some short time afterwards a new Company was started in Crosspatrick and the Battalion organisation was then as follows :-

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| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> "A" Company - Tullaroan "B" Company - Graine "C" Company - Clomantagh "D" Company - Urlingford "E" Company - Crosspatrick "F" Company - Galmoy | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Company O/C. William Meagher. Michael Ryan) later Michael Brennan) 1st O/C. Sean F. Gibbons) next Patrick Kelly) finally Patrick Ryan) Martin Joyce James Connell) later John Tierney) Kieran Bowe) later Thomas Phelan) |
|---|---|

Three further Companies based on Johnstown, Gathabawn and Freshford were organised and included in the Battalion at a later stage, but if my memory serves me right these Companies only came into the Battalion near the time of the Truce in July 1921. The Battalion Council meetings were usually held at Richard Bergin's of Killahy or Patrick Tobin's of the same townland.

On Easter Saturday night of 1920, on instructions from the Brigade Headquarters, three evacuated R.I.C. barracks in the Battalion area were destroyed by burning and rendered uninhabitable. They were situated at Garrylawn, Gathabawn and Clomantagh. A fourth barracks at Johnstown was destroyed in similar fashion a very short time afterwards. The withdrawal of the R.I.C. garrisons from these barracks left only one enemy post - that at Urlingford - in the Battalion area. It comprised the Courthouse which had been taken over by a party of R.I.C. Auxiliaries and the R.I.C. barracks which was situated directly behind and adjacent to the Courthouse. Protected by sandbags, machine gun posts and barbed wire, the two buildings formed a rather formidable fortress and, as far as I can recollect, the strength of its combined garrison of Auxiliaries and R.I.C. men was at least twenty to twenty-five men.

The next incident to which I will refer relates to a raid for arms on the house of the Revd. Mr. Murray - a protestant Minister who resided in the Graine area and which occurred sometime in 1920 after the destruction of the evacuated R.I.C. barracks. The raid was carried out by five or six Volunteers of the Graine Company including Dick Tobin, Michael Robinson and Michael Ryan. As I was not present I cannot say what exactly happened there but apparently the Volunteers encountered some opposition from Murray and his son, and some shots

may have been fired before Murray surrendered his shotgun. Following this there was intense police and military activity; a police or military guard was placed on Mr. Murray and his house, and a number of men were arrested. The arrested men were taken to Cork, tried by courtmartial there, and sentenced to terms of imprisonment. Murray and his son attended the courtmartial and gave evidence of identification although I understand that some of the men charged with taking part in the raid were not there at all.

There was a sequel to this incident some time later. After his escape from Kilmainham Prison, Ernie O'Malley, accompanied by Con Moloney of Tipperary, spent some time in this area. O'Malley decided that Murray should be severely dealt with for his action in identifying the prisoners. The upshot of the matter was that a courtmartial was arranged at which O'Malley himself presided and at which Murray was tried in his absence and sentenced to death. O'Malley then placed the onus of capturing Murray and carrying out the findings of the Court on the shoulders of the local Volunteer Company - the Graine Company. This was easier said than done for R.I.C. and British Military were constantly on guard at Murray's place. The matter resolved itself in a rather peculiar way. Some short time afterwards a coffin was seen being removed from Murray's house and rumour had it that he had committed suicide. Whether this was true or not I cannot say but he certainly disappeared and was never seen in the neighbourhood again.

Amongst other activities which commenced in 1920 and continued into 1921 were the blocking and trenching of roads, the organising and maintaining of a Republican police force and the establishment

of District and Parish Sinn Féin Courts. Seán F. Gibbons or Peter De Loughry usually presided at the District Courts and I was often called upon to act on the Parish Courts. The cases which came before us were generally of a civil nature such as petty pilfering or trespass cases. Considering the disturbed condition of the country at the time, a tribute is due to the people of the area that we were never called upon to deal with a serious criminal case.

Towards the close of the year of 1920, Patrick Talbot, the Battalion Commandant, and Patrick Loughlin, the Battalion Adjutant, were both arrested and interned. Prior to their capture they were engaged, in conjunction with Patrick Ryan, Captain of "C" Company, in preparing plans for an ambush on the Kilkenny-Urlingford road and had been to Clomantagh to inspect the site of the proposed ambush. Their arrests brought about changes in the Battalion staff. Sim Walton took over as Battalion Commandant. I succeeded Walton as Battalion Vice-Commandant, and Joseph Pollard, now of Athenry, was appointed Battalion Quartermaster. William Meagher, Captain of "A" Company, succeeded Loughlin as Battalion Adjutant and Thomas Grace was then appointed Captain of "A" Company.

One other incident which I recall relates to a proposed attack on Ballyragget R.I.C. barracks, which was planned to take place on the night of 23rd May, 1921. This was to be a combined operation carried out by the 2nd and 3rd Battalions and, as far as I can now recollect, the Brigade Commandant, George O'Dwyer, was to take charge. A selected party of approximately forty men, drawn from the Clomantagh, Urlingford, Graine, Galmoy, Crosspatrick and Tullaroan Companies, were mobilised for the operation. Arms were then fairly plentiful

and the men were armed with a miscellaneous selection of shotguns, rifles of various types, and revolvers of different pattern. The men assembled at Barna, cut the telegraph wires there and then moved off to the final assembly point at Grange about $1\frac{1}{2}$ miles from Ballyragget. There we awaited final instructions and after an hour or so word was received to disperse as the attack had been called off. The explanation given was that a woman living in the house next door to the barracks had been confined that night.

SIGNED: _____

James Holohan

DATE: _____

1st March 1957

WITNESS: _____

Grace

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