

ORIGINAL

BUREAU OF MILITARY HISTORY 1913-21

BURO STAIRE MILÉ TA 1913-21

No. W.S. 1688

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BUREAU OF MILITARY HISTORY, 1913-21.

STATEMENT BY WITNESS.

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Witness

Patrick Riordan,
Syngefield Road,
Birr,
Co. Offaly.

Identity.

V/Comdt., 4th Batt'n.,
Offaly No. 2 Brigade.

Subject.

Activities of
3rd and 4th Batt'ns.,
Offaly No. 2 Brigade,
1918-1921.

Conditions, if any, Stipulated by Witness.

Nil.

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STATEMENT BY PATRICK RIORDAN,

Syngefield Road, Birr, Co. Offaly,

formerly

Vice Commandant, 4th Battalion, Offaly No. 2 Brigade.

My official association with the national movement commenced in the early months of the year 1918 when I organised and was elected Captain of an Irish Volunteer company in my native place of Coolderry, Co. Offaly. At the time, I was 25 years of age and was engaged on farm work with my parents who were farmers.

In the Volunteer organisation of that period, the Coolderry Company was known as 'C' Company, 6th Battalion, Offaly Brigade. The other companies or units which comprised the 6th Battalion were based on the Birr, Clareen, Kinnitty, Killoughey, Drumcullen, Rathcabbín and Lorra areas. The battalion officers were:

Eamon Morkhan - Commandant
Eamon Bulfin - Vice Commandant
Seán Casey - Adjutant.

In July, 1918, at the time of the so-called 'German Plot', both Morkhan and Bulfin were arrested by the R.I.C., and Seán Casey was appointed Battalion Commandant. Shortly afterwards, Casey, who was a national teacher by profession, left the area to take up an appointment in County Clare, and he was succeeded as Battalion Commandant by Michael Kelly. Patrick Delahunty was appointed Battalion Vice Commandant about the same time.

Prior to August, 1920, the whole of County Offaly and that portion of north County Tipperary adjoining Birr were, for Volunteer purposes, organised into one brigade area, known as the Offaly Brigade. As a result of an organisation which was then carried out, the area was divided into two brigades - Offaly No. 1 and No. 2. Our battalion (6th) was included in No. 2 Brigade, and as a further step in the reorganisation the battalion area was divided into two battalions which became the 3rd and 4th Battalions of Offaly No. 2 Brigade. Michael Kelly, formerly O/C of the 6th Battalion was appointed O/C of the 3rd, and the Vice Commandant, Patrick Delahunty, was appointed O/C of the 4th Battalion. At the same time, I was appointed Vice O/C of this latter battalion, a rank which I held until the Truce in July, 1921. The other battalion officers were: Denis Duffy, Adjutant, and William King, Quartermaster. Our battalion (4th) consisted of four companies, which were:

	<u>Company O/C</u>
'A' Company - Clareen -	Kieran Jennings, later Kieran Guinan.
'B' Company - Birr -	Michael Cavanagh.
'C' Company - Coolderry-	William Murphy.
'D' Company - Rathcabbin-	Martin Morris.

The Brigade Staff at that period were:

Brigade Comdt.	- Seán Mahon
Bde. Vice Comdt.	- William White
Brigade Adjt.	- Joseph Reddin
Brigade Q/M	- Seán Robbins
Brigade I/O	- Seán Delahunty.

In the early months of 1921, Seán Mahon was arrested and Thomas Burke succeeded him as Brigade Commandant. In June, 1921, Seán Delahunty, the Brigade I/O, was arrested and he was succeeded by William J. Grogan. Brigade council meetings were at first held monthly and later fortnightly. All members of the Brigade Staff and at least two officers from each

battalion attended. I was present at several Brigade Council meetings which, as a rule, were held at King's house in Carrig, Birr, and at Grogan's of Killyon, Birr.

During the twelve months or more prior to the organisation in 1918 of Volunteer companies, there was a certain amount of activity carried out by individuals or groups of individuals. It took the form of painting slogans and flying tricolour flags, which kept the R.I.C. busy removing the flags and blotting out the slogans. I remember one incident which took place on the occasion of an auction at Killyon. A tricolour flag was flown from a tree during the auction and we remained around wondering if the R.I.C. would come along to remove it. A sergeant and a constable arrived and the sergeant proceeded to climb the tree. One of our party then ran to a nearby publichouse, borrowed a shotgun from the publican, and fired one shot which wounded the sergeant who was still in the tree. The publican, who, I am sure, was well aware of the purpose for which the gun was required when he loaned it, on second thoughts considered that his licence was in jeopardy. He decided to cover his tracks by acting the good samaritan, so he yoked up his pony and trap and drove the sergeant to a doctor. That incident created a good deal of excitement at the time and many people, particularly those who were present at the auction, were subsequently questioned by the police, but without success. No information was given and the police failed in their efforts to find the man who fired the shot. Incidentally, it must have been one of the first shots fired at the R.I.C. after the Rising of 1916, for the incident took place on 13th July, 1917.

In the summer months of 1918, when the conscription menace was at its highest peak, the strength of the companies increased and varied from 60 to 150 men. The arms available for such a large number of men was insignificant. There were only a few revolvers scattered here and there amongst battalion or company officers, and a small number of Volunteers were fortunate enough to own a shotgun. On the 18th May, 1918, a general raid for arms was carried out on the houses of farmers and others who were known to possess shotguns. In my company area, this raid yielded 15 shotguns and a quantity of ammunition. I might mention that, generally speaking, the owners of the guns, Catholic and Protestant alike, gave them up to us voluntarily when we called, and in very few cases had the guns to be seized by threat or force. It is not, however, so pleasant to record that when the danger of conscription passed, the numerical strength of the companies dwindled to in some cases, as low as 15 or 20 men.

In 1919, after the fights at Soloheadbeg and Knocklong, Seumas Robinson and Dan Breen came to this area. They were both much wanted men by the enemy at the time and carried a price on their heads. We provided them with scouts and guides and got them billeted in friendly houses in the Clareen area. Later, when they decided to move on, we escorted them to the borders of County Tipperary and handed them over to other guides.

When the general order was received to demolish all evacuated R.I.C. barracks on Easter Saturday night, 1920, there were no evacuated barracks in our battalion area so we sent parties of men to assist in the work in

adjoining areas. Personally, I spent that night with the late Edward Quinlan, then O/C of the 7th Battalion, Tipperary No. 1 Brigade. In his area I assisted at the burning of two evacuated barracks, viz. those at Dunkerrin and Knock. On the same night, local Volunteers raided the Income Tax Office in Birr and removed and destroyed the Income Tax records and documents.

The next incident of interest which I recall was the attack on Clara R.I.C. barracks, which took place on June 2nd 1920. That was a brigade job and the attack continued until well into daylight on the following morning. It had, however, to be called off before the barracks was taken. I was not in Clara myself that night, because when the arrangements for the attack were made, the task allotted to me and the Coolderry Company was to block the roads between Birr and Kinnity. About three weeks later, on 26th June, 1920, when Borrisokane barracks was attacked, we were given a similar job, this time to block the roads at Sharavogue.

As I have mentioned, the 4th Battalion of Offaly No. 2 Brigade, comprising the areas of Clareen, Birr, Coolderry, and Rathcabbin, came into being with the reorganisation of the County Offaly area for Volunteer purposes in August, 1920. There was quite a lot of other organisation work done prior to that. Suitable young men were approached to become Volunteers, and in that way the strength of the companies had been increased. Weekly parades were held for drilling and training. Signalling and scouting sections were formed and trained. Dispatch centres and dispatch routes were arranged and Volunteers and members of Cumann na mBan

were appointed to act as dispatch carriers.

On 5th August, 1920, a further general raid for arms was carried out by the various companies. This time the British authorities had issued an order that all owners of fire arms, including shotguns, should hand them in at the nearest R.I.C. barracks or military post by a certain date. It was to circumvent this order that the general raid was carried out. Again, in most cases, the owners co-operated with us and willingly handed over the guns when we called for them. In my own area, two or three Protestant farmers co-operated in a unique manner. They sent me word of the time and date on which they proposed to travel to Birr with the guns to hand them over, and I was thus able to intercept them and get the guns before they reached the military or police.

From the summer of 1920 onwards, there were only two enemy posts in our (4th) Battalion area. One was Crinkle military barracks, the depot of the Leinster Regiment, situated about three-quarters of a mile from Birr and where there were up to 1,600 British Infantry stationed. The other was the R.I.C. barracks in Birr, garrisoned by approximately 40 R.I.C. men, including a District Inspector, a Head Constable, and two sergeants. This barracks was well fortified with sand-bags, steel shutters, barbed wire, and the approaches to it were mined. There was no barracks or post in a rural area available to us to attack. The enemy forces rarely ventured out of Birr except in strong convoys, which, of course, were hampered by our activities of road blocking, trenching and demolition of bridges. At times, too, when the presence of a convoy

became known, it was possible to harass them further by sniping.

Towards the end of 1920 or early in 1921, G.H.Q. sent the first of three organisers who came to the brigade area. He was a resigned R.I.C. man named Jerry Mee. In fact, he was one of the R.I.C. men who had made history in Listowel barracks some months earlier. He was of the opinion that it was impossible to carry out a major operation in the area, and his advice to us was to carry on with the road blocking and sniping of convoys as much as possible.

Mee was replaced by an organiser named Liam Hogan. Hogan was keen to carry out a big operation and he decided to attack the night patrol of R.I.C. men and Black and Tans in the town of Birr. This patrol consisted of anything from 12 to 20 men armed with rifles and revolvers. Several meetings were held beforehand and we submitted particulars of the time the patrol usually left the barracks, the route taken and the approximate distance between the files. Hogan's idea was to launch the attack by men positioned at street corners and in gateways. It was decided to carry out the attack on the night of March 5th 1921.

On that night, 26 men from the 3rd and 4th Battalions, together with Hogan, Pat Delahunty, Commandant of the 4th Battalion, and myself, assembled on the outskirts of Birr. We were armed, some with shotguns, some with revolvers, and I think three had rifles. As a preliminary, Hogan sent three sets of scouts (2 men to each set) on bicycles into the town from three different directions. Two of the scouts were fired on by a party of R.I.C. men who were in a

position near the Catholic Church, and one of them, Laurence Langton, Vice Commandant of the 3rd Battalion, was seriously wounded and captured. The other scout made good his escape. This was a most unexpected development, as no enemy forces, except the regular patrol (which, by the way, did not come out that night), were expected to be out of the barracks. We heard the firing and when the other scouts reported back with the news of what had happened, Hogan decided to postpone the attack.

Six nights later, on 11th March, 1921, Hogan decided to have another go at the street patrol in Birr. This time 15 men, including Hogan, Pat Delahunty and myself, assembled and got into positions in Bridge St., but the patrol only came as far as the entrance to Main St. and then returned to the barracks. It was, I think, shortly after that that Hogan was recalled by G.H.Q. and Thomas Burke of Portumna, then a medical student in Dublin, came as organiser. He was appointed Brigade Commandant shortly afterwards when Seán Mahon was arrested and interned.

From divers dates in 1920, Pat Delahunty, the Battalion Commandant, myself and a few others were 'on the run'. Due to the flat, level countryside in the area, it was considered that an active service unit could not operate as a full-time force with any degree of success and safety. Our usual practice was to mobilise Volunteers as required in each company area to assist at road-blocking, to occupy sniping posts, to hold up mail cars, to raid for enemy supplies or Belfast goods at railway stations, or to assist in any particular activity for which men were required.

On 20th March, 1921, Pat Delahunty (Battalion Commandant), Denis Duffy (Battalion Adjutant), and myself, with a party of 16 Volunteers, lay in ambush at Ballybee on the Birr-Banagher road for a lorry of British military, but without result, as the military did not come along. A week later, on 27th March, 1921, we occupied the same position with a stronger force and with the late Joubert Powell in charge. On that occasion our information led us to expect that a convoy of troops would pass in lorries, but again we were disappointed and had to disband without seeing any enemy forces.

On the night of the 16th May, 1921, the Battalion Intelligence Officer learned that a patrol of R.I.C. men and Black and Tans would cycle from Birr to Kinnitty, on the following day. He got the information from a barmaid in a publichouse in Birr which some of the Black and Tans frequented. We passed the information on at once to Joe Connolly, who was then O/C of the 3rd Battalion and in whose area the village of Kinnitty was situated. Acting on the information, Connolly planned an attack which he successfully carried out. The ambush took place in the village of Kinnitty. Four members of the patrol were shot dead, without any casualties on the I.R.A. side.

On the 26th May, 1921, the Battalion Commandant and two members of the Birr Company - James Murray and James Connors - sniped a lorry load of Black and Tans at Riverstown, about one mile from Birr. They fired only two shots, one of which wounded a Black and Tan who was standing up in the lorry. The lorry kept going on

its way into Birr, with the occupants firing indiscriminately in all directions.

Towards the end of May, 1921, we learned that Tipperary No. 1 Brigade (North Tipperary) Flying Column was located near the borders of our area and were preparing for a large-scale operation. There was always good co-operation between Tipperary No. 1 and Offaly No. 2 Brigades whose areas bordered. Occasionally the column came into our area to billet and rest, and we were expecting them again after the proposed ambush. On 3rd June, 1921, the Tipperary column engaged a convoy of R.I.C. and Black and Tans at Modrenny, not far from Cloughjordan. On that same day, three Volunteers - Peter Middleton, Michael O'Connor and Arthur Keogh - were with me at Sharavogue. We heard the firing and the explosion of grenades and knew, of course, that the operation was on. We were armed with rifles. Keogh and O'Connor went to a sniping position at Knockshegowna, whilst Middleton and I took up another sniping position at Sharavogue. Thus we were in a position to snipe enemy reinforcements going from Birr towards Modrenny.

At the time there was a garrison of 20 R.I.C. men and Black and Tans in Shinrone. They, too, must have heard the sounds of the battle at Modrenny, for they did an extraordinary thing. Without exception, they got their bicycles and started to cycle towards Birr. It was said that they did not wait to close the barrack door. Their route brought them past our position at Sharavogue, and Middleton and I fired at them at about 300 yards range. Although the best we could get, our position was not by any means a good one and I don't believe we inflicted any casualties. About half the police party continued to cycle towards Birr, and the remainder dismounted, took

cover and started to reply to our fire. After a few shots, Middleton and I slipped away, leaving the police on the road firing away.

Within a few hours a big force of police and military arrived in lorries from Birr. They were going towards the scene of the ambush at Modrenny. O'Connor and Keogh fired at them from the sniping position at Knockshegowna, and this action, I would say, saved a section of the Tipperary column who were withdrawing into our area as the fight had ended at Modrenny and would, in all probability, have been engaged by the forces from Birr. The lorries halted and the military and police spent a considerable portion of the afternoon searching the area. They moved slowly and cautiously and it was evident that they were under the impression that they had encountered a big I.R.A. force. Meanwhile, the column men, hearing the firing at Knockshegowna, changed their line of retreat and came safely into our area by another route.

Mention of Sharavogue reminds me of two attempts we made to ambush District Inspector Dougan, there. Dougan, who was an ex-British army officer, had come to Birr as officer in charge of the R.I.C. and Black and Tans. He was reputed to bear a charmed life. After a time we learned that he was in the habit of visiting a lady friend at Kyleduff, Roscrea. He appeared to be a bit of an eccentric but was shrewd enough to vary the days and times of his visits to Kyleduff. Sometimes he took a big escort of Black and Tans with him, and on other occasions he drove himself in a private car, ordering any civilian he might meet to sit in with him as a hostage.

His route to Kyleduff brought him through Scaravogue, but our attempts to ambush him there failed, for the reason that he did not travel when we were waiting for him. The late Joubert Powell, who was in charge of the ambush arrangements on the second occasion, decided that a better plan would be to surround the house at Kyleduff when Dougan was inside and get him when he was leaving. As Kyleduff was in the area of the 7th Battalion of Tipperary No. 1 Brigade, the job was then out of our hands, but I happen to know that Powell and a party of men watched the house one night when Dougan was inside, and that while they were waiting for him to leave by the usual entrance, Dougan, for some unknown reason, quietly and unobserved, slipped out by a side or back entrance which was rarely used.

Signed: P. Reidan

Date: 28/10/1957

Witness: J. Grace

(Investigator) .

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