

W.S. 1593

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BUREAU OF MILITARY HISTORY, 1913-21.

STATEMENT BY WITNESS.

DOCUMENT NO. W.S. 1593.....

Witness

James Reilly,  
Hill of Down,  
Co. Meath.

Identity.

Capt. Kinnegad Coy., Irish Volunteers,  
Co. Westmeath.  
O/C 2nd Battalion, Mullingar Brigade.

Subject.

Activities of Kinnegad Company, Irish  
Volunteers, Co. Westmeath, 1917-21.

Conditions, if any, Stipulated by Witness.

Nil.

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Form B.S.M. 2

ORIGINAL

BUREAU OF MILITARY HISTORY 1913-21

BURO STAIRÉ MILEATA 1913-21

No. W.S. 1593

STATEMENT BY JAMES REILLY,

Hill of Down, Co. Meath.

I was born in this locality and went to school in Kinnegad. There was nothing unusual in the school subjects as taught at that time, and certainly nothing that could be said to be of an out and out Irish nature or that would induce any pupil to develop patriotic ideas. All the young people of the surrounding area had great sympathy for the men who took part in the 1916 Rebellion, and particularly for the men who were executed. When a local collection was organised to help the dependants of the men who took part in the Rebellion and who were now in jail or interned, we assisted in that collection. When the railway workers refused to carry English forces or their supplies, we also assisted by collecting for the dependants of the men who were dismissed from the railway for their actions.

About August, 1917, a few of us got together and decided to start a company of the Irish Volunteers in Kinnegad. About ten men from the Kinnegad area joined the company. There was no oath taken then or any declaration made. I was appointed Captain by popular vote and took charge of affairs. We had no arms of any type.

About the end of that year, Joseph Kennedy from Castlepollard, now a T.D., who was organising Volunteers in the Westmeath area, paid us a visit. The company was now put on a proper footing and recognised as an organised unit of the Volunteer force. I was confirmed in my appointment as Company Captain. John Gorman was appointed 1st Lieutenant, and Patrick Bracken, 2nd Lieutenant.

We now had around twenty men in the company. We probably could have had a lot more, but we were very careful about the type of young men we recruited.

We were now the Kinnegad Company of the 1st Battalion, Offaly Brigade. The Battalion O/C was Bart Byrne of Tyrrellspass. The Brigade O/C was Seán Mahon of Tullamore district. Kinnegad, Rochfort Bridge and Tyrrellspass were amongst the companies which went to make up the battalion. We still had no arms in the battalion. We paid a subscription of sixpence per week towards an arms fund and other expenses. Parades were held usually on Sundays - openly - and the R.I.C. did not interfere with us at this time. For a while we had the services of an ex-British army soldier as instructor, but the R.I.C. warned him about his actions and after that he would not carry on any longer. I now had to take on the job of imparting drill and other instruction. I had no previous experience in military matters, but with the aid of British army manuals I managed to carry on. This was very difficult, as the books could not replace actual experience.

Early in 1918 the country was threatened by the conscription act passed by the English government and the whole country united to oppose the enforcement of this measure. Entrance into the Volunteer force was now thrown open and soon our company strength had passed the one hundred mark. Drilling and training were now intensified and carried out openly under the watchful eyes of the R.I.C. That force was, I believe, just as opposed to conscription as we were, and I am sure that their reports to their superiors did not suffer anything as a result. Anti-conscription meetings galore were held, to which we paraded usually at full strength. We went

by route march to one such meeting in Mullingar. We marched there and back, a distance of over twenty-four miles. The Volunteers collected for the national anti-conscription fund, and had everyone, including the women folk, sign the anti-conscription pledge. The clergy took a very prominent part in the campaign against conscription. There was no attempt to make armaments of any type in the area. We believed that Volunteer headquarters in Dublin had a plan to fight conscription, and we awaited orders from them. We were aware of the passive methods recommended by the national anti-conscription council to combat the act should it become law, and it only awaited the King's signature to do so.

When the threat died down, so also did the membership of our company, and we were back again to around our original twenty members, the remainder ceasing to be active Volunteers. We carried on as usual with our parades, but still had no arms of any type. We were still in the Offaly Brigade.

In the end of 1918 a general election was held throughout the country and Sinn Féin, which was the political wing of the movement for independence and which was getting organised throughout the country, decided to contest all seats against the Irish Parliamentary Party. The Sinn Féin candidates were pledged not to take their seats in the English Parliament but to set up an Irish government in Dublin. Quite a good few of the Sinn Féin candidates were still in jail at this period. The Volunteers again carried out a huge amount of work in connection with the election. They were busily engaged

in canvassing voters and in parading to election meetings and so forth. The Volunteers provided Volunteer parties at all the Sinn Féin meetings to protect the speakers from the hostile followers of the Irish Party. The R.I.C. were hostile to Sinn Féin and encouraged the opposition elements by ignoring their actions. On the polling day, the Volunteers provided parties for duty at the polling stations to ensure that the supporters of Sinn Féin would be allowed to cast their votes freely. The Volunteers also did an amount of personation on behalf of Sinn Féin. The election went off quietly enough and there were no serious clashes. We also supplied men to act as guards on the ballot boxes in the County Hall, Mullingar, to which they were removed prior to the counting. The R.I.C. also had a guard party there who were located in a separate room. There was no clash with them. The Volunteers also assisted in collecting for the election fund.

In January, 1919, the 1st Dáil met in Dublin and set themselves up as the government of the Irish Republic. The Dáil floated a loan to provide monies for its undertakings, and here again the Volunteers were the principal agents in pushing this project. They canvassed and collected extensively for the loan. The loan was well supported by the people and we received subscriptions from some unexpected quarters. I collected the area around here and received over one hundred pounds. The money was handed over to Joseph Kennedy, who was the official receiver for this area. Each subscriber was given a temporary receipt and later on the Dáil Department of Finance issued official receipts. Every penny subscribed was accounted for.

The Dáil now took over the Volunteer force as the established army of the Irish Republic, and each officer and man of the force was required to take an oath of allegiance to that body. There was no compulsion regarding this oath and each Volunteer was free to refuse to take it if he so desired. Failure to take the oath just meant that he severed his connection with the Volunteers. A few of our men refused to take this oath and ceased to be Volunteers, but the remainder subscribed to the oath without hesitation.

In the early summer of 1919, a re-organisation of the Volunteers in the Westmeath area took place and our company was now incorporated in a brigade which was organised in the Mullingar area. A battalion was organised in our area, which was known as the 3rd Battalion, Mullingar Brigade. The companies making up the battalion were: Kinnefad, Corralstown, Milltown Pass, Raharney and Clonlost. Our former Battalion O/C remained in the Offaly Brigade and Joseph Beglin of Milltown Pass was appointed our Battalion O/C. David Burke of Mullingar was the Brigade O/C. In the end of 1919 or early 1920, David Burke resigned the brigade command owing to ill-health and was replaced by Seamus Maguire of Glenidon, Mullingar. Joseph Murphy of Tullamore, who then worked in Mullingar, was Brigade Quartermaster, and another man, whose name I can't recollect and who worked in Shaw's of Mullingar, was Brigade Adjutant. Soon after this, Joe Beglin went on the Brigade Staff and I was appointed O/C of our battalion. The Vice Commandant of our battalion was James Lennon, and the Quartermaster was James Murphy of Griffinstown. Other than these changes, the battalion organisation remained the same.

The armament of the battalion was comprised of the service rifle which we had on loan from the Mullingar Battalion for instructional purposes. There were also a few varied types of revolvers of small calibre and a few shotguns the property of individual members. Ammunition for all weapons was very limited. The strength of the companies in all cases was very low.

In the end of 1919 the R.I.C. began to withdraw their men from the small outlying stations into larger centres. Some of the smaller stations had already been attacked and captured throughout the country by the Volunteers, and they realised that they could not hold these posts any longer or else they would lose them and the arms also. Ballinabr ckey and Killucan were evacuated in our area. They held on to Kinnegad, which they reinforced and strengthened. On Easter Saturday night, 1920, all the evacuated barracks throughout the country were destroyed by the Volunteers by burning them. This was a countrywide operation ordered by G.H.Q. and made great reading in the papers both here and in America, where it served as good propaganda. We burned down Killucan and Ballinabrackey without any injury to anyone.

The withdrawal of the R.I.C. was a great blessing in that it gave great liberty to us to move around more freely without being spied on by this force. Everyone knew that they were the principal sources of information for the British government and were the key instruments in keeping the country under English subjection. The awful part of it was that they were Irishmen of the same stock as ourselves. G.H.Q. realised that the withdrawal of the R.I.C. would provide a more or less free hand for

the less law abiding elements in the country to indulge in a spate of crime, so they ordered the Volunteers to police the country. This, of necessity, could only be part-time duty, for the Volunteers had to attend to their normal callings in order to live, and the duty imposed a great strain on the force. On the other hand, it was a great novelty for them and they entered into it with great enthusiasm and made a wonderful success of it. Of course, in this work they had the willing co-operation of the great majority of the people, which the R.I.C. could never get.

This was a quiet area generally and the Volunteers were not called upon to make many arrests. One man was arrested for cattle stealing. This man was sent to the Tullamore area for detention pending trial of his case. He was taken back and brought before a local court and sentenced to be banned from the area for three months. He left the area and never returned.

Many of the local disputes were settled on the spot by arbitration. On one occasion we had to arrest an ex British army soldier named Collins who came from Kildare. He was supposed to be giving information to the R.I.C. about the Volunteers. We handed him over to the Edenderry Company of the Offaly Brigade and, as far as I can remember, he was deported to England.

The Sinn Féin courts were now well established and the people were making good use of them and abiding loyally by their decisions. The British courts were almost neglected and the barristers and solicitors practised at the Sinn Féin courts. Christopher Corry and Joseph Bracken acted as judges locally. The courts were held secretly and at first the police made no effort to interfere



with them, but later on they tried with all their might to destroy them. The Volunteers did duty at the courts and enforced their decrees where necessary.

In August or September, 1919, the British forces were about to collect all the arms in the country. G.H.Q., Dublin, had information about this and ordered the Volunteers to collect all the arms before the British forces could do so. We collected a number of shotguns of all descriptions, many of which were in an unserviceable condition. We got one .32 revolver from an ex R.I.C. man who was sympathetic to us. This was Mr. Donnelly of Kinnegad, and he was always very good. His premises and his horse and cart were at our disposal at any time we wanted them. We got no service weapons of any type and only a small amount of ammunition for the shotguns. The guns were placed in large wooden boxes and put into the face bank of a gravel pit. The cartridges were stored in a few selected houses where they would be taken care of. There was no necessity to resort to the use of arms during the collection of the weapons and we had not even to raid a house. The people handed up the weapons willingly when requested to do so.

A boycott of Belfast goods was now ordered by G.H.Q. as a reprisal for the acts of the Orangemen who were carrying out a pogrom against the Catholics there. We raided the shops in Raharney and Corralstown and removed all Belfast goods from them, which consisted mostly of Marsh's biscuits. This firm had a big business throughout the country in this commodity.

By now the R.I.C. had become much more aggressive around the areas/<sup>in</sup>which they were centred, and holds up and searches became an everyday feature. They arrested the 2nd Lieutenant of the Kinnegad Company, and he and a few other men from there were detained and interned. The Captain of Milltownpass Company was also arrested. They had raided my house several times by now and were looking for me, so I had to go 'on the run'. I did not leave the area, however, and slept in the houses of friendly people and at other times in haybarns or sheds.

By the end of 1920 the Black and Tan reinforcements for the R.I.C. had arrived in strength in the country and about fifteen of that force were now stationed in Kinnegad in addition to the R.I.C. On the whole they did not conduct themselves too badly and were more inclined to spend a lot of their time in the publichouses getting drunk and kicking up rows there when they got drunk. They vacated their original barracks and took over Dunne's house in the village, where they had more accommodation for their force. Dunne's was also a detached house and, therefore, lent itself more easily to fortification for defence. This place was soon a mass of barbed wire, sand bags and steel shutters.

In April, 1921, we attacked this barracks. We had no idea that we could capture the place and attacked it purely for its nuisance value and to keep the garrison on their toes and alert. I took charge of a number of Volunteers, about twenty all told. For armament we had one service rifle, a few revolvers and shotguns. We took up a position facing the barracks and fired a few shots at it. The garrison opened up with everything they had, including

Lewis guns, and expended an amount of ammunition. They sent up numerous Verey lights. Troops came out from Mullingar and also from the Curragh Camp. The troops had great trouble in getting there, as our men from the different companies had blocked the roads by felling trees across them, and they also cut the telegraph and telephone wires. Meanwhile, we had withdrawn safely according to plan. The blocking of roads and cutting communications were nightly features now on our part.

I should have mentioned previously that in September, 1920, a consignment of steel shutters arrived at the Hill of Down station for the police barracks in Kinnegad. The local postman, James Deignan, who was a Volunteer, informed me that they had arrived. That night I mobilised a party, seven Volunteers, and proceeded to the station. The station-master was sympathetic to us and he handed us over the keys of the store. We took the shutters and dumped them in the canal which runs close by the station. We used the hand trucks belonging to the railway, on which we loaded the shutters and wheeled them to the canal. They were heavy and took a lot of handling. The police or British forces never made any attempt to recover the shutters and they are still in the canal. The next consignment of shutters for Kinnegad came by road from Mullingar.

In May, 1921, two R.I.C. men from Kinnegad began to go to the bog regularly to cut turf. They were armed with revolvers. Our information from Kinnegad was that if they were held up, they would hand over their revolvers without putting up any resistance. I decided to hold them up and disarm them. I took with me Michael Fox and

Peter Kenny. I was armed with a revolver, and the other two had shotguns. This affair took place on the 21st May, 1921, and the bog was Rossan Bog near Kinnegad. We concealed ourselves on the side of the bog road, and when the two R.I.C. men came along I shouted "Hands up" and rushed out at them, firing one shot over their heads as I did so. They stopped immediately and put up their hands. I went up to disarm them. My two comrades with the shotguns remained concealed. One of the R.I.C. men seized me by the throat and, in the ensuing scuffle, I fell and the other policeman hit me on the head with a five naggin bottle he was carrying, knocking me out and opening up a big gash in my head. The men with the shotguns fired a few shots and both the policemen received pellets in their bodies. One policeman, as a result, lost the sight of one eye. The cartridges for the guns our men were using were swollen from dampness and they could not extract them to reload. My revolvers had misfired also. My companions, finding their guns unworkable, had to make their getaway.

When I recovered, I was taken to the R.I.C. barracks in Kinnegad. I was not ill-treated in any way. The military came out from Mullingar and took me to the military barracks there. I was immediately taken before an officer - I expect the Intelligence Officer - and questioned. A red cap, or military policeman, gave me a few punches and kicks when I was sitting in the cell in the guard room at this time. I was treated by the military doctor next morning, and I was then taken under escort to Dublin and placed in the George V Military Hospital. There were two Volunteer patients there at this time.

who were dying from wounds which, I think, they had got in the Kilmeena ambush. Screens were put around their beds and they were just left there to die. They got no extra attention. Both of them died during the week I arrived there.

After about a week or so in the military hospital, I was taken to the hospital in Mountjoy jail, where I remained for another fourteen days, and after that I was put in the prison proper. I was next taken to Athlone and charged with attempted murder, illegal possession of arms, robbery and so forth. A summary of evidence was taken down, the two R.I.C. men from Kinnefad being the witnesses against me. Incidentally, both of the policemen had been promoted to the rank of Sergeant for capturing me. When the summary was completed, I was taken back to Mountjoy jail. I was never tried on the charges, as the Truce came into force before I was brought before a court. While in Mountjoy, I was not treated too badly and the warders were generally alright. When in the hospital there, they used take out letters for me. I was released from prison in December, 1921, after the Treaty was signed.

In 1920 a consignment of petrol for the military arrived by rail at Mullingar railway station. The petrol was in two gallon cans. It was decided by the brigade to destroy this petrol. I was in Mullingar at a Brigade Council meeting that night and took part in the operation. About twenty of the Mullingar Volunteers took part in the affair. We went to the railway stores armed with pickaxes. There was a railway man there named Horan who was in on the affair. Each can had to be taken separately and holed by striking it with the pickaxe. We were splashed all over

with petrol and the place was reeking with petrol vapour before we were through with the job, which took a considerable time as there was a large stock of petrol. If anyone had struck a match, the whole place and us would have gone up in flames.

An ex British soldier made a mould for us with which we made slugs or buckshot, which we filled into cartridges for the shotguns. We also made some concrete land mines suitable for placing on roads for use against every transport. These were the only attempts made in the area to produce munitions.

There were no spies or informers shot in the area, and I don't think any such persons were operating. We had the usual intelligence organisation within the battalion and companies, but they were not of much use from the point of view of military intelligence. They were generally used to keep watch on people's movements who were not in sympathy with us or who were suspected of conveying information to the enemy. They also kept check on enemy movements and tabulated the regularity of enemy patrols and so forth. Every Volunteer was an intelligence agent, as it was his duty to report every incident that came to his notice. None of the R.I.C. stationed in Kinnegad was of any use to us in this respect. The post office in Kinnegad was of no use to us either, as it was run by an ex R.I.C. Sergeant who was not in sympathy with us. There was only one enemy post of importance in our area and that was Kinnegad.

There were no changes in the battalion organisation up to the time of my arrest, but there were changes subsequent to that.

Signed: James Reilly  
Date: 8<sup>th</sup> March 1957

Witness: James Honway  
(Investigator).