

ORIGINAL

BUREAU OF MILITARY HISTORY 1913-21
BURO STAIRÉ MILEATA 1913-21
No. W.S. 1600

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BUREAU OF MILITARY HISTORY, 1913-21.

STATEMENT BY WITNESS.

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Witness

Patrick Boland, ex-T.D.
Ballycumber, Tullamore,
Offaly

Identity.

Brigade Police Officer, No. 2 Offaly
Brigade, 1920-Truce.

Subject.

Activities of Offaly Brigade, I.R.A.
1918-Truce.

Conditions, if any, Stipulated by Witness.

Nil

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MR. PATRICK BOLAND, ex-T.D.

Ballycumber, Tullamore, Offaly.

Towards the beginning of the century, Sinn Féin, the Gaelic Athletic Association and the Gaelic League showed symptoms of what official sources would describe as subversive activities, or, in other words, militant nationalism.

The militant movement in Offaly may be traced to have its roots in Sinn Féin and kindred organisations. The national movement was then in its stride and led by John Redmond, with occasional deflections or disruptions in its ranks. By-elections which were contested showed a decline in support for Redmond's party and further support and encouragement to the militant elements.

With the formation of the Irish Volunteers and the country-wide support accorded to them as a counter organisation to the Ulster Volunteers and the Curragh Mutiny, recruiting meetings for the Volunteers were addressed in Tullamore by Professor Tom Kettle and Roger Casement, whose fates in the war afterwards under different circumstances were tragic in the extreme. in depriving Ireland of young men of talent. God rest the brave!

With the outbreak of World War I, things became more promising of support for the militant forces. National Volunteers recruited with enthusiasm all over, brought all national forces together and this solidarity remained until the declaration of Redmond in support of the Allies and his promise to encourage and enlist young men all over Ireland in support of that cause. The response was such as to threaten the unity of the forces so far united on Irish principles alone, but a cleavage took place. The then,

national forces divided, and such division remained until the Irish Rebellion in 1916, which turned the tide in favour of the Irish Volunteers. After the Rising the Volunteers remained steady in their efforts to form a military force, secure arms, perfect their military training and occasionally raided for arms. These activities led to conflicts with the R.I.C. and to the imprisonment of Volunteers, followed by jail escapes and hunger strikes.

The General Election of 1918 confirmed the policy of the militant movement and, finally in 1919, the Provisional Government, or, more correctly, the Government of the Republic, which had been proclaimed in the 1916 Rebellion, was re-affirmed. The Volunteers gave it their allegiance and so became the Irish Republican Army.

Activities were intensified, arms and munitions secured so as to be able to attack military patrols and convoys. Trains carrying military equipment were intercepted and raided, and military equipment secured, without any loss of life. But, later, reprisals took their toll of military forces and civilians.

Amongst the activities of the Offaly Brigade was the attack on Clara R.I.C. Barrack, with roads blocked over a radius of fifteen miles. Offaly was, at this time, organised as one brigade and men were drawn from many areas, many more than could be actually or effectively used, and a cordon was drawn on lines from Moate to Daingean and from Birr to Tyrrellspass. All military posts in the area were sniped simultaneous to the attack, thus confusing the British garrisons. The main object of the attack (the capture and destruction of the barrack) failed, owing to defective explosives, and the attack had to be called off. Two Volunteers were severely wounded - Martin Fleming and Pat Seery. Both have since died. God rest the brave!

It is not an easy matter formally to set a background on which to give an outline of the Offaly Brigade activities in the struggle for freedom. It is difficult to particularise each engagement or to mention the names of the units or personnel engaged. However, these difficulties confront any one trying to give to posterity veracious history.

Accounts have been written of attacks elsewhere on enemy forces. These accounts were the subjects of contention. Books have been written and disputed details settled by the Courts. Further, all who engaged in attacks, ambushes, etc. have been obliged to commit their activities to be scrutinised by the Pensions Board and, by faulty applications, or records or indifference or ignorance of what material was important, have been either insufficiently rewarded or had their claims dismissed.

To memorise, after a period of thirty years and more, either the important actions or the names of those who took part in them is very difficult. But I do hold that a very important action was that of the civil population who found shelter and food for the I.R.A. These people by their actions exposed themselves and their families to grave danger. To do a lonely vigil on the hillsides of the country while the I.R.A. rested, especially during the period when for such assistance the sentence was execution was taking a great risk. Such people are deserving of recognition. I doubt if many such people have either applied for or obtained the medal struck for such service.

However, early in 1920, the Offaly Brigade was formed into two self-officered brigades. Portions of Westmeath and Tipperary were included in the brigade areas. The brigades functioned as independent units afterwards.

The major engagements did not shine with the exploits

elsewhere. Partly because the county was flat country and not suitable for ambushes, and rendezvous were not at all posts available; it was also partly due to the fact that control of arms and munitions were reserved for areas where more favourable circumstances for attacks prevailed. However, I would say that road-blocking day and night did its part to embarrass the enemy. The futile endeavours of military convoys failed /to locate even a single Volunteer in "comb outs" over large areas; in such activities, horse, foot and artillery were used from daybreak to dark, and the entire population was rounded up for identification. Such actions, with an occasional snipe at a barrack and a successful raid, did much to demoralise the enemy and gave encouragement to the I.R.A. units.

I am refraining from mentioning particular activities or the names of those engaged in them. But I must leave on record the loyalty of the Irish forces to each other, their tolerance towards the civil population and their unremitting love of their country. To think of acts of courage or constancy, to give each his meed of praise is not now possible.

To the sections of Cumann na mBan a special note of praise is due. Over the years they were the liaison between the civil population and the I.R.A.

Looking around for contacts brings one across many seas and to many lands. A large number of the I.R.A. did emigrate to England, America, Australia, New Zealand and Canada. Some have since died at home and in foreign lands; those of their survivors should pay them the silent tribute of a prayer. God rest their souls!

Signed: Patrick Boland

Date: 25/2/57

Witness: Deán Brennan Lieut. Col

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