

ORIGINAL

BUREAU OF MILITARY HISTORY 1913-21

BURO STAIRÉ MILEATA 1913-21

No. W.S. 1711

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BUREAU OF MILITARY HISTORY, 1913-21.

STATEMENT BY WITNESS.

DOCUMENT NO. W.S. 1711.

Witness

Seán F. Dockery,
Ferbane,
Co. Offaly.

Identity.

Lieut., Ferbane Coy., Irish Volunteers, Co. Offaly.
Chief of I.R.A. Police, Ferbane area.

Subject.

'D' Company, 7th Battalion,
Offaly Brigade, I.R.A.,
1917 - 1922.

Conditions, if any, Stipulated by Witness.

Nil.

File No S. 3019.

Form B.S.M. 2

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STATEMENT BY SEÁN F. DOCKERY,

Ferbane, Co. Offaly.

I was born in the year 1899 at Creeve, Elphin, Co. Roscommon. When my school days were over, I was apprenticed to the drapery trade in Roscommon town, where I remained for about two years. In 1915 I left Roscommon and took up a position as an improver in Corcoran's drapery house in Ferbane. I have since been connected with the drapery business in Ferbane, where I now conduct my own drapery and tailoring establishment.

In April, 1917, I became a member of Sinn Féin and of the Irish Volunteers when a Sinn Féin Club and an Irish Volunteer company were formed in Ferbane. The meeting at which the club and the company were formed was held in John O'Gorman's tailoring shop. John was an old Fenian who had taken part in the Rising of 1867 at Tallaght, Co. Dublin, and who died about ten years ago after he had reached the ripe old age of something more than 100 years.

The foundation members of the company numbered about 15. The first officers were Dr. Patrick Doyle (now of Shinrone), Company Captain; Patrick Egan, 1st Lieutenant; and Laurence (Lowry) Feeney, 2nd Lieutenant. I was appointed Company Adjutant, and also Secretary of the Sinn Féin Club. Dr. Doyle had previous Volunteer experience. Whilst a medical student in Dublin, he had been a member of the Irish Volunteers, had fought in the Rising of Easter Week, 1916, and had subsequently been imprisoned in England.

In the first year of its existence, the Volunteer company's activities were mainly parades for drill and training, and the collection of money for an arms fund.

In 1918, when the British Government decided to extend the Conscription Act to Ireland, our ranks were swollen with new members - an event for which we were badly equipped. In our company at that time, our arms consisted of only a few .22 rifles, which we used for target practice. We got one of our members, a blacksmith named James Keegan of Kilcolgan, to make pikes, for which we cut ash handles at Ballinahown Wood. Raids on private houses for arms brought in a few shotguns, but nothing like sufficient to arm the number of men who were then enrolled in the company. The shotguns were, as a rule, handed over by their owners without the use of force on our part, but in one case a raid for arms led to the capture of two Volunteers. Without any orders and without acquainting any of the company officers, these two Volunteers, in their eagerness to get arms, went one night, unarmed but disguised, to the residence of a Miss Williams, where they expected to get two or three shotguns. It happened that Miss Williams was entertaining a British Army Officer that night. The officer, who was armed, held up the two Volunteers, sent for the R.I.C., and the two were later tried and sentenced to either six or twelve months' imprisonment.

The brigade and battalion organisation came into operation during that year of 1918, and for the time being our company in Ferbane became 'D' Company, 7th Battalion, Offaly Brigade. Dr. Pat Doyle was our first Battalion Commandant, with Thomas McIntyre of Cloghan as Vice Commandant. The late Seán Mahon of Banagher was the Brigade Commandant, Joseph Reddan of Cloghan was Brigade Adjutant, and Seán Robbins of Birr was the Brigade Quartermaster. In a subsequent reorganisation in 1920, the original Offaly Brigade

was sub-divided into two brigades. The battalion areas were rearranged, and the Ferbane Company then became 'C' Company, 2nd Battalion, Offaly No. 2 Brigade.

The end of the Great War in November, 1918, brought to an end the threat of Conscription, and many of those who joined the Volunteer company during the crisis, left when it was over. It was disheartening to see the strength of the company dwindle to something like 15 or 20 members, but that was the general experience of Volunteer units at the time.

In 1919, I became a member of the Ferbane Circle of the Irish Republican Brotherhood. I remember I was first asked to join the I.R.B. by "Lowry" Feeney, the Company Lieutenant. Shortly after giving my assent, I was sworn in by Joseph Reddan (the Brigade Adjutant) at Cloghan. There were about 8 members in the Ferbane Circle, and we held regular monthly meetings, at which proposed Volunteer activities were discussed. The I.R.B. Circle was, I might say, the body controlling the Volunteer Company. On instructions from the I.R.B., I resigned my secretaryship of the Sinn Féin Club. Although they were members of the Volunteers, the members of the I.R.B. Circle did not take the I.R.A. oath, the reason being that, having sworn allegiance to the Supreme Council of the I.R.B., we could not swear allegiance to any other body or any other organisation.

In addition to the ordinary garrison of R.I.C. in Ferbane, and later R.I.C. and Black and Tans, there was in those years a big garrison of British military stationed at Hunston Camp, about six miles from Ferbane. One of our earliest activities was to raid the mails and censor or

destroy the letters for the camp. Another was to destroy their carrier pigeons. The pigeons were used by the military at Hunston to communicate with their H.Q. in Dublin, who returned the pigeons by rail. The railway workers tipped us off whenever a coop of the pigeons, or, for that matter, whenever any supplies for the military arrived, and it was then a matter for us to arrange a raid and destroy the consignment.

At Easter, 1920, two evacuated R.I.C. barracks were burned down by our company. They were situated in the neighbouring villages of Creggan and Cloghan and from where the R.I.C. garrisons had been withdrawn a short time previously. Another incident at the same time was a raid on the Customs Office in Banagher, when we removed and burned the office records. These operations were carried out in compliance with the general order issued by G.H.Q.

Early in 1920, I was appointed Chief of the I.R.A. police for the Ferbane area. My rank at the time was 2nd Lieutenant of the company.

About April, 1920, on orders from Seán Mahon, the Brigade O/C, I arrested two ex-British soldiers named Fitzpatrick and O'Brien whom the Banagher Company suspected were giving information to the enemy. We captured one of them as he was coming out from Mass on a Sunday morning, in Banagher, and we took the other from a train at Belmont, between Banagher and Ferbane. Both men were held as prisoners under an armed guard in a disused game-keeper's house at Kilcor for about three weeks, when they were tried by a court of brigade officers. The onus of proving the case against the two men was placed on the Banagher Company's representatives who originally brought the charges, but beyond proving that the defendants were frequently seen

talking to and associating with R.I.C. men, they proved nothing. Both men were found not guilty and the court ordered their release.

Other police work included the ~~training~~^{arrest}, arrest and handing over of a man who had come into our area and who was required by the Roscommon Brigade on a robbery charge, and the arrest and trial of three brothers on charges of arson. The latter case took place at the time when British forces were burning farm buildings as reprisals. There had been a number of mysterious burnings of farmers' hay and outhouses, and after investigations we arrested these three brothers. They were not members of the Volunteers. It is difficult to attribute a motive for their crime. Perhaps they felt that they had a grievance, real or imaginary, against the farmers, and hoped that the burnings would be attributed to the British forces. They were tried by a courtmartial presided over by Mr. Patrick Boland, T.D. One brother was found not guilty and was discharged. The other two were found guilty and were sentenced to be deported from Ireland, with an alternative of paying a fine of £50 each. They had plenty of money and paid the fine. As a matter of fact, another brother of theirs paid the fine, £100 in cash, to me, and I in turn handed it over to the Brigade Adjutant.

On the night of June 2nd 1920, Clara R.I.C. barracks was attacked. That was a brigade operation, and our task that night was to block the road between Moate and Athlone. There were about 15 of us from Fербane engaged felling trees and manning the road blocks, as our instructions were to fight a delaying action if British military came out from Athlone. We retired next morning without encountering any enemy forces.

That attack on Clara Barracks was called off after the fight had lasted for some hours. There were, I think, three I.R.A. casualties. One was Paddy Seery from Tyrrellspass, who died from his wounds. I believe two others were wounded, one of whom had to have an arm amputated.

At Paddy Seery's funeral, my Smith and ~~W~~^Wason revolver which I had purchased from G.H.Q. for £6, was used by a member of the firing party. When returning it, he commented on its smooth and steady action, saying that there was no kick from it and that he never used a finer gun. When we examined it, however, we found that the bullets were intact except for a dinge on the caps. I returned the gun and ammunition with a report to G.H.Q., and was offered and accepted a Peter the Painter for an additional £2, and an extra £2 for a stock and ammunition. I heard nothing further about the dud ammunition.

Early in July, 1920, the British military authorities in Athlone set up a temporary military post at the bridge in Ferbane. It was there for a few weeks, probably for the month of July. The post was usually visited each night by military from Athlone, who travelled by lorry. One night, about 12 selected Volunteers from the Ferbane and Doon Companies blocked the road and took up a position at Corr Hill, about two miles from Ferbane, to ambush the lorry. That night only a dispatch rider on a motor cycle came along. We held him up and took his dispatch and motor cycle. I cannot say if the dispatch was of much importance. We sent it unopened to the Brigade H.Q., and we sold the motor cycle and put the proceeds to the arms fund.

On another occasion, a Volunteer named Thomas Buckley and I held up a British army dispatch carrier who was on his way from Dublin to Hunston Camp. He had travelled by train and made the mistake of leaving the train at Ballycumber Junction instead of at Ballycumber railway station. The train had left the Junction when he discovered his mistake, and he found he had about six miles to walk to Hunston. Our friends on the railway reported his presence in the area to us, and Buckley and I intercepted him at Ballyclare. He was unarmed and was much relieved when he realised that we were only interested in taking the dispatch and that we were not going to shoot him. That dispatch was also sent intact to the Brigade H.Q.

There was another incident in late July or early August, 1920, which resulted in our capturing a British army lorry. This lorry was used to transport foodstuffs from Athlone military barracks to Hunston military camp. Some days it was accompanied by another lorry, and sometimes it had a military escort on its way back to Athlone. On the day of its capture, we had a party of men from the Ferbane Company in position at Ballylin. One man, J.J. Flynn, climbed a tree to act as look-out, and another, the late Bill White, was in the act of pushing a hay tedder[?] out to block the road when the lorry came speeding along. "Lowry" Feeney and I dropped down in the water channel at the side of the road and trained our revolvers on the driver. He pulled up sharp, and we were surprised to find that the crew of the lorry were unarmed. We took away the lorry and destroyed any of its contents which were of no value to us. That lorry was hidden for a time out the country, and I believe it was later disposed of to a buyer and the money put into the arms fund.

During that summer of 1920, the boycott of the R.I.C. was introduced. It was strictly enforced in Ferbane. The R.I.C. protested, and if they were aggressive before, they were more so then, especially a Sergeant Collins, who went about carrying a sawn-off shotgun under his arm. When they asked for goods in shops, we usually taunted them, telling them to throw off their uniforms and resign and that they would then be served. One member of the force in Ferbane, a Constable O'Donoghue, did resign. I believe he did it for patriotic motives. We hailed his resignation as a victory, and went to the railway station to give him a send off when he was leaving.

"Lowry" Feeney and I received printed notices from the Black and Tans who had come to Ferbane, informing us that they would hold us responsible if any members of the British forces were interfered with in the area. I forget the exact wording, but it was tantamount to a threat that we would be shot as a reprisal for any attack on their forces. From then onwards, we took the precaution of sleeping out at night.

Following that, it was decided at a meeting of the I.R.B. Circle to ambush the R.I.C. party which patrolled the streets at night. "Lowry" Feeney and I were detailed to watch the patrol and to collect details of its strength, usual route, distance between the files, and the time it left the barracks and reached certain points. On the night arranged for the attack, Feeney and I cut the telegraph wires and, as arranged, went to the back of the schoolhouse, where we met the others who were to take part in the attack. They were Patrick Egan of Ferbane, Peter Kenny of Shannonbridge, "Mellows" Claffey of Seven Churches,

and Joseph Reddin, the Brigade Adjutant. All six of us were armed with either revolvers or shotguns. We moved around the town and took up positions, but no patrol came out. On the face of it, it looked as if the police had been tipped off, for there was no apparent reason, of which I am aware, that should have prevented the patrol from making its usual appearance. We went to the barracks and threw stones and pebbles at the roof and windows in the hope that they might make a rush out, but nothing would entice them out that night, so the operation had to be abandoned.

Towards the end of August or early in September, 1920, the R.I.C. garrison was withdrawn from Ferbane. Within half an hour of their departure, we had mobilised a party and had the barracks burning. It was decided to continue to enforce the boycott on their wives and families who were left behind. That was rather a distasteful duty, especially when it came to warning dairymen against supplying the women and children with milk, and warning owners of private pumps to refuse them permission to draw water, but, on the other hand, we realised that while they remained in Ferbane they would probably be a source of information to the enemy forces. The matter resolved itself after a short time when military lorries came along and took them and their belongings away.

Towards the end of September, 1920, the British military at Hunston Camp threatened that, if their mails or carrier pigeons were again interfered with, they would wreck Ferbane as a reprisal. Three or four days later, to be exact, on 3rd October, 1920, six armed soldiers from the camp went to Belmont Post Office to fetch some mails. On their way back, they were intercepted by a party of Volunteers from the Belmont-Shannonbridge Company at High

Street, disarmed of their Lee Enfield rifles and the mails taken from them. The operation was carried out without a shot being fired.

That night, the Ferbane Circle of the I.R.B. held a meeting and arranged a plan on the following lines to meet the threat to wreck the town. Ferbane is laid out in the shape of a cross, with four roads leading to Tullamore, Birr, Athlone and Hunston. There was a clear field of fire from the Tullamore, Birr and Athlone roads on to the cross, where it was assumed the soldiers would assemble, and it was arranged that two men, Pat Egan and Frank Dolan, would take up a position on the Athlone road, two others, Long Pat Egan and another, on the Tullamore road, and "Lowry" Feeney and I at the bridge on the Birr road. We were to pour fire into them from the three positions while our ammunition lasted, and then make good our escape. The fourth road, the Hunston road, did not give a clear line of fire to the cross, and it was decided to trench that road and to cover the trench with tree branches and sand. If the military came that way by lorry and were trapped by the trench, two of our men stationed there would give them everything we had in the way of bombs and grenades. We expected the military to come on the following night, October 4th. Lack of arms prevented us from planning for more than eight men to take part in the proposed operation.

I dispatched a messenger to Ballycumber for the stock and ammunition for my "Peter the Painter", which, I understood, had arrived there from G.H.Q. I had already received the gun itself. The messenger was also to collect any ammunition which the Ballycumber Company could spare us.

During the day of October 4th 1920, military and police made a sudden swoop on Ferbane, and Tom Buckley and I were captured whilst making our escape through the gardens at the back of our place of business. Buckley had a butcher's shop next door to me.

Before bringing us to Tullamore Prison, the military took us with them on a series of raids, and later that evening, when passing back through Ferbane, they made us lie down in the bottom of the lorry so that we could not be seen. ^{by} Our ~~our~~ way to Tullamore, I feared we would meet my messenger returning from Ballycumber with the ammunition and stock of the "Peter", but, fortunately, he was not on the road.

A few days later in Tullamore Prison, a soldier remarked to me, "Your pals planned to rescue you on the night of your arrest. They cut the road at Ferbane, but, lucky for them, we did not see them, for we would have blown the Shinnars to hell with machine-guns". I knew from this remark that the boys had gone ahead with the plan to defend Ferbane, but the military did not attempt to carry out their reprisal threat.

In Tullamore we were charged with the offence of having attacked and disarmed the soldiers at High Street, near Belmont, on October 3rd. As we had no part in that operation and could prove alibis, we sought, through friendly visitors, a direction from the Brigade Staff as to what action we should take at our trial, and were instructed to simply state, "As soldiers of the Irish Republican Army, we refuse to recognise the court". We did so, and the courtmartial which tried us found us guilty and sentenced each of us to two years' imprisonment with hard labour.

We were removed from Tullamore to Mountjoy Prison, and were there at the time of Kevin Barry's execution. We were next taken to Wormwood Scrubbs Prison, and finally to Hull Prison, from where we were released in January, 1922.

Whilst I was politically opposed to the Treaty, I took no active part in the Civil War.

Signed: Seán F. DOUGHERTY

Date: 10th December 1957

Witness: Grace
(Investigator).

