

ORIGINAL

BUREAU OF MILITARY HISTORY 1913-21

BURO STAIRE MILITARIA 1913-21

No. W.S. 1675

ROINN



COSANTA.

BUREAU OF MILITARY HISTORY, 1913-21.

STATEMENT BY WITNESS.

DOCUMENT NO. W.S. 1675.

Witness

Jos. O'Shea,
76, Great William O'Brien St.,
Cork.

Identity.

Capt., 'E' Coy., 1st Battn., Cork 1 Brigade.

Subject.

'E' Coy., 1st Battn., Cork No. 1 Brigade,
I.R.A., 1916 - 1921.

Conditions, if any, Stipulated by Witness.

Nil.

File No S. 290.

Form B.S.M. 2

ORIGINAL

BUREAU OF MILITARY HISTORY 1913-21

BURO STAIRE MILEATA 1913-21

No. W.S. 1675

STATEMENT BY JOSEPH O'SHEA,

76 Great William O'Brien Street, Cork.

I continued as a member of D. Company, Cork City Battalion, Irish Volunteers, from the time of the Easter Rising, 1916, until about the month of July of that year when I got employment as a trimmer on board one of the boats owned by the City of Cork Steampacket Company, which plied between Cork, London and Liverpool. It would be about the same time when I was sworn in as a member of the Irish Republican Brotherhood by Fred Murray, an officer in the Cork city Volunteers.

I was not very long on the boats until I was asked to smuggle aboard a Kerry Volunteer, named, so far as I can remember, O'Riordan, from Firies. He was, at the time, wanted by the British authorities in connection with the shooting of an R.I.C. man in Kerry. I got O'Riordan across to Liverpool safely, and brought him to Peter Murphy's house and shop in Scotland Road, Liverpool. I believe that Peter Murphy secured O'Riordan a passage to the U.S.A. I first met O'Riordan in the Volunteer Hall, Sheares Street, Cork, where Seán Murphy, Battalion Quartermaster, introduced me to him, and gave me instructions about taking him to Liverpool.

The house of Peter Murphy in Scotland Road, Liverpool, was a rendezvous for Lancashire Volunteers and those associated with the Sinn Féin movement in that county of England. I had occasion to visit him often there, on Volunteer business. Other very

active I.R.A. men in Liverpool and district whom I met were Neil Kerr, - Fitzgerald, Jim Moran, John Sullivan, Joe Duffy, Steve Lanigan, - Harrington, and the brothers King from the Bootle district of Liverpool.

I was at sea until November, 1917, and, during that time, was able to get over to Cork quite a good quantity of ammunition. On one occasion, a case of sporting ammunition, consigned to a British army officer in Cork, was put aboard our boat at Liverpool. I was able to hide it aboard, and, when we docked in Cork, I got it ashore safely and handed it over to our lads.

On another occasion, we had a case of .303 rifle ammunition aboard, bound for Cork. I broke open the case, took the ammunition in small lots, and hid it on board the ship. When we got to Cork, I took the stuff ashore, and passed it on to the sister-in-law of Tomás MacCurtain. The latter was then O/C of the Cork City Volunteers. We got about one thousand rounds, in all.

Apart from the two instances I have mentioned, I was successful in getting across from Liverpool small lots of ammunition, picked up from time to time by the Liverpool Volunteers, until I left my job on the boats in November, 1919, and returned to work in Cork.

I got in touch again with D. Company in Cork. Daithí Cotter was Company Captain, with Chris Gorman. Cotter was actually our drill instructor, and Chris Gorman was, to all intents and purposes, regarded as the captain.

We had about one hundred and fifty men in D. Company at that time (late 1917). Con Collins was

1st Lieutenant, and Freddy Murray, 2nd Lieutenant.
Liam Rabbitt was Adjutant.

A reorganisation of the Cork City Volunteers took place in January 1918. I am not definite about the date, but I think it was in January, or very early in the year, 1918. D. Company was split up into four companies, viz., C., D., E. and F., of the newly-formed 1st Battalion. Prior to this, there was only one battalion of Volunteers in Cork city. My new Company now became E. Company, 1st Battalion, Cork No. 1 Brigade.

The officers of E. Company at that time were: Captain - Chris Gorman; 1st Lieutenant - Seán Kenny; 2nd Lieut. - Con Connell. We had about sixty men in the company. Our headquarters was in the Sinn Féin hall in Watercourse Road, Blackpool, Cork, and we drilled usually in the open country in the Ballyvonane district. The company area covered, roughly speaking, the district from the North Cathedral to Murphy's brewery and Killeens, on one side, to Dublin Hill bridge, on the other side. This territory lay north of the river Lee, as did all the 1st Battalion area.

When E. Company was established in 1918, the arms position could only be described as very bad. We had a few revolvers and little else. There was, however, a section of Volunteers attached to our company, in the adjoining Killeens district. It was small in numbers at first, but gradually improved until it comprised upwards of thirty members. These (Killeens) men, being many of them farmers' sons, or at least belonging to the farming community, had quite a few shotguns. Killeens lies about three miles outside

the city, and is north-east of Blackpool.

During the years, 1918 and 1919, the Company was engaged principally in organising, drilling and general training. With other Volunteer companies in the city, we took part in the general election of December 1918, stewarding meetings held by the Sinn Féin candidates, and generally helping them in fighting the election.

During this period, we experimented with the making of bombs. These we made in an outhouse at Green Lane, Blackpool. We procured empty cocoa tins or small paint tins which were filled with cement and bits of steel, and iron and pieces of gelignite, with fuse attached to a detonator. The bomb was exploded by inserting a long nail in a cap fitted to the tin, and striking the nail sharply. The nail broke a small bulb filled with sulphuric acid, which set fire to the fuse and caused an explosion. This is a rough description of what was a very crude bomb. Quite a few of them were made, not without great danger to those engaged on the job. So far as I am aware, these bombs were never used in action against the enemy.

Early in 1918, a quantity of pikes were made for possible use against the enemy. These were turned out in Pa McGrath's forge in Morgan Street, Cork, by Michael Bowles, a blacksmith, and an officer in C. Company, 1st Battalion. It is of interest to record that the same Pa McGrath was elected Lord Mayor of Cork in 1956, and was also a member of Dáil Eireann. He died while in office as Lord Mayor. Referring to the pikes, it should be stated that they were never

used by any of us, and I cannot say what became of them.

About October 1919, I again went over to Liverpool, and was working there on the docks. I was in Murphy's of Scotland Road, Liverpool, one night, when I met a man named O'Rourke from Dundalk, Co. Louth, who had come in off an American ship called the "Indianapolis". He told me about ammunition which was on his ship, and said if I wanted it, I could have it, meaning, of course, that he would arrange for me to take the stuff. I agreed, and went with him to the ship. I was going to and from the "Indianapolis" every day for a whole week at least, and brought out the ammunition (American rifle type) in canvas bandoliers, to Peter Murphy's of Scotland Road. I got a couple of thousand rounds in all. This rifle ammunition was all sent on to Dublin subsequently. In addition, I got some revolver ammunition, not a lot; this I sent direct to Cork by a seaman on a boat, working between Liverpool and Cork. I returned again to Cork in December, 1919.

During the year 1919, we started raiding for arms in houses where we had reason to believe there was a gun. I cannot say that we increased our meagre supply of arms very much, as a result of these raids. In fact, we got very little from them. It was customary for four or five men to take part in the raids, one or two of whom would be armed with a revolver.

Abortive Attempt to raid Ballyquirke Aerodrome:

It was, so far as I remember, late in December of 1919 when I was one of a party of Cork City Volunteers who went out to Ballyquirke Aerodrome, Killeagh, Co. Cork, with the intention of holding up and disarming the British military guard there. The aerodrome at Ballyquirke is about fifteen miles east of Cork city, and about five miles west of Youghal.

About four men from each of the companies in the 1st Battalion cycled out to Killeagh at night, and approached the vicinity of the aerodrome about 11 p.m. We were armed, some with revolvers, and some with special life preservers. The latter were to be used to knock out the military sentries before they could give the alarm. Our instructions were to fire no shots, if at all possible. The job was to be carried out silently, so as to take the sleeping soldiers by surprise. With us that night were men from the Cobh company under Mick Leahy, Commandant of the 4th Battalion, Cork No. 1 Brigade, in which area Killeagh was situated. When we left the main Cork-Killeagh-Youghal road to go to Ballyquirke, the main road was blocked by other men from the 4th Battalion, in order to prevent enemy reinforcements coming up on us. Dando (Dan) Donovan, O/C, 1st Battalion, and Tom Crofts, also a 1st Battalion officer were there with us that night.

We were in positions adjacent to the aerodrome from midnight until about two or three o'clock in the morning when we received orders to withdraw, and get back to Cork. We learned later that Terry MacSwiney who was to take charge of the operation, was

proceeding to Killeagh in a motor car in which were some rifles, when the driver was misdirected, on enquiring the road to Ballyquirke, with the result that he took the wrong road and failed to reach our party at the time appointed. As time went on and early morning was approaching without any sign of Terry turning up, it was decided, possibly by Dando Donovan and Mick Leahy, that the job should be called off.

Early in the year 1920, about a half a dozen men from each company in the battalion received orders to shoot R.I.C. men who, at that time, usually stood, armed, in groups at different street corners in the city. I was one of those from E. Company selected for the purpose. We were to attack the R.I.C. with revolvers. This order was suddenly countermanded by, I believe, G.H.Q. in Dublin, who, so far as I can recollect, gave the order to attack in the first instance.

Some time early in February 1920, I happened to be crossing Parnell Place, Cork, when I chanced to meet Florrie O'Donoghue, the Brigade Intelligence Officer. He detailed me and a Volunteer named Mark Wickham to keep watch on the house of an enemy agent, and, if he showed up, we were to follow him and keep him under observation. We were to carry revolvers and, if our suspect went to the Great Southern railway station to board a train, we were to shoot him. While we watched the house, our man failed to make an appearance, and, after some hours on duty, we were relieved by two other Volunteers who continued the watch. The enemy agent did not show up on this occasion, but, a few nights later, on 25th February 1920, he was picked up by men of our 2nd Battalion and executed. His name was

Quinlisk.

Attack on Blarney Barracks:

On the night of 3rd June 1920, I was one of a party of about thirty-five men from the 1st Battalion, Cork No. 1 Brigade, which attacked the R.I.C. barracks at Blarney, Co. Cork.

Blarney is six miles west of Cork city, and about four miles from Ballincollig. In Ballincollig military barracks were strong forces of enemy foot and armoured units. In Blarney itself, the barracks had a garrison of eight R.I.C. men and a sergeant. The building was not in an isolated position. It stood between the courthouse and Smith's hotel. It was two-storeyed, with loop-holed walls and steel shutters, with sandbag defences.

On the evening of 3rd June 1920, in company with Sean Kenny and Maurice Forde of E. Company, I went to Killeens, just outside the city, where, with other men of the attacking party, we awaited the transport to bring us to Blarney. About 9 p.m., a van, which was commandeered from a garage in Cork city, came along and took about six of us close to Blarney village. I think there were five vans and a large private car used by our lads to get out to Blarney that night. All these vehicles were commandeered in Cork. We were armed with shotguns, rifles, revolvers and Mills grenades. I carried a revolver and grenades.

The plan of attack was: a few of our lads would drive up to Smith's hotel near closing time (for the bar) at 10 p.m., and, having entered the hotel, get the occupants into a place of safety, before laying the

explosive charge which they brought out in the car with them. The explosive would be laid against the wall dividing the public bar in the hotel from the barracks. It was hoped to blow a breach sufficiently large to enable us to get through and into the barracks.

Meanwhile, our lads were stationed in houses and at points opposite the barracks, to open fire with shotguns and rifles when the explosion went off. The idea was to give covering fire to those of us who were to rush into the hotel, the explosion being the signal. I was stationed with a few others at the corner of the Square in Blarney, and about twenty yards from the front of the barracks, with instructions to rush across into the hotel when the explosion occurred, and enter the barracks by the breach in the wall.

At 10 p.m., or very shortly after, there was a terrific explosion inside Smith's hotel. Immediately, our lads opened up with rifle and shotgun fire on the front of the barracks, and I dashed across the street into the hotel with others of our fellows. When we got inside, there was nothing but dust and smoke; bricks, broken glass and plaster were falling in all directions. For some time, it was impossible to see, or be seen. Eventually, when the dust cleared a bit, it was noticed that the wall dividing us from the barracks was not breached at the point where the explosion was laid, although a large portion of the wall had, in fact, been blown away. I understand that the reason for this was that the explosive our fellows had laid blew in the dividing wall at a point where a cross-wall joined the side wall, and against which two corner fireplaces had been built. We had, by sheer bad luck, attacked an

almost solid block of masonry, the strongest in the building.

When the failure to breach the dividing wall became evident, the officer in charge of our party, Dan (Sando) Donovan, O/C of the 1st Battalion, gave the order to get away, and a signal was given to all our lads outside, to pull out of the village immediately. We of the attacking party made for the cars which were ready, outside the village, and were brought to the outskirts of Cork, at Whites Cross, where we abandoned the cars and went on foot, in small groups, the rest of the way to the city.

In connection with this attack on Blarney barracks, there were upwards of four hundred men on protective duty, felling trees and raising obstructions on the numerous roads leading to the village from Cork and Ballincollig. One road only was left free of obstacles, to allow our cars to return after the attack. Enemy reinforcements did, in fact, leave Cork and Ballincollig that night. Some of these were engaged by our protection parties, and their advance halted. All of our lads escaped from the net which the enemy was drawing around the area.

Although the attempt to capture Blarney barracks was not a success, the damage done to the building was of such a serious nature that it was evacuated the following day, and was burned by the Blarney company of I.R.A. the same evening. A dangerous enemy post had been removed, and a vital link in our communications with the battalions north-west of the city of Cork was cleared.

Raids on Trains at Rathpeacon:

On a night in June 1920, the mail train was held up at Rathpeacon, which is about two miles north of the city, on the Mallow road. Dan (Sando) Donovan and Tom Crofts, Vice O/C of the 1st Battalion, were in charge of the operation. A very large number of men (about half of the 1st Battalion) were engaged, amongst whom were men from companies in the Rathpeacon and adjoining districts. I, with five men from E. Company took part. We were armed with revolvers, as were others who were engaged in the actual hold-up. The majority of our lads were blocking roads and acting as a covering screen, in case enemy patrols were in the vicinity.

When the train arrived in Rathpeacon, we boarded it, and took away the mails. There were no troops on the train, as it happened. The bags of mails were taken by car to a cottage at Tubbereenmire, about six miles north-west of Cork city, where they were censored.

At a later period (May 1921), I was in charge of a party of about thirty men who again held up the mail train at Rathpeacon, at night. We were armed with revolvers. We took over the signal-box at the station, and put the signals against the train as it was approaching. We then backed the train into a siding, and proceeded to search it. There were two soldiers aboard, but they were unarmed, and were not interfered with by us.

On the train were six cases of searchlight apparatus, consigned to the military. We took these away by car, and conveyed them to a safe destination. The train was then allowed to proceed.

On this occasion also, it was necessary to have a large covering party, all armed, as the point at which this train was held up was close to the main Cork-Mallow road which, at this period, was in constant use by enemy forces. The rail service in this area was also being used extensively by the British. All of our lads got safely away without encountering any opposition.

Arrest of James O'Gorman:

In July 1920, I received information that a Black and Tan, named James O'Gorman, was in Cork city. This man was suspected of complicity in the murder of two I.R.A. men named Dwyer of The Ragg, near Thurles, Co. Tipperary, and it was understood that he was leaving Cork for England by boat. I received instructions to watch for this man and take him prisoner.

On an evening in July, following receipt of a report from our intelligence service, I went, with five others from E. Company, to Penrose Quay, Cork. We were armed with revolvers. In due course, O'Gorman came along, obviously going to the Cork Steampacket Company's boat which was sailing for England that same evening. I held him up and, with the others, put him into a motor car which we had ready nearby. He was brought to the Kilcully district, north of the city, where he was kept in a house, under armed guard, for a few days. He was then taken by car to Knockraha in East Cork where he was executed.

Destruction of "Cork Examiner" Office, Cork.

On a night late in December 1920, the premises of the newspaper known as the "Cork Examiner" at Patrick St., Cork, was entered by about ten men (engineers) from 1st Battalion, and the printing plant smashed up. This particular paper had been publishing information adverse to our movement and the brigade gave instructions to have action taken to stop this.

The "Examiner" premises was situated in the city centre where enemy armed forces were on constant patrol. As a cover for our men engaged in the demolition of the property plant, I and eleven men from E/Company, all armed with revolvers, took up positions in groups of two in the immediate vicinity of the "Examiner" office. We were careful to keep out of sight of passing enemy patrols. After about 20 minutes or so, the engineers left the premises, having completed the job. My party then disappeared down side-streets and all got safely away without arousing the slightest suspicion. The raid had a salutary effect on the proprietors of the newspaper in question.

General Activities.

Before my arrest in May 1921, E/Company, of which I was appointed captain in November 1920, carried out activities of a very varied nature against enemy forces in Cork. Raids on mails were of frequent occurrence, postmen being held up and letters taken away for censoring. Anything found of interest to our intelligence service was passed on to the battalion intelligence officer. Raids on railway premises for military stores were carried out. Petrol lorries were held up and large quantities of petrol captured. At Monard, on the Mallow road, seven of us from E/Company, armed with revolvers, held up a lorry and seized 400 two-gallon tins of petrol. This was brought by horse and car to Killeens on the Blarney Road where

it was placed in a dump for use by the brigade. This job took us all night to complete.

On various occasions we waited in ambush for military and Black and Tan patrols. On one such occasion, about fifteen of us, armed with revolvers, rifles and grenades, remained all night on the alert in the house of Miss Peg Duggan (a prominent member of Cumann na mBan), 49 Thomas Davis St. Cork. We had received word from the brigade that a reprisal attack by enemy forces was anticipated on the house of the late Tomas McCurtain, former Lord Mayor of Cork, and Brigadier of the Cork Brigade, who was murdered in his home by an R.I.C. murder gang in March 1920. Miss Duggan's house was almost opposite that of the late Tomas McCurtain. The family of the latter still resided in the murdered Lord Mayor's house. We waited all night for the coming of enemy forces, but they failed to put in an appearance and we withdrew from Peg Duggan's the following morning.

Referring again to the murder of Tomas McCurtain, three nights after the occurrence in March 1920, I and 16 other men from E/Company formed an armed guard in the house where Mrs. McCurtain and her family feared another visit from the police. The latter did not return.

A further feature of the company's activities was the provision of dumps for weapons, ammunition, explosives and other items which might prove useful in the fight.

An important dump was located on the premises of Messrs. Harrington, Goodlass, Wall Ltd., Paint, Oil and Chemical Merchants, Commons Road, Cork. This dump was "created" in 1918, and continued until 1923. It contained explosive materials (procured mainly on the premises) such as nitric acid, acetone, patent turpentine, yellow phosphorus, guncotton, manganese and other material used by the brigade for the manufacture of explosives.

A further dump was made in 1920 on the lands of Bernard Casey, Killeens. It continued until 1923. This contained revolvers, rifles, bombs and explosive materials.

Another dump in E/Company area contained motor cars, petrol and engineering material. This was a brigade dump and, in common with the two previously mentioned, was under the care of E/Company men all through the struggle.

In May 1921, my home was raided at night by British military and my brother John (also a member of E/Company) and myself were taken to Cork military barracks. After some time there I was removed to Cork Gaol and from that to Spike Island. Following a mutiny of I.R.A. prisoners in Spike, during which we broke up anything breakable in the place, I was transferred with others to Maryboro' Gaol. I was kept in Maryboro' until the general release of prisoners in January 1921, when I returned again to Cork.

Signed: Joseph O'Shea.

Date: 16 September 1957

Witness: 

