

ORIGINAL

BUREAU OF MILITARY HISTORY 1913-21

BURO STAIRE MILEATA 1913-21

No. W.S. 1632

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BUREAU OF MILITARY HISTORY, 1913-21.

STATEMENT BY WITNESS.

DOCUMENT NO. W.S. 1632.

Witness

Comdt. Michael McHugh,
33, The Rise,
Glasnevin,
Dublin.

Identity.

Vice Comdt., West Mayo Brigade, I.R.A.

Subject.

Activities of West Mayo Brigade, I.R.A., 1917-21.

Conditions, if any, Stipulated by Witness.

Nil

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ORIGINAL

BUREAU OF MILITARY HISTORY 1913-21

BURO STAIRÉ MILEATA 1913-21

No. W.S. 1,632

STATEMENT BY COMDT. MICHAEL McHUGH

33, The Rise, Glasnevin
Dublin

I was born at Castlequarter, Ballinlough, Co. Roscommon, in August 1880, and educated at the Franciscan National School at Granlahan.

My father was a farmer and was in the Fenians and, later on, the Land League.

I was sent in to Castlebar in 1898 to serve my apprenticeship at the drapery business and I resided there, except the times I was arrested, until 1923.

I joined the G.A.A. and the Gaelic League in 1900, played football with Castlebar and attended night classes to learn the Irish language. We staged a number of plays and ran some very good concerts all through the years up to 1916. The Gaelic League and G.A.A., in my opinion, had a good bearing on shaping the future actions and general outlook of the youth of Ireland regarding the coming movement.

A company of the Irish National Volunteers was formed in Castlebar in 1913 which I joined; it was then run by a committee. John Hoban took me into the I.R.B. in 1917. For a considerable time after the formation of the Volunteers they were, as I said, at first run by a committee, but junior officers were later appointed; there were no senior officers. Meetings and parades were held on six evenings in the week and I was later appointed 1st Lieut. with John Hoban as captain. On the parades there was instruction given in section, platoon and company drill, including physical training and route marches. Our parade ground was very suitable; it consisted of a big enclosed yard, one time used as a brewery, and also, we had the Mall which made an excellent parade ground..

In 1914, we got some rifles and revolvers and were given instruction in these weapons; later, we got two miniature rifles which we used for firing practice. Instruction on the rifle was usually carried out indoor and for this purpose we had the use of rooms in the Rooney Hall, which was owned by the Celtic Literary Society and all Volunteer meetings were held there.

In connection with the drilling of the Volunteers, we had four instructors - all ex-N.C.O.s. of the Connaught Rangers - but as they were all reservists they had to report to their unit when called up before the outbreak of the first world war in 1914. Two of them were outstanding as instructors their names were Tracy and Murtagh.

At the time of the split in the Volunteers, to the best of my recollection, about 75% of them went with the John Redmond section all over the country, while the remainder stayed with the Irish Volunteers. A few towns in the county had strong companies, but some were as small as sections. Very few of the rural areas had more than a platoon, but they were all very keen on their work.

No instructions whatsoever were received in Co. Mayo from G.H.Q. for the 1916 Rising and we were not even informed that the Rising was to take place. During the week there were no trains to the West and no post office messages. We had to depend solely on rumour of which there were many. Our company assembled at their H.Q. each night during Easter Week expecting some news of the Rising, but in vain, and the same situation applied to all companies in the county.

Before the 1916 Rising the only enemy armed force in the Co. Mayo was the R.I.C., but soon after the Rising a large British army force arrived and took up quarters in Castlebar, Ballina, Westport and Claremorris. There were

two military barracks in Castlebar and both were occupied, one by the Munster Fusiliers and one by a Welsh regiment, this is, to the best of my recollection.

A few days after the arrival of the British military, a number of arrests were made all over the county; the majority of those arrested were sent to camps and prisons in England, and some were released after being detained a few weeks in Richmond barracks in Dublin. Frongoch was one of the camps for internment in North Wales; the jail was Lewes. In the Castlebar area John Hoban and myself were arrested, also a few from Balla - Dick Walsh, Pat Fallon, J. Reilly and Pat Keville. We were brought to Castlebar Jail and kept there for about a week when we were taken to Richmond Barracks in Dublin and detained there for about three weeks before being released. Joe McBride and a number from Westport were also arrested. Their names I cannot remember.

I would like to mention that in Co. Mayo after the Rising the only Volunteers remaining were ourselves; the other - or Redmond's - Volunteers ceased to exist. Our training continued during the year and a number of Volunteers who took the opposite side returned to us.

In 1917, the brigade and battalions were formed. There was one brigade covering the whole county and 12 battalions. The first officers were as follows: Brigade O/C. Joseph McBride; Vice O/C. Michael McHugh; Adjutant Dick Walsh; Q.M. Michael Kilroy; M.O. Dr. McBride. Dick Walsh was also a member of the Volunteer Executive G.H.Q. Dublin.

The battalions were as follow:

Castlebar	O/C.	John Hoban
Westport	O/C.	Joe Ring
Newport	O/C.	Ml. Kilroy (acting)
Claremorris	O/C.	Pat Kenny
Ballina	O/C.	Martin Lacken (and later Tom Ruane)
Kiltimagh	O/C.	Sean Corcoran
Ballinrobe	O/C.	S. Forde (later Tom Maguire)
Swinford	O/C.	P. Gallagher
Balla	O/C.	J. Reilly

Parades and training were carried out as usual and much more time was devoted to rifle training with the small number of arms we had. The great drawback was the extreme scarcity of arms, as most of the battalions had only a few miniature rifles with which they were able to have firing practice. Later on, we purchased rifles from Dublin. I expect they were secured through G.H.Q.

On one occasion I was arrested by a party of R.I.C. under an Inspector named Horgan and released about a week later by the intervention of an army officer from the Munster Fusiliers which occupied one of the barracks in 1918. I would like to say that the rank and file of this regiment were inclined to be friendly around the town, but they were later replaced by an English regiment. As I said earlier, the other barracks was occupied by Welsh.

When the conscription scare was on there was a marked increase in our strength and better attendance was noted at all parades. All shotguns, ammunition and explosives in all the local shops and private houses were taken over by the Volunteers, also some slash hooks, hay forks or anything that could be used as a weapon for hand-to-hand fighting. A few rifles and revolvers were also got in different ways. A number were taken from soldiers home on leave and some were bought from soldiers in the barracks. The threat of conscription caused a number of people who were opposed to us to turn over and become very friendly.

There were two elections fought in 1917. Both seats were secured by Sinn Féin - Joe McGuinness in Longford, and Count Plunkett in Roscommon. Our victory was celebrated with parades, and bands, and bonfires blazed all over the county. We had a few clashes with the R.I.C. which were not of a very serious nature.

There was a general election held in 1918 and the

Volunteers had a strong representation on all the election committees in Mayo, organising and canvassing in the different areas, keeping order at all the meetings, making arrangements for the transport of voters to the polling stations, guarding the booths and escorting the ballot boxes with a constant watch until the votes were counted.

At that time, Co. Mayo was divided into four constituencies north, south, east and west. We were successful in all four, & the Sinn Fein candidates being returned in each place as follows Dr. Fearon, Wm. Sears, Eamon de Valera (who opposed John Dillon, the then leader of the Irish Parliamentary Party) and Joe McBride. Various clashes with the R.I.C. and Redmondite parties took place particularly in East Mayo, but were not of a serious nature.

In December 1919, the first Dáil was formed and the Irish Volunteers became the Irish Republican Army which ^{the} meant/taking of an oath was necessary. I administered it to the Volunteers in several companies and only two men refused to take it.

About this time a large number of R.I.C. barracks were evacuated in the outlying districts and all of these were burned down together with raids on Income Tax and Rates offices where all books, records and documents were destroyed by the Volunteers following an order from G.H.Q.. All this took place over the country during the Easter weekend 1920.

The Republican Courts under prominent Sinn Fein members were a great success in this county where the Volunteers gave every assistance possible for the successful running of them. When the Courts were established for a short time, very few, if any, cases were brought to the British Courts and; as a result, our Republican Courts were kept fairly busy. There were only a few cases where the arrest and detention of civilians by the I.R.A. took place and I'm glad to say this was only for a short period as, in most cases, it was enough

to warn them that a further offence would mean their removal to an unknown destination, a threat which had the required effect.

There were some cases of land trouble, but intervention by responsible I.R.A. officers settled these, the parties concerned being advised to wait until the bigger question was settled.

General raids for arms were held with success over the county and, in June 1920, a successful raid was held on Ballyvarry R.I.C. barracks where four rifles and one revolver were captured without any losses.

Enniscrone coastguard station was also raided and captured and seven rifles secured, again without any casualties, in a clash in Ballina between R.I.C. and I.R.A. One R.I.C. sergeant was killed.

A British army lorry broke down at a place called Beakin on the Ballyhaunis-Claremorris road. An armed guard was placed on the lorry and the rest of the party went on to Claremorris where the British military occupied the old Workhouse. Comdt. Pat Kenny and a number of Volunteers from the Beakin Company decided to attack the guard on the lorry. Unfortunately the action misfired as Kenny was shot and seriously wounded in the face and head by the accidental discharge of a shotgun from a member of his own party. He was taken away to safety and later was brought to Castlebar Infirmary where Dr. McBride gave him every attention, but it was thought to be safer to have him transferred to the Workhouse hospital as it was more enclosed. We took him there until a few days later when a boy came to me with a message from a lady to say she had seen an R.I.C. patrol around the Workhouse. The fact of the patrol did not worry me as much as the lady talking about it, as it showed she suspected something. So we had again to shift Comdt. Kenny and made arrangements to have him conveyed to

Galway Hospital. This we did the following day when I instructed a number of Volunteers to guard the different points leading out of the town and to open fire if there was any interference by the R.I.C. with the party travelling with Kenny. Everything went off very well as the party reached Galway safely, where Kenny recovered.

Arms were again purchased from G.H.Q. as the supply was very small until it improved early in 1921, but still fell short of requirements. One or two of our officers were sent across to England with a view to purchasing arms and ammunition, but they failed to secure anything worth while.

Enemy raids and arrests were becoming very frequent and a few were arrested now and again.

In September 1920, it was decided that a reorganisation should be made, so a meeting was called for Castlebar on 18th September. All the battalions were represented and there was also an officer from G.H.Q. - Eamon Price. Joseph McBride presided and the following decision was arrived at: To form four brigades for the county instead of the one that then existed. The result was as follows:

North Mayo Brigade	Tom Ruane.	O/C.
South Mayo Brigade	Tom Maguire M. O'Brien P. Fallon	O/C. Adj. Q.M.
East Mayo Brigade	Sean Corcoran Tom Ruane	O/C. Vice O/C.
West Mayo Brigade	Tom Derrig Ml. McHugh (myself) Ml. Kilroy	O/C. Vice O/C. Q.M.

Each brigade was instructed to form their own battalions immediately as, at this period, every town and parish had a company of Volunteers and this did not present any difficulty.

In November 1920, on the Monday night after Bloody Sunday, there was general raiding all over the country and in this county enemy forces consisting of military and R.I.C. arrested Dom Derrig, O/C. West Mayo Brigade, and myself, also Tom Ruane, O/C. North Mayo Brigade. Each battalion lost a number of their best officers and some of the rank and file. All were interned in the Curragh and Ballykinlar Camps until the general release in December 1921.

This disorganisation caused by the big number of officers and men who were arrested all over the country after Bloody Sunday, was a big set-back to the brigades and it took a considerable length of time to reorganise.

While I was interned, the brigade was responsible for the following activities: In May, 1921, a party of Volunteers under the command of Michael Kilroy attacked an enemy force at a place called ^MKilkeena. These were R.I.C. and Black and Tans. After a prolonged fight, three Volunteers were killed and a number wounded. Those killed were Jas. McEvelly, Tom O'Donnell, and J. Collins. One of the wounded Volunteers, P. Jordan, died shortly afterwards in hospital. One of the enemy was killed and a few were wounded. About the early part of June, a party of Volunteers under the command of Joe Ring ambushed British forces ^{AT CARROW KENNEDY.} which consisted of two lorries of R.I.C. and Black and Tans. D.I. Stevenson and three other ranks of R.I.C. were killed, and a number were wounded. There were no Volunteer casualties. All arms and equipment were captured. Another ambush took place in Carrowkennedy, where a party under Michael Kilroy attacked a large number of enemy forces. Some of the R.I.C. were captured, and after being deprived of their arms and equipment they were set free. There were no Volunteer casualties. After

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this ambush the Volunteers had to move into other areas, as the British sent large forces of military, R.I.C. and Black and Tans which made an intense scouring of the whole district in the vicinity of where the ambush took place.

For intelligence purposes, the post offices were a great source of information. I, personally, had good contacts in Castlebar, and there were also a few members of the R.I.C. who were friendly but who seldom had much to give away. Young boys were our greatest help in communications and dispatches. The Cumann na mBan were active throughout the area, especially in Castlebar where the local unit was looked after by Miss Staunton and Miss Tessie Moane, who afterwards became Mrs. McBrien.

Signed: M. McHugh

Date: June 11th 1957

Witness: J. P. S. [Signature]

(Investigator). Capt.

