No. W.S. 1771

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BUREAU OF MILITARY HISTORY, 1913-21.

STATEMENT BY WITNESS.

DOCUMENT NO. W.S. 1771

Witness

Mr Florence Begley, 32 South Main Street, Bandon, Co. Cork.

Identity.

Member of Irish Volunteers and Irish Republican Army, Co. Cork.

Subject.

Crossbarry Ambush, 19th March, 1921.

Conditions, if any, Stipulated by Witness.

Nil

File No . 5 209.

Form B.S.M. .2

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On the evening of the 16th.of March 1921 whilst at Brigade H.Qrs.xat which was in the house of Mr. Forde, Ballymurphy, Upton, Charlie Hurley the then Brigade O/C.informed me that the Column was over at Tuogh or Rearour and he asked me if I was finished my work as we would both go over to see the lads. I told him that I would not be finished for another hour. He then said that he would stroll along to O'Mahony's, of Belrose. Upton. where I could meet him later and that we would then proceed from there to the Column. I contacted him approx an hour later as arranged and as we both were walking along towards Tom. Kellehers of Crow Hill we met Liam Deasy (then Bde.Adjt.) Tom Barry (column 0/c.) Tadg O'Sullivan (Bde.Q.M.) and I think Denis Lordan and Mick Crowley. Denis was Column Adjt. Mick Crowley was Bde. Engineer. I could be wrong about the Denis and Mick being with the others. However after a shake hands all round and a short chat in the boreen Tom Barry asked me if I had the Pipes over at H.Qrs.and if I would accompany the Column as the following day (Thursday) was St. Patrick's Day and it was intended to celebrate it in style by ambushing some lorries to the accompaniment of the pipes. Mandingartharmannatamannandarxinxatharxmanda. Tom made arrangements to have the pipes collected at Bde. H.Qrs.and brought over to O'Mahony's, Belrose, later in the evg. All of us proceeded from the boreen towards O'Mahony's houses (it was a regular call house in the Knockavilla Coy.area or Crosspound Coy.area both being the one and same Coy.) on the way we called in to Crosspound Public-house where we remained for only a few minutes. We remained at Mahony's for some hours where we had our tea and where doubtless the Senior Officers exchanged views on current happenings and plan of campaign. At around II or I2p.m.we all moved to leave the house and as we did so Charlie said to me "Flor we had better be going home too" (we looked on H.Qrs.) as being home and no wonder we would as Fordes, Ballymurphy, was Bde. H.Qrs. for many months prior to this evg). Tom Barry almost immediately said "Flor is coming with us Charlie" I will never forget Charlie's reaction to Toms statement-"what"he said"for the Skirl of the Pipes and the crack of the rifles I am going too," but Liam and Tom persuaded him not to attempt to come as they felt he was not physically fit as a result of a wound and a sprained ankle incurred during the Upton train ambush approx. four weeks earlier. It was impressed on him that if we had a long retreat he could not possibly stand up to it. In his disappointment he said "well Flor let me hear the pipes before you go play-a few tunes! I did as requested. I did not see Charlie after that night as he was killed on the following Saturday morning fighting has way out of H.Qrs. at Ballymurphy. (Charlie had spent a week at least convalescing at Exx H.Qrs.prior to the evg of the I6th.March and we both slept in the same bed whilst he was staying).

With Liam, Tom Barry, Tadg, and the others I joined the column that night (16th.March) at Rearour or, and we proceeded towards Shippool, (on the Innishannon-Kinsale road) arriving there in the early hours of Thursday morning the 17th. Immediately on arrival ambush positions were taken up and mines laid on the roads. We remained until dusk that evg.withdrawing then back to the townland of Skeough (which is situated between the main Bandon-Cork road and the Innishannon-Kinsale road.) where we billeted that night and all frida until after 11PM

when we moved off towards Crossbarry. We arrived at Crossbarry approx. I or I.30 a.m. to my recollection. We were halted by the column 0/c. and he gave orders taxant that in case of alarm we were to mobilise at Beasley's farmyard. This was the customary procedure before men were detailed to billets. We then proceeded to our billets which had been previously provided by the local Coy. officers and men and accompanied thereto by a local scout.

I was billeted with a family named O'Driscolls which overlooks the Quarry road as far as I can recollect. Peter Monohan a Scotchman (Brobably of Irish Parentage) was in charge of my billet. (Peter by the way was a deserter from the Cameron Highlanders who were stationed in Cove. I understand that he was a Sergt of the R.E.s. attached to the Camerons). After about a half an hour in billets the alarm was raided. Enemy lorries coming from Bandon direction etc.etc. We tumbled out of our billet and marched to the pre-arranged mobilisation point where we were detailed to take up positions. (I did not see Peter after this as he was killed later in the morning in action. From those who knew him better than I did I was told the he was a fine soldier.) (Has He is buried in the Bandon Republican Plot). I would say that around eight O'clock or perhaps half eight nine enemy lorries came along from the Bandon side into the ambush position. Immediately they were attacked at the same time as the firing started I proceeded to play the pipes and continued to do so whilst the firing lasted. If a full took place in the firing I stopped playing as I felt that I may be giving our position away. On resumption of firing I played away again. The lorries on the roadside were not full of soldiers as they approached our positions as many of them had been dropped along the road leading into where we were. The occupants did not last long but we were very fortunate that a bullet penetrated the drum of an enemy machine gun which was in position on a lorry thereby jamming it. Later a lad Edward White who was a prisoner in one of the lorries (and had been arrested earlier that night at Kilpatrick where he had been with a dispatch) from which he escaped luckily during the ambush carried the machine gun during our retreat. The nine lorraes were captured and burned. As the action on the roadside was taking place fighting developed on our rear and flanks.

at Crow Hill from which could be seen masks thick smoke coming from the vicinity of Fordes house (Bde.H.Qrs.) at Ballymurphy. Liam Deasy said to me there and then that Fordes was on fire on looking closely I said no it is not the house but the Feore of Ratax oats and my god Liam I said there are two Mills bombs in it and if they explode thex all the Forde family will be shot off hand by Percival and his gang. On investigating the occurences at Fordees on a later date I learned that Miss Mary Forde seeing the oats on fire and aware that the bombs were hiden therein and seeing that the Tommies had left the farm yard taking her father and brother with them rushed to the eass and pulled out the bombs weilkit and took them in her apron down to a well which was a short distance at the back of the house. Whilst looking at the thick smoke coming from

the Forde farmyard we were wondering what became of Charlie. Later in the day Tom Kelleher's sister came on with the news that he had been killed trying to fight his way out of the house. It was after he had been killed that that the feore of oats had been sat alight.

The Column suffered three the loss of three men killed and three wounded. I do not know what the enemy losses were but a Lieut. Hotblack was killed and quite a lot of soldiers were killed on the roadside in front of our positions. There were quite a number of enemy losses in the rear and flank positions also.

In the interest of historical accuracy I would like to record that Sean Buckley (then Brigade I.O.) was taken prisoner wikknikanownar ofixthmistanownamical statements. The crossbarry ambush at the outside farm of Mrs.O'Connell of Ballymurphy. This farm was located at Ballinphellig across the bog from Ballymurphy. Mr. Tim O'Connell (son of the owner) and a workman named Roche were arrested with him. This was before the fighting started down on the Crossbarry side. Miss J.Forde a step-sister of O'Connell pleaded with the officer in charge of raiding party (a Major) (Hampshire Regiment) not to take all the men could be not leave her someone of them to milk the cows. He eventually left the three but he emphasised that he would be back in an hour to see that they were still there and he also emphasised that were Three Hundred of our men (meaning British troops) in the area this morning and if you attempt to leave you will be caught. A few minutes after leaving the house and yard firing started below at Crossbarry and the troops moved slowly towards the firing.

Now sometime later perhaps two or three months after the Crossbarry ambush in conversation with Frank Neville of Raheen, Upton, (his then address) who was then on the run and was Asst. Brigade Q.M., I chatted to him about the happenings around Crossbarry before and after the ambush. We discussed the position of the enemy lorries on that morning of the ambush and various approaches of same from Cork, Bandon, Ballincollig, and Kinsale. As a result of what Frank told me and he was closely in touch with his original Coy. area (Crosspound) the total number of lorries concentrated in the ambush area was Thirty Four. Giving each lorry (they were mainly Crossley tenders) a seating capacity of approxiten men this would tally with the statement of the Hampshire Major to Sean Buckley and the other two with him. We know the Auxies from Macroom were to be in on the operation but they failed to turn up in time. I am not counting them in as they were not there.

I would be inclined to say that the maximum numbers of troops (British) involved that morning at Crossbary and precincts was 350. I do firmly believe that 350 was the maximum.

When chatting to Frank Neville I was very keenly interested in what happened to all the people I knew around Ballymurphy, Ballin-phellig, etc. on the morning of the ambush because of the fact that I had spent months living amongst them before the ambush. I was therefor

doubly keen on questioning in detail.

Another point I would like to make in the interests of historical accuracy is that the British operation that morning of 19th.of March 1921 was as a result of information which they had got from a captured I.R.A. man who had been the Coy. Capt.of the Knockavilla or Crosspound Coy.a month earlier. This man was captured or surrendered voluntarily whilst armed with a rifle and the scene of the ambush of the train at Upton Railway Station. It was an unfortunate business for the man concerned and for the safety of many many I.R.A. men. The Column could have been wiped out as a result of this mans betrayal of many vital facts relating to Brigade H.Qrs. and the movements of Senior Bde. Officers. The man in question was tried by the British. He was couptmartialled on a charge of being in possession of a rifle on the scene of an ambush namely -being in the attack on the train at Upton station on the morning of the I6th of March '2I. He was a wanted man by the British before this and he was not available to the I.R.A. to fulfil his obligations as a Coy'. Capt. for months prior to the Upton affair. In fact I was dumbfounded when we mobilised at or near Upton station on the morning of the I6th.when I saw him present as one who was to participate in the train attack. At any rate the circumstances of his arrest on the scene of the ambush were investigated by the Brigade O/C. Charlie Hurley (who happened to be in charge of the attack and who was wounded on the job) that very day and it was discovered that this man threw his rifle under the stairs of the house he occupied near the station and never fired a shot but remained there to be arrested (waiting). As I have said he was courtmartialled by the British but he was never sentenced but merely interned in Bere Island after having been in Cork for a time.

Within a week of the arrest of this one time Coy.Capt. we were tipped off by a friendly R.I.C. **Sangs** (Sergt.) to be carefu as he had given the game away meaning that he had talked quite a lot. At the general release of prisoners from internment camps late in 1921 this gentleman(Coy.Capt) approached a local I.R.A. man on his arrival home and volunteered a statement of what occured after his arrest at Upton and he clearly stated that he gave certain information whilst under the influence of drugs etc.etc.m He was later courtmartialled by Senior I.R.A. officers and sentenced to death subject to G.H.Q.sanction. Sentence was commuted to exile for life it being Truce times.

Now it was undoubtedly as a result of thismans informatio that the British happened by accident to come in contact with the column at Crossbarry.

It obviously took the British a whole month to formulate certain plans based on the information secured from our friend

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the latter admitted at his courtmartial by I.R.A. Senior officers during the Truce or Jan. 1922 that he had told the enemy where Brigade H.Qrs.. was situated among other things. In fact he confessed without having been asked on the night after his release from the British internment

The enemy apparently took it that very strong security measures. would be in force for the protection of H.Qrs.perhaps they were judging by their own standards on the field hence the wimmanaxafxaktingxawiftig slow methodical planning before moving to surround the locality of The Hampshire Major told Sean Buckley also that his instructions were to arrest every man & boy he came across in their homes or otherwise on that morning. An area of about four miles in circumference was taken in by the enemy troops and then they began to move in tightening the circle searc hing all the houses as they closed in. happened that the column had entered the area during the night neither the column or the enemy knowing anything of the moves or intended moves of the other. That is the position from the historical point of view. It was lucky that the column was so strong numerically. I do not think it was ever before or after so strong numerically. I may add though it is out of sequence that after the Crossbarry affair it came to light that north of Crosspound some nights previously the enemy troops were probing the ground here and there in the hope of making discoveries of I.R.A. activities or sentries having been posted for the protection of H.Qrs. It could any number nights from the time they got the information from their prisoner. This I do know that on a Sat.evg. a fortnight after the capture of the Coy. Capt. at the Upton ambush the enemy troops (I believe they were Auxies) took up ambush positions near Crossbarry village if one may call it so and after sometime they left their positions and searched the local public house of Cronin's holding up and searching the occupants or customers on the premises and asking quastions re certain houses and families in the Ballymurphy and Ballinphellig areas. all preparatory to making their major move on the area.

I would like to record that approx. two weeks after the Upton (FEB/6 克) ambush arrangements were made for Dr. Welply of Bandon to come and visit the Brigade O/C.in his capacity as a doctor. The Bde. O/c. was not making a good recovery. I met Dr. Welply at Crossbarry village and accompanied him in his car to Barrens, OF Balluphe 14.6, the pre-arranged venue. Dr. Welply was at this time M.O. to the British troops stationed in Bandon Some few years later I happened to meet Dr. Welply and we discussed the meeting referred to. I mentioned that the man he had attended on that day was killed a few weeks later in Ballymurphy. He replied that he had since heard so but though he attended the British wounded in Bandon Barracks on the morning of the Crossbarry ambush and saw the I.R.A. dead in the Barrack yard he did not recognise and could not recognise any one of them. He then went on to relate the circumstance. of the Bde. 0/c's death as he had got it from the British Officers on that day. Charlie had fired through the front door and then dashed out the back door but just as he got outside the back a wommie hearing the shots came running towards the house with his rifle and took a shot from his hip whilst running and just by fluke blew Charlies brains out.