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BUREAU OF MILITARY HISTORY, 1913-21.

STATEMENT BY WITNESS.

DOCUMENT NO. W.S. 1679.

Witness

Mortimer Curtin,
Rathduff,
Co. Cork.

Identity.

O/C, Grenagh Coy., Donoughmore Battn.,
Cork 1 Brigade, I.R.A.

Subject.

Grenagh Coy., Donoughmore Battn., Cork 1 Brigade,
I.R.A., and Battalion Column 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. 1,679

STATEMENT BY MORTIMER CURTIN,Rathduff, Co. Cork.

I was born at Rathduff, Co. Cork, on September 8th 1892. My father was a farmer and publican. I went to school to Rathduff National School, where I was taught by T.C. Murray, later to become a popular playwright. I left school in 1908 and went to work on my parents' farm.

I joined the Sinn Féin Club in Grenagh when it was formed in the early part of 1917. Several other young men from the district joined at the same time. As a result of attending the meetings of this club and reading Arthur Griffith's paper, Sinn Féin, the younger members of the club decided to form a company of the Irish Volunteers in the area. At the time a number of Volunteer companies were already operating in the surrounding area. "Pa" Twomey was Battalion O/C, and we approached him for assistance in organising our unit. He attended a meeting convened by me at Grenagh one night in October, 1917, and Grenagh Company was formed. The strength of the company at this time was about 30. The officers elected at the initial meeting were:

O/C - Mortimer Curtin (witness)
1st Lt. - Patk. Forde
2nd Lt. - Tim Mahoney
Adjt. - Joe Kenny
Q/M - Mick Coleman.

The company was attached to Donoughmore Battalion, Cork Brigade. The other companies in the battalion at this time were Mourne Abbey, Grenagh, Courtbrack, Blarney, Donoughmore, Berrings. Except for "Pa" Twomey, who was Battalion O/C, I cannot recollect the names of the other officers of the unit. None of the officers of our company (Grenagh) had any military training. Our unit was trained

in the initial stages by the Battalion O/C ("Pa" Twomey), who lived in the neighbourhood.

The only type of training carried on was close order foot drill, and the officers, while learning the practical aspect of training under "Pa" Twomey, studied British military training manuals. Within a short time we were reasonably proficient in the various aspects of close order drill and were able to carry on without outside assistance. The only arms held by us at this time were about a half dozen shotguns which were owned by members or their friends. After a short time we collected a few more shotguns in raids on the homes of local loyalist families. By the beginning of 1918 we held about 15 shotguns and had a small supply of ammunition for each. Funds for the arming and equipping of the unit were raised by weekly subscriptions from the members.

The British now threatened to enforce conscription and there was, as a result, a big influx of new recruits to the Volunteers. The strength of Grenagh Company now increased to about 140. The increase in strength led to a reorganisation and the company was divided into four sections. Three of the section commanders were: - John O'Neill, Michael Murphy, and Batt Harte. I cannot recollect the name of the fourth. About this time, the 1st Lieutenant (Pat Forde) and 2nd Lieutenant (Tim Mahoney) left the area. They were replaced by Ted O'Connell and John Flynn respectively. During this period the members of the unit were engaged in collecting used cartridge cases, making gunpowder and slugs for reloading these cases. These slugs were made in a special mould designed by Pat Harte (blacksmith) and Joe Kenny (Company Adjutant). We also picked up small quantities of gelignite and made canister bombs by filling cocoa tins and such like containers with concrete and scrap iron, leaving a space in the centre in which to insert a

stick of gelignite in which detonator and fuse were fixed. We also experimented with various other types of weapons. A stock of canister bombs and cartridges, loaded with slugs, was built up as a result of our activities in this period, which stock became useful at a later stage. In addition to engaging in providing weapons and carrying on our training at this time, all Volunteers helped in organising the general public to fight the conscription threat. The clergy and the public were all united in this fight in our parish. Fr. Carroll, C.C., was a tower of strength to the people and worked unselfishly to raise the national morale of the people.

When the conscription scare had passed, towards the end of the summer of 1918, a big number of the new recruits who had joined earlier in the year became careless and lost interest to a certain extent. They were, I would say, still available in an emergency, but they did not see any prospects of being forced to fight for England, so they fell away. The majority, however, continued to serve, and training in close order drill, scouting and night manoeuvres continued as the year 1918 advanced. At this stage, training was becoming more advanced and regular visits were paid to the area by Seán O'Sullivan - one of the officers from Cork City area. He was engaged more or less on organising and training duties.

Towards the end of 1918, plans for an attack on Rathduff R.I.C. Barracks were submitted by me through my Battalion O/C ("Pa" Twomey) to Brigade H.Q. No action was taken at the time, but I learned later that this was due to the fact that the wife and family of the Sergeant were residing in the building.

During the general election in December, 1918, all companies in Donoughmore Battalion were ordered to proceed to Cork to carry out protection duty at the polling stations. About eighty men from Grenagh Company travelled to Cork on this occasion. We remained in the city for two nights and one day - being billeted at Drinan St. in W.L. Kelleher's stores.

About this time, the Brigade O/C (Tomás MacCurtain) visited every company in the area. As a result of his travels, he realised that the organisation was now too unwieldy and it was decided to divide the area, which embraced the whole county of Cork, into three brigades. The county was now divided into three separate areas as follows: Cork City, with Mid and East Cork, Cork 1 Brigade; North Cork area to Limerick and Kerry borders, Cork No. 2 Brigade; West Cork, Cork No. 3 Brigade. Our battalion (Donoughmore) now became a unit of Cork 1 Brigade, but Mourne Abbey Company of this battalion was transferred to Mallow Battalion of Cork No. 2 Brigade.

At this stage, Battalion Council meetings, which were attended by the battalion officers and a representative from each company in the battalion, were held at fortnightly intervals. At these meetings, reports on the activities in his area were submitted in writing by each company officer. These reports were discussed at the council meeting and were then transmitted through Battalion H.Q. to Brigade H.Q. The reports were later returned to the Company O/C with the comments of the appropriate officers on the Brigade and Battalion Staffs.

Up to this time the Volunteers were operating under the control and direction of an executive which was elected

by delegates from all units at an annual convention. On the establishment of a government by the members of Dáil Éireann, who had been elected at the general election in December, 1918, it was now for consideration whether the Volunteers should become subject to the new government of the Irish Republic. During the spring and early summer of 1919, a new constitution for the Volunteers was circulated to all units for consideration. This new constitution was based on the acceptance of the control/by the Dáil Department of Defence. The new constitution was discussed by each company and by company delegates to a Brigade Convention which was held in the old Cork City Hall under the guise of a dance. The convention was presided over by Tomás MacCurtain. After debating the document, line by line and word for word, it was finally decided, after a session lasting eight hours, to accept the new constitution and to submit the Volunteers to the control of Dáil Éireann. Following the final ratification of the new constitution, we became the Irish Republican Army, for short, I.R.A.

Training now became more intensive. Selected men from each company were trained in signalling, engineering, scouting, first-aid, intelligence work, and a full scale military organisation was set up. In addition, the I.R.A. were used to support all activities which would help to establish the government of the Republic. The collection of the first loan floated by the new government in the summer of 1919 fell mainly on the shoulders of the men of the army. Several meetings in support of the loan were held in the area. The meeting at Grenagh was addressed by Terry MacSwiney. The vast majority of the people in the district subscribed generously to this Dáil Éireann loan.

While all the organisation work in connection with the political side of the movement was assisted in

every possible way by the military-minded young men, we were all the time training for the day when we would come to grips with the enemy military and police forces. Regular parades and manoeuvres were now being held. Target practice with .22 rifles was a regular feature of the training, which became more intensified as the year 1919 advanced.

Early 1920 saw a "stepping up" in the general activity. A number of R.I.C. barracks were attacked throughout the country. These attacks led in a number of cases to the evacuation of other enemy posts, so at Easter 1920 a general order for the destruction of all such evacuated enemy posts was issued by G.H.Q. As there was no evacuated post in our area, we were not called for any activity in connection with this order.

The first major operation in which the members of the company (Grenagh) took part was the attack on Blarney R.I.C. Barracks on June 1st 1920. This was a combined operation in which the Donoughmore and Cork City battalions operated. Specific duties were allocated to the O/C of each unit. The operation was due to take place at 9.30 p.m., and all units were to withdraw from their posts at 10.30 p.m.

The main attacking party - drawn from Cork City - drove into Blarney in a motor car and stopped outside Smith's Hotel, which adjoined the R.I.C. barracks. The garrison, with the exception of the Barrack Orderly, were seated outside the barrack as the I.R.A. party drove up. The latter now entered the hotel and ordered all the customers into a room at the rear. They then took in a large charge of explosives which they had taken along in the motor car. The charge, which was laid against the

dividing wall between the hotel and the barrack, was exploded. The explosion demolished the wall between the barrack and the hotel, as well as half the hotel. I was not in the main attacking party.

While the attack was in progress, I was in charge of a party of 22 men from Grenagh Company on the Kerry Pike road, with instructions to hold the road at all costs until 10.30 p.m. We remained in position until the specified time, when we withdrew in accordance with instructions. We returned on foot to our home area. We were all armed with shotguns.

The R.I.C. station at Blarney was evacuated next day.

About this period, a boycott of R.I.C. and Tans was carried out in our area. This boycott was rigidly enforced, with the result that food, fuel or drink for the enemy garrison in the district was only obtainable at the point of the gun.

Early in July, 1920, instructions to carry out an attack on a patrol of R.I.C. at Grenagh were received by me from Battalion H.Q. The patrol, consisting of two men, normally travelled on foot each evening about 4 p.m. from Rathduff R.I.C. station to Grenagh Post Office. On the evening of July 10th 1920, I collected eight members of the Grenagh Company. It was now about 3.30 p.m. We took up a position behind the roadside fence within about 300 yards of Grenagh on the road to Rathduff. We were all armed with shotguns and re-loaded cartridges. We were not long in position when the patrol - a sergeant and a constable - approached our position. We opened fire but only one shot went off - the remaining cartridges were ineffective. The sergeant fell - seriously wounded. The constable

threw his belt and revolver on the ground and then put up his hands. Though we had orders to do so, we could not shoot him in the circumstances. We collected the arms and the mails which they were carrying and we allowed the constable to go. As we expected reprisals, we moved in a body in a north westerly direction for about a mile. We now separated and each went his own way. Within an hour, a strong force of Tans and military arrived in the area with bloodhounds. They traced us to the point at which we had separated, but they failed to trace us much further. They then ran amok, chasing several people who were working in the fields in the area and beating them up. The men who took part in the attack were: Jack Flynn, Batt Harte, Ted O'Connell, Jack Forde, Mick O'Keefe, John J. McCarthy, Mick Coleman, and Mortimer Curtin (witness).

Following this incident, the R.I.C. barracks at Rathduff was evacuated towards the end of July, 1920. It was burned by the members of the Grenagh Company on the night of its evacuation.

At this period, night raids by parties of military and police were a regular feature of life in this area. Hardly a week passed that my home was not raided on more than one occasion.

On October 20th 1920, the full Grenagh Company was mobilised in conjunction with representatives from the other companies in the battalion for an attack on an expected enemy convoy in Glencaum area. When the full party had been assembled under the control of the Battalion O/C (Jackie O'Leary), the job was called off as information which had by then come to hand indicated that the enemy convoy was not due to travel.

Beyond intensive training and tightening up of the organisation work, there was not much activity until early January, 1921, when it was decided to establish a Battalion Column to be specially trained and fully armed. The column - to the number of about 60 - was assembled in Donoughmore. It was composed of representatives from each company in the battalion. The representatives from Grenagh Company were: Con Healy ("One-eyed Gunner"), Denis Dwyer, Batt Harte, Mick O'Keefe, Ted O'Connell, Dan Flynn, Jerh. Murphy, Jack Forde, Mortimer Curtin (witness). The column was trained by Joe O'Connor (Blarney), who was an ex-Sergeant Major of the Irish Guards. About twenty-five members of the column were armed with rifles. The remainder were armed with shotguns. We were put through an intensive course of training for about a fortnight. I was then instructed by the Battalion O/C (Jack O'Leary) to return to Grenagh area to attend to company affairs as we were building dumps in the area at the time. It was during my absence from the column that Dripsey ambush took place on January 28th 1921.

About mid February, 1921, it was decided to break up the column into smaller units as it was not found feasible to feed such a large number of men in one area. As all the men were now fully trained and could be collected at short notice, this scheme was found to be safe. The representatives from each company area now returned to their own areas, but were instructed to be always ready to travel at short notice to any selected spot. A few rifles were dumped in each company area to enable training to be continued and to permit the trained men from the column to train the other men at home as reserves. The majority of the arms were, however, dumped in a central dump in Donoughmore Company area.

The members of all units were busily engaged during the spring and summer of 1921 in the cutting of enemy lines of communication. All roads in the area were blocked by cutting trenches or demolishing bridges. The trenches were being continually filled in by forced labour parties collected by the British, so that the effort to keep the roads closed required the constant attention of every available man either on the actual work of trenching, acting as scouts or on armed guard duty.

Our intensive training continued at this period. As there were now no enemy posts in our district and we were not strong enough to attack the large enemy columns which occasionally moved through the area, our activities were confined to observing and reporting enemy movements and evading capture.

On the evening of May 14th 1921, Paddy Collins (Battalion Q/M) arrived in my area (Grenagh) with a motor car which he had seized from Sir George Colthurst. He informed me that the Battalion Column was being re-assembled and that in co-operation with the Brigade Column it was to attack Macroom. I collected three members of the column from Grenagh Company, and with Paddy Collins we travelled to Ballinagree where we met the remainder of the attacking party. We were moved into position on the outskirts of Macroom about 9 p.m., but within half an hour the Brigade O/C (Seán Hegarty) approached our position and informed us that the operation was being called off. We were instructed to return to our home area and to come back again the following week. The men who went from Grenagh on this occasion were: Batt Harte, Jack Forde, Mick Coleman, and Mortimer Curtin (witness). The Donoughmore Column O/C (Jackie Leary) was in charge of our party.

Beyond keeping enemy lines of communication closed and observing the movements of enemy forces, there was no further activity up to the Truce on July 11th 1921.

As far as I can recollect, the officers of the Donoughmore Battalion in the period 1917 to the Truce were:

1917 to November, 1918:

O/C - "Pa" Twomey
Vice O/C - Thos. J. Golden.

November, 1918:

O/C - Thos. J. Golden
Vice O/C - Dick O'Mahoney
Adjt. - Denis McCarthy
Q/M - Jim Barrett.

Late 1919:

O/C - Thos. J. Golden
Vice O/C - Richard O'Mahoney (Dick)
(left to become O/C 9th Battn.,
Passage West).
Adjt. - Jim Barrett.
Q/M - Owen McCarthy.

May, 1920:

O/C - John J. O'Leary
Vice O/C - Frank Busteed
Adjt. - Jim Barrett
Q/M - Owen McCarthy.

August, 1920:

O/C - John J. O'Leary
Vice O/C - Frank Busteed
Adjt. - Jim Barrett
Q/M - Paddy Collins.

February, 1921:

O/C - John J. O'Leary
Vice O/C - Frank Busteed
Adjt. - Paddy Collins
Q/M - Denis Murray.

Prior to the reorganisation in 1917, Donoughmore Battalion was No. 3 Battalion, Cork Brigade. It then

became the 14th Battalion. When Cork County was divided into three brigades in January, 1919, the battalion became the 6th Battalion of Cork No. 1 Brigade.

My rank at the Truce was O/C Grenagh Company, Donoughmore Battalion, Cork 1 Brigade.

The strength of the company was about 100.

Signed:

Mortimer Barton

Date:

26-2-57

Witness:

P. L. Donnell

(Investigator).

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