

ORIGINAL

BUREAU OF MILITARY HISTORY 1913-21

BURO STAIRÉ MILEATA 1913-21

No. W.S. 1,655

ROINN



COSANTA.

BUREAU OF MILITARY HISTORY, 1913-21.

STATEMENT BY WITNESS.

DOCUMENT NO. W.S. 1655.

Witness

James Prendergast,
2, Myrtle Hill Terrace,
Tivoli,
Cork.

Identity.

Vice O/C, West Waterford Flying Column.

Subject.

'D' Coy., 3rd Battalion, West Waterford Brigade,
I.R.A., 1917 - 1922.

Conditions, if any, Stipulated by Witness.

Nil.

File No S. 2969.

Form B.S.M. 2

ORIGINAL

BUREAU OF MILITARY HISTORY 1913-21

BURO STAIRE MILEATA 1913-21

No. W.S. 1,655

STATEMENT BY JAMES PRENDERGAST

2 Myrtle Hill Terrace, Tivoli, Cork.

I was born at Carriglea, Dungarvan, Co. Waterford, . My grandparents were evicted from their farm holding at Glen-corrán, Ardmore, Co. Waterford, during the Land League struggle, but the land returned to the family again in 1911.

When the Volunteers were first started in my district (Ardmore) in 1913, I joined up, and when the split in the Volunteer movement happened in 1914, not one member of our company took the side of John Redmond; all of us sided with the Irish Volunteer leaders under MacNeill.

We were mobilised at Easter 1916, but we received no orders and nothing happened in our area. There were no arrests of Volunteers immediately following the Easter Rising.

During the years 1917-18, the activities of our company were mainly of a training nature, drilling, rifle practice and suchlike. The West Waterford Brigade, under Pax Whelan, Dungarvan, organised Volunteer companies in almost every parish. Our company was known as D/Company, 3rd Battalion. Jim Mansfield of Old Parish, Dungarvan, was the battalion commandant. We had about fifty men in D/Company; but, except for about a dozen shotguns and a revolver or two, we were woefully weak as regards arms.

In 1919, we began to become more active. Raids for shotguns and any other sort of guns we could get were made on private houses, mostly those of the so-called gentry class in the district. These raids were carried out at night by about half a dozen men or so. We were successful in getting hold of some guns, some of which were rather ancient and not of much use. Raids on postmen and mail cars were also undertaken, and correspondence addressed to police or military or, in fact, to any loyalist in the

neighbourhood, was passed to the Battalion Intelligence Officer.

Attack on Ardmore R.I.C. Barracks.

My first major engagement while serving with D/Company occurred on 17th January 1920, when we attacked Ardmore R.I.C. Barracks.

The barrack building was situated in the main street of the village. It was stone-built and two storied. There were about 12 to 15 police in the barracks on the night of the attack. In addition, I should mention that the coastguard station at Ardmore was, at that time, manned by British marines. The station was on high ground overlooking the village and about half a mile or so to the south. Jim Mansfield, the battalion commandant, was in charge of the attacking party. I cannot say what number were actually engaged, but I do know that I was one of six Volunteers posted with shotguns in houses directly opposite the barracks. I remember I was in an unoccupied licensed house owned by Flemings of Youghal. We opened the attack with a burst of shotgun fire at the barrack windows. The police immediately sent up Verey lights to summon assistance and replied to our fire with rifles and grenades. There was, I believe, another party of our lads at the rear of the barracks. They, too, 'opened up' with shotguns. Firing on both sides was going on now and again for about an hour when we received orders to "pull out" of the village. Apparently we had not sufficient arms or ammunition to press home the attack.

While the firing on the barracks was going on, another group of Volunteers surrounded the coastguard station and had a few shots at it, the idea being to keep the Marines engaged while the barrack attack was proceeding. Other parties of Volunteers were cutting telephone and telegraph wires and blocking roads in the vicinity of Ardmore and for miles around to prevent enemy reinforcements coming along from Youghal in the west, or Dungarvan in the east.

About a month after this, it was planned to make another attempt to capture the R.I.C. garrison in Ardmore. A parcel for delivery to the barracks was to be given to Hurton, the local postman. Incidentally, he was an ex-British soldier, but was now one of our Ardmore Company. Hurton was to knock on the barrack door about nine o'clock one morning (the usual time for delivery of mails) and, when the door was opened, Mick Mansfield of Oldparish, and myself, armed with revolvers, were to rush the barracks, hold up the guard and keep open the door for others of our lads, who were in houses in the vicinity since the previous night.

I remember it was a Holy Day and the people of the village were going to Mass when Hurton approached the barracks, about 9 o'clock in the morning, to hand in the parcel. The next thing we heard was a woman shouting to warn the R.I.C. inside. She was the wife of one of the constables who had, apparently, spotted us and gave the alarm. As a result, the door of the barracks was not opened and we had no option but to get out of the village as our plan had gone hopelessly astray.

Shortly after this, the building was strengthened against attack with steel shutters on the windows and barbed wire and sandbags around it.

R.I.C. disarmed near Clashmore.

About September 1920, we decided to hold up and disarm an R.I.C. sergeant and two constables who used attend the Petty Sessions Court at Clashmore, about seven miles north west of Ardmore. The police always went on bicycles and dismounted to walk up a steep hill on the Ardmore side of Clashmore. We decided to stage the hold-up at this point.

Battalion Vice-Commandant Willie Doyle of Piltown, Mick Mansfield, ... Veale of Piltown and myself, all armed with revolvers, hid in a gateway until the three R.I.C. men appeared.

We jumped out on them and ordered them to put up their hands. They did so. We took their guns, bicycles and a lot of correspondence, and got safely away.

West Waterford Flying Column formed.

About this period (October 1920) many of us were coming under the notice of the police and military and it became impossible to remain at home; as a result, a flying column, which comprised mostly men 'on the run'. George Lennon, Dungarvan, was O/C. Other first members whose names I can remember were: Paddy Lynch, Ned Kirby and 'Nipper' McCarthy, Dungarvan; Pat Keating from Comeragh, two brothers Barron from Kilmacthomas, Mick Mansfield from Old Parish, Dungarvan, and Sean Riordan, Dungarvan. I, too, was one of the first members of the column. All told, the column numbered about 17 men and, so far as I can recollect, we had, in the beginning, only one rifle (a Mauser), a few shotguns and a couple of revolvers. Our greatest need was rifles if we were to be any kind of an effective force at all. We were soon to get those much-needed rifles.

Ambush of military at Piltown.

In the latter part of October 1920, plans were laid to ambush the military at Piltown Cross which is on the main Youghal-Dungarvan road and at a road junction leading also to Ardmore. The proposed ambush position was about two miles east of Youghal and six miles north of Ardmore. The general plan was that a party of Volunteers would enter the village of Ardmore at night and open fire on the barracks, giving the impression that a full-scale attack was on. The telephone wires from Ardmore to Youghal were to be left intact to allow the R.I.C. to 'phone Youghal military barracks for assistance. A relieving enemy force coming out from Youghal by lorry would have to pass our ambush position at Piltown Cross and there they would be attacked by the column.

On the night of 1st November 1920, we took up ambush positions at Piltown Cross. In all, we had about 18 men under the command of George Lennon. All were armed with either shotguns or revolvers. The column was divided into three sections. The main body was on the north side of the Cross; the two other sections were on the south and west sides.

At about 9 o'clock, the mock attack on Ardmore barracks began. We could hear the firing and see the Verey lights being sent up from the R.I.C. barracks. Meanwhile, we had been trying to cut a trench across the road to stop any military lorries coming from Youghal. We did not make a good job of this due to the tough road surface and the passing traffic, which impeded the work.

At about 11 o'clock, Vice-Commandant Willie Doyle, who was some distance away on top of a telegraph pole, reported that he had seen lights going on in Youghal military barracks as if the enemy was astir. At about 11.30, our scouts reported that a military lorry was on its way from Youghal and was approaching our position. The lorry came along and, as it reached the trench (which incidentally failed to stop it) we 'opened up' on it with a burst of shotgun fire. My position was directly over the lorry and inside a clay fence. I was armed with a shotgun. Our first burst of fire killed the driver and the lorry stopped. The order was then given to us to "cease fire". The Tommies were screaming and firing indiscriminately. The night was pitch dark. I shouted out to the military to "get out and surrender" at the same time jumping out on to the road and again shouting to the soldiers to "fall in". While this was happening, some of our lads again opened fire and I had to throw myself flat on the road, shouting "Cease fire, Cease fire". The firing stopped. I again ordered the military to "fall in" which they did.

Pat Keating of Comeragh next came out to the road and the two of us ordered any soldiers who were wounded to "fall out". About a dozen did so. I began to look for the military officer in charge and after some time he came out on to the road. It appears that he was in the cab with the driver and, when the latter was killed, the officer jumped from the cab and in over the ditch amongst some of our lads who did not recognise him in the darkness and the excitement. He lay there until his men surrendered. I took from him a Webley revolver and his Sam Browne belt.

In the meantime, the whole column had come out on to the road and were taking the rifles, ammunition and equipment from the soldiers. The military party were from the 2nd Hampshire Regiment. It comprised a captain, a lieutenant and about 25 other ranks. In addition, there were two R.I.C. men named O'Neill and Prendiville with the military, presumably acting as guides. These two men, after being disarmed, were taken a short distance up the Clashmore road and told they would be shot unless they gave their word to resign from the R.I.C. This they promised to do and were thereupon released.

The night previous to this, it was decided that if we should capture a military officer in the ambush, we would hang him as a reprisal for Kevin Barry who was to be hanged in Mountjoy Jail that same day (1st November 1920). We discussed this matter when we had the captain of the Hampshires as prisoner, but, as news of Kevin Barry's execution had not reached us, we decided not to proceed with the hanging of the British officer.

After the ambush, the military secured a farmer's dray and brought their dead and wounded into Youghal. We suffered no casualties.

When all the captured arms were got together we got into the military lorry and proceeded in the direction of Ardmore with the intention of attacking the barracks there. We had gone only a short distance, however, when the lorry broke down and, as we failed to restart it, we decided to abandon the idea of going to Ardmore. The column then moved north-west to the Aglish district and thence to the Comeragh area where we went into billets.

With regard to the two policemen captured at Piltown Cross: when O'Neill returned to Youghal, he took off his uniform, said he was finished with the R.I.C. and walked out. The other constable, Prendiville, did not resign as he had promised to do, but, about two weeks later, when bringing a pension payment to the caretaker at the Youghal Bridge, who lived in a house at the Waterford end of the bridge, and who raised the bridge for the passage of boats, he (Prendiville) was shot dead from the high ground overlooking the bridge, by men of the column.

Some time after the Piltown ambush, I learned that an invitation to come in to Youghal and have a drink was extended to me by some military officers in Youghal. I understand that they wished to show their appreciation of my treatment of their prisoners who, I had said, would not be harmed. I remember also telling these same prisoners that we expected they, too, should treat, in a similar fashion, any of our lads who might be captured by them.

Following the Piltown ambush, we remained in the Comeragh district for several weeks where we received intensive training in the use of the rifle by John Riordan from Dungarvan, a member of the column and an ex-British soldier. Every man in the column was supplied with a rifle now and each man had about 200 rounds of rifle ammunition.

Ambush at Metal Bridge, Tramore.

Early in the month of January 1921, we were informed by the East Waterford Brigade that they intended to stage an ambush near the town of Tramore, Co. Waterford. They asked for assistance from our West Waterford column. On the night of 7th January 1921, about 20 of us proceeded in motor cars to the vicinity of Tramore where we left our cars and walked to the scene of the proposed ambush at the Metal Bridge. This bridge spans the main Waterford-Tramore road and is about a mile east of the latter town. We were all armed with rifles, and George Lennon, the column commander, was in charge.

When we reached the Metal Bridge we were placed in positions on high ground overlooking the road on the Tramore side of the bridge. The East Waterford men were in positions on the Waterford side of the bridge. Two of our men were detailed to throw bombs at the R.I.C. barracks in Tramore to give the impression that an attack was intended. As the telephone line to Waterford was left untouched by our lads, it was anticipated that the garrison in Tramore barracks would 'phone for assistance to the military in Waterford. The relieving troops coming out from Waterford would then be ambushed at the Metal Bridge.

Pakeen Whelan and Pat Keating from our party went in to Tramore and threw a few bombs at the barracks, while we waited for the military to come out from Waterford. About half an hour later, we heard the noise of lorries approaching, and, before they reached the Metal Bridge, fire was opened on them by the East Waterford men. Apparently, the military then left the lorries at the Waterford side of the bridge, because all I remember seeing was two empty lorries with a driver in each coming under the bridge. We opened fire on the drivers and the lorries stopped.

Meanwhile, the action was proceeding on the other side of the Metal Bridge, but we could see nothing on our side. After about half an hour of intermittent firing (all of it on the Waterford side of the Bridge) the order was given to us to 'pull out' and retreat. This we did, picking up our cars about two miles to the west. We then returned to billets in the Comeragh district.

Attack on troops at Cappagh Railway Station.

In the month of February 1921, the column moved to Cappagh, which is midway between Cappoquin and Dungarvan, for the purpose of attacking a military escort on a train conveying jurors to the Waterford Assizes, about which we had prior information. We arrived at Cappagh railway station in the forenoon and I was detailed to take charge of a party from the column whose job was to take up the railway tracks at the station, so that the train we expected would pull up there and so give us a better chance to engage the enemy. Before we had succeeded in our task, a pilot engine came along and the driver and fireman shouted to us that the military were following in a train just behind. We hurriedly got into positions overlooking the station, and, when the train arrived, we opened heavy fire on soldiers who were on the footplate of the engine and also in the guard's van. We wounded some of the military, but the train gathered speed and went on in the direction of Durrow where the military were again attacked by others of our lads in that district.

We again pulled back in to the Comeragh Mountains and lay low for about a month. Again we went to Durrow to attack the escort on a jurors' train, but, although we waited two or three hours at Durrow nothing turned up. We later learned that the British had given up the idea of taking jurors to Waterford by train; they now travelled by lorries escorted by military with an armoured car.

The column now disbanded for about a month with the exception of George Lennon, O/C., Paddy Joe Power, Pat Keating and myself. We were constantly on the watch for any troops coming out from Waterford to snipe at them. One night, when the other three were asleep, I was awake and saw a large force of military advancing along the railway line towards where we were. I called to the others and we opened fire on the soldiers. They replied vigorously, but as they couldn't see us, we were quite unharmed. We wounded about seven of them and then, as we were outnumbered 50 to 1, we retreated to Comeragh.

Not long after this, the column was at full strength again. We marched across the Nire to Ballymullala, about 4 or 5 miles north west of Dungarvan, and, having received word that British troops were on their way from Fermoy to Dungarvan, decided to attack them in the vicinity of Cappagh. We were lined along inside a ditch when a large lorry with about 50 soldiers came along from the Fermoy direction. I happened to be the last man on the southern end of our line of attack. I emptied my rifle into the lorry of troops as it passed and then retreated, as previously instructed. When crossing a fence, a machine gun from the military lorry opened up on me, hitting a wooden stake beside me and cutting through my trench coat. Our main party had pulled back to Ballymullala, leaving me alone. They had gone a distance of about a mile in that direction when they missed me and decided to return again. I picked them up and went on with them to Ballymullala where we lay low for a week or so.

Attack on military at The Burgery, Dungarvan.

It was on the eve of St. Patrick's Day 1921, when the column, numbering about 18 men, moved near to the town of Dungarvan. It had been reported that a lorry of troops would be leaving Dungarvan to go to a military outpost at

Sir Charles Nugent Humble's house, about $1\frac{1}{2}$ miles to the north east of the town and on the main Dungarvan-Waterford road. To attack this lorry on its return to Dungarvan the column moved at night to within half a mile of the town to a district known as The Burgery. This is roughly midway between Humble's place and Dungarvan town. Our positions were behind the ditch lining the road at the Burgery. At that time, George Plunkett, a G.H.Q. officer, was down with us on inspection duty. He came with us to the Burgery that night. George Lennon, O/C of the column, was also present. It was arranged that Lennon, Ned Kirby, Paddy Joe Power and I would open the attack. We were armed with rifles and I had, in addition, one Mills grenade. About 11.30 on the night of 18th March 1921, the first British lorry came along (our information was that one lorry only had left Dungarvan earlier in the evening, but we encountered two returning). Lennon, Kirby and Paddy Joe Power opened up on it with rifles and I threw the grenade which failed to explode. The military drove on for about 300 yards in the direction of Dungarvan and then stopped. The soldiers then got out and came back the road towards us. We allowed them to approach to about 100 yards, when we opened rifle fire on them. They got down on to the road and replied to our fire with rifles. We then jumped over the fence and advanced down the road towards the enemy. They got up and ran towards Dungarvan while we followed and continued firing at them. Finally, they got into a small field off the road. We called on them to surrender. They did so. The military party who surrendered consisted of five private soldiers, an officer named Captain Thomas, and an R.I.C. sergeant named Hickey. The officer, soldiers and R.I.C. man were disarmed and released, but Hickey was taken prisoner. Early the following morning, after having been tried by courtmartial, Hickey was

executed. This man had received several warnings to cease his activities against the I.R.A. He was prominent in pointing out lads all over the county and identifying I.R.A. prisoners who would, otherwise, be unknown to the military.

While we were engaged as I have described, our main body made contact with another Crossley tender full of soldiers. The latter, when heavily attacked with rifle fire by our lads, ran helter-skelter from the Crossley and scattered in the darkness all over the countryside. The two military cars were then set on fire.

The whole affair finished about half an hour after midnight. We then moved out of the Burgery district and pulled back to Kilbrien, about eight miles to the north west.

At about 4 o'clock on the morning of 19th March 1921, eight of us returned to the scene of the ambush, on Plunkett's instructions. His intention was to reconnoitre the position in the hope of picking up rifles which might have been thrown away by some of the soldiers during their efforts to escape the previous night. So far as I can remember, the eight men were (in addition to Plunkett) - George Lennon, Jim and Mick Mansfield, Mick Shalloe, Kelly Donovan, Sean Fitzgerald, Pat Keating and myself. We all carried rifles. We were advancing in open formation across a big field adjacent to the Main Burgery road when, quite suddenly and unexpectedly, we came under heavy fire from soldiers and Black and Tans who were out on the road and who, apparently, saw us crossing the field. We immediately dropped to the ground and fired in reply. One Tan who showed himself at a gatepost was hit and fell dead. Pat Keating was badly wounded and Sean Fitzgerald was shot dead. There was nothing we could do in the circumstances but retreat. This we did, firing as we went. We brought Pat Keating out of the field and to a farmer's house about $1\frac{1}{2}$ miles distant.

Dr. Hackett was contacted and came out to attend him, but nothing could be done; the wound in the stomach was too serious, and Pat died at 5 o'clock that evening.

Owing to the activity of the British, we had to go back to the farmer's house that night and remove Pat's body. We buried him temporarily in the Comeragh mountains. Later, his remains were interred in his native Kilrossanty. Pat was Commandant of the Comeragh battalion and a most courageous fighting man.

After the Burgery ambush, the column retired north-west to the hilly country around Kilbrien, when it was decided to disband for a few weeks owing to increasing enemy efforts to trap us.

I returned to Ardmore for a short while where I instructed the local units in the rifle and on guerilla tactics generally. We sniped the British Marines in the coastguard station periodically, just to keep them under strain. On one occasion, a party of these Marines were on patrol duty in the vicinity of Piltown Cross at a place called Monatrea when they surprised three Volunteers and myself who were unaware they were so near. We dispersed and came under fire from the Marines as a result of which one of our party, a boy named Quain, was fatally wounded.

The column was mobilised again in April 1921, and for a considerable period operated in the Comeragh mountain area. From the comparative safety of the mountains, raids were made on enemy convoys and troop trains. On one occasion, four of us - George Lennon, Paddy Joe Power, myself and another man, whose name I have forgotten, were in the vicinity of Kilmacthomas when we learned that a troop train was due to pass. We proceeded to a railway crossing at Ballylinch, a few miles from Kilmacthomas, and got under cover nearby. We had scarcely got into position when the train arrived.

We opened up rapid fire with rifles on soldiers on the foot-plate of the engine and in the carriages. The military returned the fire, wounding Paddy Joe Power in the neck, but not too seriously. The train proceeded on its journey without a stop. I cannot say whether we caused any casualties or not.

As an instance of our activities in the first half of the year 1921, I would refer to a raid with which I was associated in West Waterford and which had a rather humorous ending.

We received information that British officers from Waterford city visited a private house at Annestown, Co. Waterford, owned by Croker's, the publishing firm in Waterford. Four of us, armed with revolvers, called to this house between 7 and 8 o'clock one night and saw through a window four British officers having dinner. We rushed in and held them up. They complied with the "hands up" order whereupon we took their four revolvers. As we were leaving, one of the officers - a colonel - asked me would I like a drink. I said "yes". The four of us had a few drinks which continued for about an hour. The officers then asked us for a song and one of our lads went to the piano and obliged with the popular British army song: "There's a long, long trail a-winding". We then bade the officers goodnight and left.

A day or so before the Truce of 11th July 1921, I was with the column at Millstreet, Co. Waterford, from where we moved to Ballinamult in the Knockmealdown Mountains. We billeted in farmhouses in the locality. About 4 o'clock in the evening, one of our scouts reported the presence of a British mobile column in Millstreet which we had just left. We "stood to arms" and, later that evening, discovered that the British column had billeted opposite us on the other

side of the glen. We learned that they were going to Clonmel the following morning. Because of the Truce, which was to take effect at 12 o'clock (midday) the following day, it was decided not to attack the enemy force.

When the Truce came I attended an officers' training camp and, when the British evacuated Ballinacourty coastguard station, Co. Waterford, I 'took over' with a party of I.R.A. Later, in 1922, the column took over the infantry barracks in Waterford city. I was O/C. of this barracks when it was attacked by Free State troops in 1922.

Before concluding, I would like to record a tribute to the following comrades of mine in the West Waterford Column: Commandant Pat Keating (R.I.P.), Mick Mansfield, Sean Riordan and Mick Shalloe. These men proved themselves loyal and fearless comrades, often against vastly superior enemy forces. I have no hesitation in saying that they were principally responsible, both by their actions and example, for any successes achieved against the enemy by the West Waterford Brigade, I.R.A.

Signed: James Pendergast
Date: 24 July 1957

Witness: A. Gorman

