

ORIGINAL

BUREAU OF MILITARY HISTORY 1913-21
BURO STAIRÉ MILÉATA 1913-21
No: W.S. 1589

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BUREAU OF MILITARY HISTORY, 1913-21

STATEMENT BY WITNESS.

DOCUMENT NO. W.S. 1589.. . . .

Witness

Diarmuid O'Leary,
7, Landscape Gardens,
Churchtown,
Dublin.

Identity.

Capt., Killeagh Coy., I.R.A.
Member of Flying Column, 4th Battn.,
Cork 1 Brigade.

Subject.

Activities of Killeagh Coy., I. Vols.,
Co. Cork, 1918-21.
Activities of 4th Battn., Flying Column
and the Fight at Clonmult, Jan., 1921.

Conditions, if any, Stipulated by Witness.

Nil.

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BUREAU OF MILITARY HISTORY 1913-21
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STATEMENT BY DIARMUID G'LEARY

7 Landscape Gardens, Churchtown, Dublin.

I was born in the village of Killeagh, Co. Cork; my parents belonged to the farming community.

When a company of Irish Volunteers was reorganised in Killeagh in 1918, I joined up and was appointed captain of the company. This position I held until I went to the battalion flying column in November 1920. Our battalion was known as the 4th Battalion, Cork No. 1 Brigade.

In Killeagh, we had a company strength of about 50 or 60. Very few of us had firearms and those we had were of the shotgun variety. I had an old .32 revolver which was not in very good condition.

Things in Killeagh were rather quiet during 1918-19. We took part in election activities, stewarding, canvassing votes and generally helping the Sinn Fein candidate for the area in the general election of December 1918. Drilling and general training were carried on regularly, but the only item of note, so far as Volunteer activities were concerned, was the raiding of dwelling houses in the district for guns. These night raids resulted in our getting together a few extra shotguns and a sporting gun or two, but it could not be said that the company was otherwise than very poorly armed.

Following the successful capture of Castlemartyr R.I.C. Barracks on 9th February 1920, by a handful of men from the 4th Battalion led by Diarmuid Hurley of Middleton, Co. Cork, the question of attacking the R.I.C. barracks in Killeagh was under consideration. This barracks was a stoutly constructed store and slated two-storied building and had a garrison of a sergeant and five constables.

Joseph Ahern, who was, I think, vice-commandant of the 4th Battalion at the time, discussed with me the feasibility of successfully attacking and capturing Killeagh barracks and I was instructed to survey the building, particularly at the

rear, with a view to blowing in the back portion of the barrack building and forcing an entrance there. I carried out the survey by night and satisfied myself that the plan was not one which could be successfully accomplished. A dwellinghouse adjoining the barracks would, in my opinion, be blown up if we exploded a charge of gelignite at the rear of the barracks thereby involving loss of life, perhaps of the whole family who lived there, and I could see no possibility of evacuating this family before the attack without attracting the attention of the R.I.C. in the barracks. It was also a fact that the R.I.C. were very much on the alert now, following the attack and capture of their barracks at Carrigwohill and Castlemartyr not many miles away.

I sent off my report to Joseph Ahern and was informed later that the proposed attack was called off. A short time after that, a raid on the mails was carried out by some of our 4th Battalion in which a letter from the sergeant of the R.I.C. at Killeagh to the British authorities in Cork was found. The letter stated inter alia that suspicious-looking men were seen in Killeagh. It was obvious to us from this that the Killeagh R.I.C. garrison was alert to the possibility of attack.

Not very long afterwards, the barracks was evacuated and the police dispersed into other barracks in the district. Hearing that there was a possibility of their returning to re-occupy the barracks in stronger force, I burned the place at 6 o'clock one morning,

Due to my home in Killeagh being raided for me, I decided in mid-1920 to go 'on the run'. I lived in various houses in the district for some months up to November 1920. During that time I decided to have a crack at the enemy on my own and selected as a target one of the military lorries which passed frequently on the main road between Youghal and Cork.

Killeagh is situated on this main road. It is $7\frac{1}{2}$ miles from Youghal (to the east) and 23 miles from Cork (to the west). My idea was to explode a charge of gelignite under a lorry as it passed going to, or from, Youghal. Having experimented with some fuse, I went on to the main road from Youghal to Killeagh and laid a bundle of three sticks of gelignite in a hole in the road to which I attached a few yards of fuse; this I proposed to ignite from my position in the ditch on the roadside. Hearing what I thought was a military lorry approaching, I lit the fuse. From the distance of the lorry and its speed, I calculated that the explosion would take place as the lorry passed where I lay. In fact, the expected lorry turned out to be a Crossley tender which would, of course, travel much faster. The Crossley passed over the gelignite which did not explode until the car had gone on for another 100 yards. My attempt proved abortive.

When the 4th Battalion flying column was formed later in October 1920, I linked up with it early in November of the same year at Churchtown, about three miles south west of Midleton. The column then comprised 21 men with Diarmuid Hurley, commandant of the 4th Battalion, in charge, and Jos. Aherne, vice-commandant, second in command. We were all armed with rifles, police carbines, revolvers and shotguns. Practically all these guns, excepting the shotguns, had been captured in various engagements with enemy forces in the East Cork area, and all by men of the 4th Battalion.

After a period of training together, during which the column moved from district to district, Diarmuid Hurley decided to enter the town of Midleton by night and attack a party of Black and Tans which was then stationed in Midleton as a support to the R.I.C. garrison in the town. It was customary for the Tans to patrol the town each night about 8 or 9 p.m. This patrol numbered about 15, divided into two groups walking on opposite sides of the main street.

To the best of my recollection, the date was 31st December 1920, when the column moved close to Midleton shortly before the enemy patrol was due to make its appearance. About half the column (a dozen men) entered the town and took up positions in doorways and side streets adjoining the main Street. The remainder of the column, of which I was one, was on outpost duty on roads leading to Midleton. Actually, I, with Tom Hyde of Ballinacurra and another man whose name I cannot remember, held a position about a quarter of a mile east of the town. Our instructions were to engage any enemy forces approaching from Youghal to the east and then fall back on Midleton.

Our lads in Midleton went into action when the Tan patrol appeared on the streets and, in the ensuing fight, killed three and wounded five of the enemy. About a dozen rifles and revolvers were captured. Our casualties were one man wounded in the hand.

During the engagement no enemy troops approached our position outside the town, and, when the fight ended, we made contact with Diarmuid Hurley and his men and withdrew northwards to the district of Dungourney. We billeted there for about a week and, in about the second week of January 1921, the column moved to Garrylaurence, Clonmult, when we took up quarters in a disused farmhouse about half a mile north west of the small village of Clonmult. The latter is seven miles north east of Midleton.

The Fight at Clonmult.

Before describing the fight at Clonmult, it might be as well to give some idea of the house we occupied and its surroundings. The house was a long low building with walls of mud and stone and a thatched roof. It had three rooms. There were two windows and a door at the front of the house

(there was no back door). The approach to the house was by a boreen which gave entrance to the haggard in front of the house. This haggard was about 20 yards by 30 yards in area. A grass bank 'ran' at the rear and about six feet from the building. A large cowshed was at right angles to the front of the house on its northern side; to the south and west was a small grove of trees, about 20 yards away.

On the fateful day of Sunday, 20th February 1921, in the early afternoon, Diarmuid Hurley, Jos. Aherne and Captain Paddy Whelan left our headquarters at Clonmult to survey an ambush position at Little Island, a railway station on the Cork-Cobh line, and about six miles south of Clonmult. An ambush on a troop train was being planned for the following Tuesday. Before leaving, Hurley gave instructions that the column should move off that evening to a position nearer to the proposed ambush at Little Island. He appointed Captain Jack O'Connell in charge of the remainder of the column at Clonmult, which consisted of 12 regular column men and four other Volunteers named Harty, Terry, Walsh and Garde. These latter four had come that day to the house at Clonmult with money from a collection levied on local farmers and others by order of the brigade headquarters in Cork. The purpose of the levy was to purchase arms and maintain the columns then operating in the Cork Brigade area.

We had taken a midday meal and were packing up preparing to leave. Two of our lads named Joyce and Desmond had gone to a well a few yards from the house to fill their water bottles. I chanced to look out a front window and saw, to my amazement, soldiers crawling past the gateway near the boreen. The time now was about 3 p.m. I immediately gave the alarm and, almost at once, the military opened fire on us from all sides. Captain O'Connell distributed the reserve ammunition

and some grenades and we replied to the enemy fire through the windows.

Our position now was extremely precarious. It was obvious we were surrounded by superior enemy forces and our prospects of fighting a winning battle from inside the house were absolutely hopeless. Realising the state of affairs, Jack O'Connell, after about an hour's firing, decided to attempt a sortie. The door was opened and 'Jacko', fixing a bayonet to his carbine, led the way, followed by Michael Hallahan, Richard Hegarty, Jim Aherne and myself. We were met by a hail of bullets. 'Jacko' got through to the shelter of a ditch and, subsequently, fought his way through to the enemy cordon. Hallahan was shot dead almost on the doorstep. Hegarty was killed as he made for cover at a fence opposite the house, and Jim Aherne got away into the fields about two hundred yards to the south where he, too, was shot and killed. I got out into the haggard, but, seeing the other boys fall, decided there was no hope of escape and dashed back again into the house amidst a hail of bullets, none of which, fortunately hit me.

Inside the house, Paddy Higgins of Aghada was now in charge of the beleaguered garrison. We had no idea of what had happened to 'Jacko'; indeed, we presumed he, too, had been killed. Actually, he escaped and went to obtain help which arrived too late. Meanwhile, firing continued on both sides during which one of our comrades, Joyce, who with Desmond had gone to the well for water, had crawled, badly wounded as he was, to the rear of the house and told us we were surrounded on all sides by the enemy. The poor fellow died that evening. Desmond, too, had been killed, presumably as he tried to make his way back to us, but, of course, we didn't know this at the time.

The British now began to close in on us and the next thing we realised was that the thatched roof had been set on fire by them. Paddy Higgins then decided to bore a hole through the rear wall and try and get his men out of the doomed building by the back. We 'set to' with bayonets, knives and forks and eventually hacked a hole big enough for a man to get through. The house was now full of fumes from the burning thatch which was beginning to fall in on us. We were getting sick from inhaling the fumes.

It was then arranged that I should be the first to make the attempt to escape. I went to get through the break in the wall and had only got my head out when I received a bullet in the head and was pulled back again by my comrades. I remember creeping into the kitchen and then remember no more of what happened in the burning house.

My next recollection was being propped up against a wall and I barely remember being in a lorry, but at the time I was only half conscious for brief periods.

Before continuing my personal story, I wish to record what happened after I received the head wound as told to me by survivors of that fatal day.

After repeated calls to surrender, and, having no alternative because of the house being on fire together with the fact that the place was ringed by British military reinforced by Black and Tans, Paddy Higgins instructed the boys to throw their guns into the blazing house and come out with their hands up, bringing me with them. This was done, whereupon the Black and Tans lined up the boys and shot seven of them in cold blood. Were it not for the intervention of the British military officer in charge, all the prisoners taken would have been murdered likewise. Seven of our lads fell to the guns of the murderous Tans. The names of these boys

together with those killed in action were: Richard Hegarty (Garryvoe), Jeremiah Aherne (Midleton), Christopher Sullivan (Midleton), Joseph Morrissey (Athlone), Michael Hallahan (Midleton), James Glavin (Cobh), John Joe Joyce (Midleton), James Aherne (Cobh), Michael Desmond (Midleton), Donal Dennehy (Midleton), Liam Aherne (Midleton) and David Desmond (Midleton). Michael and David Desmond were brothers. Liam Aherne was brother of our vice-commandant Jos. Aherne, and James Aherne his first cousin.

The following were taken prisoners: Paddy O'Sullivan and Maurice Moore (Cobh), Paddy Higgins (Aghada), Volunteers Harty, Terry Walsh and Garde and myself. Paddy Higgins was badly wounded, having been shot through the mouth by a Black and Tan; the remainder (excepting myself, of course) were unwounded.

The prisoners, wounded and otherwise, were put into a lorry and taken into Midleton where they were paraded for identification by the R.I.C. This explains my recollection of being propped against a wall, to which I have already referred.

From Midleton we were brought by lorry to Cork. I must have been unconscious for a considerable time, because I next remember waking up in bed in a hospital attached to Cork military barracks and having my head shaved in preparation for my wound being treated. My mother and sister came from Killeagh to Cork barracks inquiring for me as I was not amongst the bodies of my comrades found dead at Clonmult. They were informed that there was no person of my name there. (I had given a false name). Concluding I was dead, my people held a wake in my home at Killeagh and my mother even purchased a grave where I would be interred when my body was found. At the first opportunity I wrote to her, telling her I was, in

fact, alive and a prisoner.

With me in the hospital ward were some other patients, one of whom I remember had been the stationmaster at Upton, Co. Cork. This man had fought with the I.R.A. in the Upton ambush on 19th February 1921, and had been wounded and taken prisoner. His bed was nearest the entrance door. One night, following an ambush in Cork city, in which some soldiers were killed, a few military came into the room and proceeded to beat this man unmercifully with the butts of their revolvers. He died from the effects of the beating. It was lucky for me that my bed was farthest away from the door or I might have met with the same fate.

After less than a week in bed, I was told to get up. My clothes, which were bloodstained and wet and my shirt which was the same, were handed to me. I dressed myself and, with four military police as guard, was marched across the barrack square to the detention wing of the barracks. I was desperately weak and hardly able to walk. I asked one of the guard to allow me to lean on him or permit me to sit down for a moment on a stone in the square, but I was refused. Eventually, I was put into a cell where I removed my clothes and got into a bed with a blanket for a covering. I was only a short time there when a priest came in. I complained about the condition of my clothes. After leaving me he must have reported this, because a warder came along shortly afterwards and took my clothes away, returning them later clean and dry.

The following day I was ordered to get up and go down into the barrack yard. I was so weak, I fell down some steps and was helped up by a sergeant of the Cameron Highlanders. This man was very considerate to me while I was under his charge. In the yard I met my comrades Paddy O'Sullivan and Maurice Moore and I met them there at our hour's recreation

each day until we were tried by courtmartial on 19th March 1921, and sentenced to death. We were to be shot on the Wednesday following.

I asked permission for my mother and sister to see me but, when they came to the barracks, they were refused admittance. Here, I might mention that both of them were 'on the run'. Their home was repeatedly raided by military and Tans, with the result that they had to get out and find accommodation elsewhere.

After the courtmartial sentences, counsel was briefed on our behalf and our cases taken to the British House of Lords for consideration. This caused a postponement of the executions. The weeks dragged on without us hearing anything definite about the decision in our cases and, in the meantime, I used continue to meet Paddy O'Sullivan, Maurice Moore and Paddy Higgins at recreation. Higgins, in addition to the bullet wound in the mouth, was suffering from acute appendicitis which, he told me, would need an operation. Talking about our execution, I remember saying I would ask that I be shot along with the others when the time came. We all agreed we should 'go' together. The next I heard was that Paddy Higgins was put into hospital for his appendix operation.

My mother and sister had now got permission to visit me and, one evening early in May 1921, when in the recreation yard with Paddy O'Sullivan and Maurice Moore, I was told my people were there to see me. When I had seen them I returned to the recreation yard and found that O'Sullivan and Moore were missing. I asked the sentry on duty where they were and he told me they had been 'shifted'. Later that evening, as I walked down the corridor to my cell, I noticed that a sentry was posted outside the two doors of the cells next to

mine and that the doors were marked with a large cross (X). My door bore no such cross. In the two 'marked' cells were Paddy and Maurice.

I wasn't long in my cell until a priest came in to hear my confession. He told me I was to be executed the following morning. I remember asking him what time I was to be shot and his reply that he didn't know. Later, a soldier came in with tea to me and he said that two lads were to be executed in the morning. I inquired about myself and the soldier said: "They are keeping you for your mate in hospital" (meaning Paddy Higgins). Apparently, we were to be shot in pairs. I need scarcely say I did not have much sleep that night.

The following morning, 5th May 1921, I heard the cell doors beside me opening and Maurice and Paddy passing my door answering the litany of the rosary. Very shortly afterwards I heard the shots which signalled the death of my two comrades.

In the forenoon of the same day I met Paddy Higgins in the recreation yard. He had been operated on for appendicitis and was going for another operation. Relating to him the events of the previous night, Paddy remarked: "They are probably keeping you for me".

That evening I was called to an office upstairs in the barracks. There were three British army officers seated at a table. One of them proceeded to read out the sentence of death passed on me and then added that the sentence was commuted to one of penal servitude for life. It is not possible to state the relief I felt at this totally unexpected news. I returned to my cell where I was told to pack and get ready to leave, where to, I had no idea. The next thing happened was that I was given a bucket of water and a brush and ordered to scrub the cookhouse floor. I refused to do this and was again put back into my cell. Later on, I was marched out with about a dozen other prisoners, put into a lorry with an

armed guard of soldiers and taken to Cork Gaol where more prisoners were collected. One of these was Tom Crofts, O/C. 1st Battalion, Cork I Brigade. I remember Tom coming over and shaking hands with me.

We were all brought down to Spike Island where I was imprisoned in the 'criminal' portion of the prison. I joined in the wrecking of the cells with all the other prisoners, with the result that I was transferred to Kilkenny Gaol. In Kilkenny, the prisoners who were there before I arrived had dug a tunnel under the gaol to a point outside the walls. Many prisoners escaped by means of this tunnel, but, unfortunately, I was in a different wing of the gaol to that from which the escape was made.

After a few months in Kilkenny, I was transferred to Waterford Gaol from which I was released in February 1922.

Of the boys captured with me at Clonmult in February 1921, all (including Paddy Higgins) had their death sentences commuted to penal servitude for life, except, of course, Paddy O'Sullivan and Maurice Moore, R.I.P.

Signed: *Diarmuid O'Leary*

Date: *3rd March 1957*

Witness: *P. Gorman*

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