

ORIGINAL

BUREAU OF MILITARY HISTORY 1913-21
BURO STAIRÉ MILEATA 1913-21
No. W.S. 453

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BUREAU OF MILITARY HISTORY, 1913-21.

STATEMENT BY WITNESS

DOCUMENT NO. W.S. 453.....

Witness

Captain George Staunton,
"Sans Souci",
Fr. Griffin Road,
Galway.

Identity

Member of Irish Volunteers, Prospect Hill,
Galway, 1917 - .

Vice-Comd't. 2nd Battalion, West Connemara
Brigade, 1920 - .

Subject

National events, Co. Galway,
1917 - 1921.

Conditions, if any, stipulated by Witness

Nil

File No. S.1597.....

Form B.S.M. 2.

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STATEMENT BY CAPTAIN G. STAUNTON,

"Sans Souci", Fr. Griffin Road, Galway.

Ever since I was 10 or 12 years of age I was very anxious to know everything in connection with firearms and drill books. My father had in the house a shotgun and a revolver and that gave me an opportunity of learning something concerning the use of firearms. Every chance I got I was out with the gun and of course unknown to my father and the whole family. I used to get up at 5 o'clock in the morning - steal out the gun and shoot rabbits, wild fowl and anything that would come my way. The sad part of it was that I dared not bring home the "kill"; naturally I would be giving the game away. My father had also a very heavy type of rifle - it was for the purpose of shooting seals - it was that heavy that I was not able to lift it to the shoulder, and in order to satisfy my curiosity I used to place it on a rest and fire a few shots. I remember the first shot I fired from this rifle will never be forgotten for besides getting a woeful kick from it I was deaf in the right ear for a considerable length of time afterwards. This incident didn't prevent me from getting fond of firearms. As a matter of fact I got to like them more and more even to this day.

I was just as fond of drill books - I somehow got possession of a British Training Manual through some militia man from the village. I used to keep this safe in my school bag. I valued this Drill Book much more than I did my school books and religiously studied it

from cover to cover. I had always the ambition of becoming a soldier but not a British soldier - somehow I never had any "grádh" for anything British, and the R. I. C. I disliked them.

My father emigrated to America when he was quite young and worked there for a number of years, becoming an American citizen, and after returning home from America he became a staunch land leaguer, and I suppose, as the saying goes - "like father like son", I was naturally brought up in an atmosphere which savoured of nothing else but the real gaelic outlook. I remembered an old man of 80 years of age who spent all his life in Australia and came home to end his days in his native "Lettercallow" coming to visit my home every night - (I was only a little kid at the time). It was most interesting listening to him giving an account of the British and the British rule in that country, and needless to say his account of things there was everything but favourable. This old man's "talks" on his far-off travels were I suppose instrumental more or less in making me antagonistic towards British rule in this country. One of his remarks will for all time cling to my memory. It was his description of the Equator. The strangest thing he saw in his travels was in crossing the Equator - it was daylight in the bow of the ship and the darkness of night in the stern. His stories, coupled with other stories of the "old man" of the time in relation to the prevailing British laws; the law of the Bailiff, the Famine, etc. were the principal features. Yes! these narratives definitely inspired my enthusiasm to become one of those with

nothing else in view except to free the country from the saxon yoke. I had my mind made up to strike a blow whenever the opportunity presented itself.

In the year 1917 I came into Galway City to serve an apprenticeship as a motor mechanic. I only spent a short term at that. I then served in the drapery trade and subsequently served some time in the Department of Agriculture in Glasnevin, Dublin.

Towards the end of 1917 I joined the Volunteers. Their Headquarters was in the Thomas Ashe Sinn Féin Hall, Prospect Hill, at the time. There was a fairly large number of young men in this Volunteer Company. There was a basement in the hall which was used exclusively for drilling and lecturing purposes. We used to attend there twice a week regularly; wooden guns we used for practising rifle drill. Occasionally the whole Company would be taken out at night into the open country for the purpose of learning how to attack and defend at night time. Scouting and street fighting were also part of the training programme.

Our Acting Brigade O/C. at this period was Seamus Murphy. He was Manager of the weekly paper called the "Galway Express". As far as I can recollect the whole of the county of Galway together with Clare or at least part of the county of Clare comprised the Brigade. Anyhow nothing of an eventful nature occurred until 1918. Then came the famous General Election and the conscription threat. Things began to get livelier. The result of the General Election meant great encouragement to the boys. At that Election I was very

actively engaged, organising, and canvassing. I voted many times in the names of people who were dead for years. My name wasn't even on the register of voters.

We had route marches very frequently around this time. I remember marching with the Galway Company on St. Patrick's Day to Athenry. There was a Brigade mobilisation this day and I don't believe that the Athenry people witnessed such a large assembly in the town ever before. I remember that we were followed by two R. I. C. men on bicycles all the way to Athenry on that day. It so happened that somebody in my section shouted up "the lunatic" while we were on the march and near enough to the R. I. C. to hear it. Anyhow it was the cause of finding myself for the first time in personal contact with the limb of the law for a few days afterwards. I was arrested and brought to Eglinton Barracks. One of the policemen's names was "Mulloy". I was asked questions about the "lunatic" incident. I answered nothing except in the Irish language; even my name, I gave it in Irish. Of course, I pretended I didn't know what they were talking about. There were two of them questioning me without result. I was kept there for a considerable length of time and eventually the two R. I. C. brought me to the door and asked the same questions again, but of no avail. Finally one of them stood back and gave me a ferocious kick in the posterior as a result of which I suffered some pain for some time afterwards. I didn't mind very much as long as I wasn't kept in altogether. They were frantic over this "lunatic" business and this is how the lunatic affair occurred. Sometime previously it so happened that some man from the "Annydown" Headford district got insane with the

result that the police went out to collect him for the purpose of having him committed. Anyhow when a party of R. I. C. arrived at this man's house they found that he was armed with a shotgun and he had also the house barricaded, and on approaching the house he fired on them and wounded the Sergeant. The proposition was much tougher than what they thought it would be and so far as I know they didn't succeed in arresting the insane man for some time.

Towards the end of 1918 the Volunteers or at least those who commanded were contemplating an attack on Loughgeorge R. I. C. Barracks. There were rumours galore but nothing materialised. Around this time too there was no love lost between myself and the R. I. C. and in addition to that things were getting a kind of monotonous as far as I. R. A. activities were concerned - I decided to go home. There I commenced straight away organising the Volunteers. I got in touch with Colm O'Gaora who was closely connected with the movement, and offered my services. In the meantime I got a job as "lorry driver" for the Co-operative Society in Tiernea, Lettermore. Fr. M. McEvily was Manager of the Co-op. and a great supporter of the cause. He was also one of the judges (chairman) of the Sinn Féin Courts. For a time I acted as Court Registrar for that area. Needless to mention I was kept fairly busy during that period.

In 1920 I was given the rank Vice Commandant of the Battalion. Colm O'Gaora and myself got going and organised the Battalion into Companies. We were listed as Battalion No. 2 and was made up of the following Companies. Incidentally, I have before me the same old $\frac{1}{2}$ -inch map which I used at that period and on which the

Company boundaries are marked out (the only souvenir left).

Battalion II - West Connemara Brigade

Colm O'Gaora	-	O. C.
G. Staütnton	-	Vice O. C.
P. Mannion	-	Adjutant.
P. Nee	-	Quartermaster.

Rosmuck Company A.	(97)	O. C. John Wallace, P. Conroy, Colm P. Conroy
Carraroe "	B. (87)	O. C. M. McDonagh, G. Costello.
Kilkerrin "	C. (75)	O. C. M. Nee, M. J. O'Malley, R. Connolly.
Lettermore "	D. (65)	O. C. P. Delapp, G. Cloherty, G. Connolly.
Tiernia "	E. (58)	O. C. Michael McDonagh, M. O'Toole.
Camus "	F. (69)	O. C. John Conneely, P. Geoghegan.
Clynagh "	G. (79)	O. C. P. Clancy, P. McDonagh.
Lettermullen	H. (68)	O. C. John Derrane, J. McDonagh, Ed. Beaty.

I am not very definite as regards the names of those who were Lieutenants and Second Lieutenants as I have nothing to go by except to rely on my memory.

About March 1920, we had the whole Battalion in good trim and our next move was to attack and capture the Gortmore Barracks. This meant a lot plotting and planning - as can be seen on the map our Companies were very scattered with the result that our lines of communications were our hardest problems. Just to give the reader an idea I will give an instance here.

The figures in parenthesis are the numbers of men in each company who were active volunteers. The total of the Battalion Roll was much in excess of these figures. I'm only relying on memory. D.

Lettermullen and the point opposite across the Bay at Mynish Carna is only 3 or 4 miles, but to travel around by road it is something like 46 miles.

Lettercallow and the point opposite across the Bay is only 3 miles, but around by road it is 36 miles.

Annaghvane near Bealandangan and the point opposite Garrafin, Rosmuck, is only $1\frac{1}{2}$ miles and around by road it is about 23 miles.

In order to overcome the difficulty of getting dispatches through quickly we had very often to depend on boats, but then again we had another snag to contend with - the tide and the weather - we had the "naval arm" fairly well organised, so much so that it proved invaluable to us later on.

At any rate I was looking forward myself to the capture of Gortmore Barracks, but to attack this Barracks on our own was out of the question due to the fact that we had no rifles or grenades in the Battalion. Consequently it was arranged that Miceál Thornton, East Connemara, would send on some men with the necessary items; i.e. a few mines, grenades and a few rifles. On the appointed night of the attack a number of men went off and took up positions convenient to the Barracks. My task that night was to proceed to Tullycross Roads, Ballinahown, with the Co-op. lorry. I arrived there early in the night and waited there alone until approximately 2 o'clock in the morning. I felt very miserable that night from once it was past midnight. There was no earthly chance of having the task completed before daylight in the morning, because from where I was waiting for those men to the place of attack

was 15 miles away. Anyhow when "Thornton" and his men arrived it was too late and it was there and then decided to postpone the whole affair until some future date. I came to the conclusion immediately that depending on outsiders was purely a waste of time - I took a very poor view of the whole thing. I had now to perform the most galling task of all - to go back and inform the men in waiting that they were to withdraw and that the order to attack was cancelled. Our prestige in this case was dealt a heavy blow and naturally had a demoralising effect on the men. The men, of course, were indeed very disappointed and as one of the men told me afterwards it could have been worse. This man with two others were ordered that night to cover and guard a certain R. I. C. man's house. This policeman being a married man with family was living out of Barracks, and luckily enough for himself, he didn't venture outside his own door this particular night. Had he made any attempt to proceed to the Barracks which was a distance of about 500 or 600 yards away, he would be a dead man.

My first experience of being under enemy fire was in Carraroe one night while carrying out arrests of some men who were supposed to have robbed another man in the village. Incidentally this was my own birthday. There was an order come through from Galway City H. Q. authorising the arrests, but somehow I could never get the full facts in connection with the order. I don't remember receiving the order officially. Anyhow, however, we arrested some men and while in the process of arresting them the R. I. C. appeared on the scene. There were some shots fired. We were not in a

position to close in on the R.I.C. that night by any means as our armament only consisted of one bull-dog .45 revolver and a few shotguns. We got all our prisoners - 6 or 7 in number - away safely to an unknown destination. There were two or three of the Volunteers arrested that night by the R.I.C. It is to be noted here that the R.I.C. Barracks was only a distance of $1\frac{1}{2}$ miles away from where we were operating that night.

Around this period the duties of policing the area were performed extensively by the Volunteers and it was plainly to be seen that the controlling powers of the R.I.C. forces were being paralysed and the collapse of the once mighty power of England was only a matter of time. It was only a matter of days until the evacuation of the R.I.C. Barracks took place and immediately they departed we burned down the Barracks. They were brought to Oughterard in order to strengthen the garrison there - it meant also a safer anchorage. As Lettermore came under the jurisdiction of the Carraroe R.I.C. they occasionally used to pay a visit there by crossing the bay in a curragh. The first opportunity that would present itself I was to attack them on landing. On receiving a message one day that they had arrived, I at once got my old bull-dog .45 and shotgun and in the meantime I sent word to a few of the "boys" who were to take part in the attack. Unfortunately we were too late - they just had been a few hundred yards away out to sea when we arrived. I actually ran as fast as I could without halting on that occasion, the distance being almost two miles. The number of policemen on that day was three, with two boatmen. I was fully convinced afterwards that had we been there in time the three rifles which we very badly needed were ours. We never got the chance again.

Kilkerrin R. I. C. Barracks was evacuated about July 1920. The occupants took refuge in the Carna Barracks, a distance about six miles away. We burned the Kilkerrin Barracks to the ground the following night after their leaving it. Burning of police Barracks was a dangerous proposition around this period because booby-traps were very likely being set by the police. Those booby-traps sometimes consisted of mines, grenades, etc. concealed or cleverly placed in such a position that those entering the building were liable to be blown up on the spot - thanks to the "tÓglach". This was an organ that was published by the I.R.A. Headquarters and circulated principally, giving very useful information concerning the latest in everything applicable to the fighting forces of the I.R.A.

It was about this time that I took it on myself to go direct to Mr. Seamus Murphy, Manager of the "Galway Express". He was the acting Brigadier of the whole area at the time. I remember I had planned to carry out an ambush on two or three R. I. C. that used to frequent a certain place. Anyhow I approached Acting Brigadier Murphy at his office in Eyre Square, Galway. I explained to him my views and what I had in mind as regards the ambush. He would not give me any authority to proceed with the operation. As far as I can recollect he said it was sheer madness. I had to drop the whole thing with a heavy heart, and after that I had no intention of having anything further to do with the man.

In the Battalion II area the R. I. C. were all cleared out. As far as I know, Gortmore Barracks was

the last to be consumed by the flames.

In September, 1920, the reorganisation of the West Connemara Brigade took place. Colm Ó Gaora, O.C. Battalion II, and myself attended a meeting of the newly-formed Brigade which was held at Pádraic Ó Máille's house in "Muintir Eoin". Captain P.J. McDonnell of Léenane had been appointed by G.H.Q. to take charge of the Brigade. Needless to say I was more than delighted with the change and so were a good many more of the boys. Very important things were discussed at this meeting, but unfortunately having to rely on my memory I am not in a position to relate the many important things that were dealt with. From the commencement of the change over things were taking a different shape and in the right direction. First of all the question of procuring arms by hook or by crook was the order of the day. G.H.Q. would not supply arms without payment and of course necessitated the collecting of sufficient money for the purpose of purchasing same, rifles, ammunition, grenades, revolvers, etc. It was accordingly arranged that Captain McDonnell proceed to Dublin in order to procure same. I am not in a position to say when the next meeting of the Brigade took place but I think it was some time in November 1920.

Colm Ó Gaora and I reported at Glanlish some time about the end of November 1920 and there we met Pádraic Ó Máille and Johnsy King who had a few rifles and some ammunition. They were both "on the run" and we remained with them until very near the Christmas. Colm and myself had a fairly hard time during that period. We were both "on the run" and had to be very cautious in

case we would be arrested by the enemy. There was a herd's house there in Glanlosh in which Pádraic Ó Máille used to sleep in. Unfortunately there was only the one bed which meant of course that the bed had to be used alternately - those who slept in it at night kept a look out during the day and those who slept during the day would keep a look out during the night. The food was supplied from Pádraic Ó Máille's home in "Muintir Eoin". Pádraic had located a cave near the top of a mountain not very far from the herd's house in which we were staying and Pádraic, being a much wanted man by the police at this time, used often sleep in this cave; anytime there was any rumour of a raid coming off we would have to make for it. Getting up to this cave was a torture indeed for Colm and myself on account of not being used to climbing the mountain but it was no trouble at all to Pádraic. I remember one night the dogs started barking away down the glen and immediately Pádraic heard them he made up his mind to make for the cave - I shall never forget that night. Off we started after some argument between himself and Colm - Colm didn't want to go at all and neither did I because each of us had to carry a big load. In order to please Colm anyhow Pádraic volunteered to take most of the stuff. His load that night consisted of one big bag of turf, three rifles, a bucket of fire and a few more things thrown in. He proceeded on up the side of the mountain without the least bit of bother, Colm and myself creeping on slowly behind him, and believe me it was a great relief when we reached the cave.

Captain McDonnell and Jack Feehan were away in Dublin at this time trying to procure arms for the column. Both of them were arrested by Crown Forces and

released again and eventually succeeded in bringing back with them some rifles and ammunition.

Christmas was very near and Colm and myself were anxious to be home. We took our departure from Glanlosh a couple of days before Christmas Eve. There was no such a thing that time as travelling by road - it was too dangerous to cycle. We had to walk the mountains to and from Glanlosh which was a distance of about 30 miles each way. We got accustomed to it but even so trudging the bogs and the mountains at night required a certain amount of energy, determination and many of the other qualities necessary to achieve the qualifications of the man whose only aim is to win over a cunning and treacherous foe. We had to endure great hardships at times and as it is bound to occur in the case of the man "on the run" we got our quota of hunger and thirst, but anyhow there was one great consolation that God favoured us with very good weather for the duration of the Tan period.

During the 1920 Christmas festival and up to the month of April 1921, nothing really happened worth relating beyond the fact that we were at all times on the alert and attending to the duties which usually demand the attention of an officer responsible for the administration of his Battalion.

In the interval between December 1920 and the end of January 1921, the West Connemara Flying Column was formed and Captain P.J. McDonnell was appointed O.C. There were about 26 men in the Column, representing the four Battalions of the Brigade, i.e. No. 2 Battalion Leenane; No. 2 Battalion Rosmuck; No. 3 Battalion

Roundstone; No. 4 Battalion Clifden.

The next big operation which I took part in was the Screebe Ambush. For some time before this ambush took place the police stationed at Oughterard were in the habit of cycling as far afield as Camus and Lettermore-na-Caille once a week. The number of men in the patrol varied and each man was armed with rifle and revolver. The object in view principally was to pay a visit to the old haunts where usually a drop of potteen could be procured. Their movements were closely kept under observation until finally it was decided to ambush them. Screebe was considered the most suitable place for the attack and after the usual detailed planning the Active Service Unit arrived, waited and was prepared for action at the nearest point to Screebe which was the little village of Doire Átha Banbh.

On the 6th April, 1921, the R. I. C. patrol of five policemen fully armed, came along, but being earlier than usual the "boys" were not in their respective positions in time, with the result that the attack didn't come off until they were returning. A police patrol always avoided the mistake of keeping close together while travelling in patrol formation, and accordingly our men were arranged in such a position so as to allow the patrol to come into the ring in such a way that the leading man as well as the rear man would be covered by the ark of fire of the whole column. Unfortunately the leading R. I. C. man had not reached the pre-arranged point of reference when one over-anxious member of the column fired a shot on the impulse of the moment which upset the whole target. However, the column opened fire resulting in an R. I. C. man being

wounded and his firearms captured. A few more of them were captured and disarmed; their bicycles as well as some bottles of potteen were also captured and broken up. None of our men suffered any casualties although the fighting was on quite a long time. This victorious fight was in itself a great source of encouragement to the men of the West Connemara Flying Column. The R.I.C. resisted desperately although it was to no purpose.

But, of course, the aftermath of this operation will not be forgotten by the people who lived in the vicinity of the Screebe Ambush for it wasn't long until the Black and Tans were on the scene. They burned five houses, namely, Colm Ó Gaora's, The School Residence in which the teacher Mr. P. Conneely was living, Pearse's Cottage, P. Geoghegan's, Doire Atha Banbh, and the Co-operative Store in Camus.

My own home in Lettercallow was visited by the Tans on this occasion too, fully intended to burn it down although it was fifteen miles from the scene of the ambush. It would be burned down only for the District Inspector Golding who accompanied the Tans. He saved it. At that time they were more anxious to get myself than they were in burning the house. They carried my photograph around with them. The R. I. C. had it in the Barracks in Eglinton Street, Galway. How they came into possession of it was during the 1914-1918 World War - motor drivers were compelled to have a permit for driving and on that permit it was necessary to have your photo attached.

After the Screebe ambush we were kept moving the whole time. It would be foolish to remain in the one place for any length of time and to look for any kind of comfort was out of the question. Any rest we had was during the daytime for at night time we did all the travelling; furthermore, a stranger in a strange place would be spotted and talked about if seen by the neighbours, who I must say this for them, wouldn't wish anything harmful to happen us, but there was the danger that the wrong person would get to know things ending up in causing unpleasantness to us perhaps.

In the month of April 1921, the Column was split up in two sections - one section operating on the north side of West Connemara and the other section operating in the south. The Commander of each section respectively was Captain P. J. McDonnell and Gerald Bartley, O/C. Battalion IV. The Headquarters of the South Section was located at Glencoaghan near Recess. The idea of splitting up the main column was due to the big problem of procuring sufficient food to feed the men and on that account it was advisable not to have too many clustered together in the one place.

The next big move which was in contemplation was the preparation for an attack on the Crown Forces operating in convoys in and around Clifden and Recess. This required very careful planning as those convoys were very well equipped and strong in numbers.

I may mention here that shortly after the Screebe ambush sometime around the 25th April I think, the Muinntir Eoin fight took place. The Column was

billeted there in Pádraic Ó Máille's house at the time. The R.I.C. went to raid it but they got more than they bargained for - the fight lasted for the whole day long. I wasn't there that day but I was on my way going there through Oorid and Shanakeela when luckily enough I got word that the Crown Forces were carrying out a big round-up commencing at Maam Cross. I just escaped from being nabbed on that occasion.

A few weeks passed before I could get in contact with the Column again. The Tans travelling in Crossley Tenders were now very active especially around Clifden and Recess, and between Galway and Clifden. We planned to slow down their activities by blowing up a number of bridges on the main routes. By this time the nights were getting short and, of course, to our disadvantage, because it meant less time in carrying out night operations. Lough Inagh Bridge between Recess and Kylemore and Costelloe Bridge near Costelloe Lodge were rendered impassable. The destruction of these bridges was a bit laborious. They were partly knocked down by men with picks, crowbars and shovels, and partly by explosives; our supplies of gellignite were practically negligible but under the circumstances we didn't fare too badly.

It was about the month of June (I don't know the date) Colm O'Gaora and I received word to proceed to Glencoaghan as quickly as possible. We took off at dusk, accompanied by a guide, Pádraic O'Nee (Joe Conneely was another of our guides - both men were from Inver) across the bog on towards Aitriche, Recess. The night wasn't by any means dark and it was fine settled weather. About two hours' walk would bring us to the river at Aitriche but instead of reaching there in the two hours

we had travelled for over three hours, and besides we had lost our way. The three of us sat down to have a rest and to take our bearings. We didn't know on God's earth where we were; the most peculiar thing about it was that after being walking the whole night we never came across a lake or stream despite the fact that there are hundreds of them. We were so mesmerised on that particular night that it failed us absolutely to recognise any of the landmarks we knew so well heretofore. Colm lost his hat; I lost my tobacco pouch; Pádraic O'Nee, the guide, was looking for his pipe and he having it in his mouth. Finally when we were on the verge of giving it up as a bad job, the guide turned his cap inside out and went on ahead of us a few yards sniffing exactly like a setter. Suddenly he called out to us that he recognised the spot. It transpired that instead of being at Aitrighe where we meant to cross the main road, we were over at Shanakeela, about six miles out of our course. Had we proceeded directly without interruption to the spot we intended crossing the main road we would undoubtedly walk straight into the trap of death. The Crown Forces from Clifden were raiding on that particular night and in that particular place. God took a hand in saving us again once more.

Preparations were well advanced by the end of June 1921 towards striking another blow at the Tans and we were all eagerly looking forward to having a crack at them, but shortage of ammunition, mines and grenades were responsible for the delay. In the month of July, 1921, we were called to a meeting of the Brigade to be held at Gleannageimhleach, and to get to this place we had to cross the Killary Harbour from somewhere near Dernynacleigh to Bundorrgha on the Mayo side, thence by

road to Gleannageimhleach. There were three or four lorry loads of Tans in Leenane that same night. Strange thing that the Truce was called the following day and that same night we were enjoying ourselves in Leenane where we were given a sumptuous meal, plenty of refreshments and a hearty céad míle fáilte.

SIGNED George Stanton Capt.

DATE 27-11-50.

Sean Brennan Capt.

WITNESS

Lad Rany & J. Hogan

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