

ORIGINAL

BUREAU OF MILITARY HISTORY 1913-21

BURO STAIRÉ MILEATA 1913-21

No. W.S. 1706

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COSANTA.

BUREAU OF MILITARY HISTORY, 1913-21.

STATEMENT BY WITNESS.

DOCUMENT NO. W.S. 1706.

Witness

Seán O'Connell,
23, Ardmanning Road,
Togher,
CORK.

Identity.

Capt., 'G' Company, 1st Battalion, Cork No. 1 Brigade.
Member of Cork City Active Service Unit.

Subject.

'G' Company, 1st Battalion, Cork No. 1 Brigade, I.R.A.,
1916 - 1921.

Conditions, if any, Stipulated by Witness.

Nil.

File No. S. 3002.

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STATEMENT BY SEÁN O'CONNELL,

23 Ardmanning Road, Togher, Cork.

I am a native of Cork City where I joined the Irish Volunteers late in the year 1916.

Our headquarters was in what was known as the "Volunteer Hall", Sheares Street, Cork. The Company I joined was "A" Company, Cork City Battalion. The officers of that Company were :- Captain - Sean Scanlan; 1st Lieutenant - Seán Hurley, 2nd Lieutenant - Paddy Corkery, Quartermaster - Harry Varian, Adjutant - Jeremiah Driscoll. We were about two hundred strong. We drilled in the hall at Sheares Street in the open country in the Model Farm Road district.

The year 1917 was mostly spent in drilling and general training. We had occasional tussles with the R.I.C. in the course of recruiting meetings held by the British in the streets of the city. The 1914-1918 war was in progress at that time and it was customary for the military authorities to hold street corner meetings at which young men were exhorted to join the British Army "to fight for the freedom of small nations." We attended these meetings and interrupted the speakers by shouting and generally making ourselves a general nuisance. As a result, clashes with the police, who were present on duty to prevent such interruptions, were of frequent occurrence. No arms were, however, used by us on these occasions, not at least so far as my Company was concerned.

In late September, 1917, the first serious clash between the Volunteers and the R.I.C. occurred in Cork City. The occasion was one on which a Volunteer demonstration was being held to celebrate

the release from gaol of Republican prisoners. The notorious District Inspector of R.I.C., Swanzy, was in charge of a large party of police on the night in question. He ordered a baton charge, and, as the police drew their batons, Joe Murphy, one of our officers, opened fire with a revolver, wounding one of the R.I.C. Swanzy, deeming discretion the better/ ^{part of valour,} countermanded the baton charge. This man, Swanzy, was in charge of a party of police, in civilian attire, which entered the home of Tomás McCurtain (then Lord Mayor of Cork) on the night of 20th March, 1920, and shot him dead. Shortly after this occurrence, Swanzy was transferred to Lisburn, County Armagh, where he was shot and killed by Cork Volunteers on 23rd August, 1920.

In mid 1918, when the British Government proposed to introduce conscription in Ireland, there was a large influx of Volunteer recruits, and, as a result, the organisation in Cork was divided into two battalions and later three, viz. the First, Second and Third. When the conscription crisis passed, about fifty per cent of these recruits discontinued membership, and the Third Battalion was then amalgamated with the First and Second. I cannot say with any certainty when exactly this happened, but to the best of my recollection the time would be late in the year 1918.

Following the reorganisation of the battalions my Company became known as "G" Company, First Battalion, Cork No. 1. Brigade.

Sometime late in 1918, I was sworn in a member of the Irish Republican Brotherhood by Seán Hegarty who was, later, to become Brigade Commandant of the Cork No. 1. Brigade. There were about fifteen others in my I.R.B. 'Circle'.

Early in the year 1919 one of our Company officers named Harry Varian was returning home alone at night, and, when walking

on the footpath in Washington Street he met two R.I.C. men on patrol, one of whom was named Hayes. Varian, who was armed with a revolver at the time, stepped off the pathway to allow the police to pass. The latter challenged him to halt, whereupon Varian fired at the police through the pocket of his overcoat in which he was carrying the revolver. Constable Hayes fell, wounded, and his companion fled. Shortly afterwards, one of our Brigade officers named Fred Murray, who was not unlike Varian in appearance, was arrested and charged with the shooting. To the best of my recollection, Murray was put on trial three times for the alleged offence. The British authorities failed, however, to establish his identity as being the man who actually shot Hayes and he (Murray) was released from custody.

Grattan Street Explosion.

In the month of May, 1918, when I held the rank of Company Quartermaster, I, and others of "G" Company, were involved in an explosion on the premises of Andy Hearne's boot shop in Grattan Street, Cork.

In a room at the back of the shop we had set up apparatus for making bombs of the canister type, pikes, and slugs for cartridges. We had got quite a large quantity of powder used for blasting quarries and decided to grind it for the purpose of filling cartridge cases. The grinding was done by a pestle (motor-driven) and mortar which we had secured to do the job. When the powder was ground finely we stored it in biscuit tins on the premises.

One evening we received word that the police were prowling around in the vicinity of Grattan Street. Fearing our arsenal

would be discovered and captured, we decided to remove it to a place of safety. On the night in question, Dick Murphy our Company Captain, Miceál Tobin and myself, went into Hearne's and proceeded to empty the tins of powder into linen bags outside of which was a coarser type of bag. Dick and Miceál were holding a bag and I was emptying one of the tins into it when all of a sudden a terrific explosion occurred. I was blown clean through a window of the room and was badly burned on the face and back. Dick Murphy also received serious burns as did Miceál Tobin. Two other men of our Company with a Mrs. Hegarty were just about to enter the room when the explosion occurred. They were extremely fortunate to escape serious injury.

Dick Murphy was removed to the North Infirmary where he was treated and subsequently recovered. Miceál Tobin and I were taken to the hospital of the Sisters of Mercy where poor Tobin died.

Later that same night, Dick Murphy was removed from the North Infirmary by Volunteers and taken to a place of safety, as the police and military were on the scene shortly after the explosion and were making widespread inquiries as to what exactly happened and who were concerned. I, too, was taken away from the Mercy Hospital that night by Volunteers before the police could get hold of me. I was removed to Blackrock, Cork, where I was under the care of Doctor Saunders, presently Medical Officer for Health in Cork. I was out of action for about three months and on recovering rejoined the Company as Quartermaster.

Raid on Captain Clarke's at Farran.

Due to the lack of arms and ammunition which restricted the activities of my own Company, as well as every other Company in

the Brigade, it was my job as Quartermaster to lay hands on every gun and round of ammunition possible. In common, therefore, with other Companies, we in "G" Company organised raids on houses of people where we suspected guns might be obtained. These houses were, generally speaking, those occupied by ex-British Army or Navy personnel. In several instances we received the 'tip-off' beforehand that a shotgun, or, perhaps, a rifle or revolver, might be in a certain house. A raiding party, numbering about half a dozen, sometimes less, would call to the particular house at night and collect the weapon. Invariably one of two of our party would carry a revolver in case any opposition was encountered, the intention being, not so much to use the gun, as to show it in case we met with a hostile reception. The necessity for carrying a gun was made evident from an experience we had when raiding for arms at night at the house of a British Army Captain named Clarke, who lived at Farran, a village about six miles west of Cork City.

So far as I can remember now, we had advance information that Clarke was holding a shooting party on his estate, and, on the night before the 'shoot', about eleven of us went out to Farran to raid the house. A few of us, including Walter Furlong (later Lord Mayor of Cork), carried revolvers. Arriving at the house, I knocked on the door while the remainder of our lads were hiding near the steps leading to the house. A maid opened the door. I entered the hall followed by our lads, and went upstairs to search the rooms accompanied by a few others. The remainder of our party spread out amongst the rooms on the ground floor. While I was upstairs I heard a shot. I ran down to the diningroom where I discovered that Walter Furlong had shot Captain Clarke in the hand. It appears that Clarke adopted a very hostile attitude and had threatened to

shoot Furlong. In fact, he (Clarke) said that if he had got the chance he would have emptied his revolver into us. I bandaged up his wound which wasn't very serious and we proceeded with the search. In this raid we got a fully-loaded Colt .38 revolver, a Winchester rifle and a number of shotguns. On leaving, we took away Clarke's motor car into which we put the guns and drove the car to the city where the guns were safely dumped. This was the only instance, so far as "G" Company was concerned, where it was necessary to use a weapon on a raid of this nature.

The nett result of these night raids on private houses could be said to be reasonably good. We did, however, get guns of an obsolete type, which we could not use for want of suitable ammunition.

Raid on Murray's Gunshop.

The battalion arms supply was considerably augmented as the result of a raid by picked men from the 1st Battalion on the premises of Messrs. Murray, gun dealers, Patrick Street, Cork. The date of the raid was 18th November, 1919.

For some nights prior to this, a few of us had been detailed to watch the time at which the shop was locked up and, on the night in question, Tom Crofts, Seán Lucey, Steve Foley, alias McAlister, and myself, took up positions in pairs near Murray's premises. We saw the man locking up the place and followed him to his home at Blackpool where we held him up, took the keys of the shop from him and then handed him up to some of our lads who were waiting nearby, as previously arranged. He was to be detained until the job was completed.

We returned to Patrick Street and entered the shop accompanied by some other 1st Battalion men who were on the look out for us.

It was about half-past seven by this time and Patrick Street had its usual patrols of police. We worked silently and quickly when once we got inside Murray's and removed to two motor cars, which we had parked outside, up to fifty or sixty shotguns, a large quantity of shotgun ammunition and a quantity of spare parts for guns. A covering party of our lads, standing here and there in ones and twos and armed with revolvers, was stationed in the vicinity of Murray's in case of interference by the police passing up and down Patrick Street. I am sure we were at least an hour in Murray's before we had cleared everything, which might be of use to us, out of it. Tom Crofts and I often went with the 'stuff' to the White Cross district, north-west of the City where we dumped it in a hayloft owned by a friendly farmer. The guns taken on this occasion formed the main armament in the attack by the 1st Battalion on Blarney R.I.C. barracks in June of the following year.

Attack on Blarney R.I.C. Barracks.

On the night of 3rd June, 1920, the R.I.C. barracks at Blarney, County Cork, was attacked by men of the 1st Battalion, Cork No. 1. Brigade.

Blarney village in which the barracks was situated is about six miles north-west of Cork City and about four miles north of Ballincollig. In Ballincollig barracks was stationed a large force of British military which it was expected would move to the relief of the R.I.C. garrison when news of the attack became known.

On the night of the attack upwards of four hundred men from the 1st and 6th Battalions were mobilised. Of this number only about thirty men were engaged in the actual attack. The remainder were detailed to block the roads leading to Blarney to hinder the advance of any British relieving forces from Cork City or from Ballincollig.

I, with Tim Lehane, was in charge of about thirty men from "G" Company whose job was to block the road at Carrigrohane. We had some shotguns, two rifles and about seven or eight revolvers. Our position was about half a mile north-east of Ballincollig village and approximately five miles south of Blarney.

Earlier that same evening Tony Noonan, an officer in "G" Company, had arranged to have a number of cross-cut saws and axes in the vicinity of Leemount Bridge (which crosses the river Lee at Carrigrohane), the purpose being to fell trees across the roads from Ballincollig later that evening.

Our lads moved out to our positions roughly about 7 p.m. on the evening of 3rd June, 1920. We held up all traffic on the neighbouring roads and were preparing to cut trees to form road blocks, when, at about 7.30 p.m., to our great surprise, lorry loads of armed military approached from Ballincollig and opened fire on the party of which I was in charge, approximately, three quarters of a mile on the Cork City side of Ballincollig. We were quite taken off our guard by this sudden, unexpected, development and were not prepared to meet it. However, we got in off the road and opened fire with revolvers on the military, who halted. In view of the fact that our party was dispersed at the time in small groups here and there, with the result that we were unable to bring the concentrated fire of our armed men (few as they were in comparison) on the enemy forces, we had no option but to withdraw. Nevertheless, the action, insignificant as it was, had the effect of delaying the advance of the British from Ballincollig, on Blarney, as they waited for reinforcements to come up before proceeding further. We suffered no casualties on this occasion and I cannot say whether, or not, we inflicted any on the enemy.

Shooting of Enemy Spies.

A feature of the struggle in Cork was the effective manner in which the I.R.A. dealt with persons who were known to be spying for the enemy. Due to the excellent Intelligence Service set up in each Battalion and Company area, it was possible to bring those informers 'to heel' when the evidence against them proved conclusive. Two such instances in which men of "G" Company were concerned may be recorded.

It was recorded to us by the Brigade that two ex-British Army men named Hawkins and Hamill were enemy agents and instructions were given that they should be apprehended and executed.

A watch was kept on the movements of the two spies and one evening, about seven o'clock, they were held up with revolvers on their way home, by five men from "G" Company. Hawkins and Hamill were then taken outside the City on to the Lee Road and shot. It later transpired that the two men were taken away by the military shortly after being shot. They recovered from their wounds and left the country.

On another occasion we received instructions to arrest another ex-British soldier named Begley who was alleged to be an enemy agent. We watched for him and at about noon one day, Tadg Twohig and I tracked him up Patrick Street. We were 'covered' by four or five men from "G" Company, all of whom were armed with revolvers. We arrested Begley and took him out of the City. He was detained for a day or so in a house and on instructions from the Brigade he was executed by shooting.

As the fighting became more intense in the latter half of 1920 and prior to the Truce of July 1921, it was customary for the Company to send out armed patrols of about a half a dozen men armed with

revolvers and at a later stage, bombs, to engage the police, military and Black & Tans at every opportunity. Bombs were thrown at lorries containing Military or Tans and they came under revolver fire from our lads many a time. Most of these engagements were of the 'hit and run' variety, as we had neither the arms or the ammunition to maintain a fight in the City for any length of time, against such vastly superior enemy forces. It is not possible to say with any certainty what casualties the enemy suffered as a result of these brief encounters. The North Abbey Barracks in our district was also a favourite target for occasional sniping by our lads. The sniping had a certain nuisance value inasmuch as it kept the garrison in a state of constant jitters and made them fearful of venturing out except in large parties.

These nuisance attacks on barracks and enemy patrols coupled with the raiding and capturing of enemy supplies at railway stations, the blocking of roads leading out of the City were continuously carried out notwithstanding increasing vigilance on the part of our opponents right up to the time of the Truce of July, 1921, at which time I was still an active officer of "G" Company, 1st Battalion, Cork No. 1. Brigade, I.R.A.

SIGNED:

Jean O'Connell

DATE :

26 November 1957

WITNESS:

A. Gorman

BUREAU OF MILITARY HISTORY 1913-21
BURO STAIRS MILEATA 1913-21
No. W.S. 1,706