

ORIGINAL

BUREAU OF MILITARY HISTORY 1913-21

BURÓ STAIRÉ MILEATA 1913-21

No. W.S. 479

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BUREAU OF MILITARY HISTORY, 1913-21.

STATEMENT BY WITNESS

DOCUMENT NO. W.S. 479.....

Witness

Commandant Michael Murphy,
61 Grosvenor Square,
Dublin.

Identity

Member of 'B' Company 2nd Battalion
Longford Brigade Irish Vol's 1917 - .

Member of I.R.B. Longford 1919 - .

Batt'n. O/C. 2nd Longford Brigade Nov. 1920 - .

Subject

- (a) National activities, Longford, 1917-1921;
- (b) Military activities in Longford area
1920-1921.

Conditions, if any, stipulated by Witness

Nil

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STATEMENT BY ~~COMMANDANT~~ MICHAEL MURPHY,
61, Grosvenor Square, Dublin.

I joined the Irish Volunteers in May, 1917, at Briskill, Newtownforbes, Co. Longford. It was Hubert Wilson that took me into the Volunteers. I took no oath on joining - just made a form of declaration, the contents of which I cannot remember now. The Volunteers paid a subscription of sixpence per week towards the purchase of arms, etc., and to cover ordinary expenses.

My family always had a good national outlook and were active in the days of the Land League. In addition, we were given a good national training during our schooldays and got a good grinding in Irish history and kindred subjects.

I joined "B" Company, 2nd Battalion, Longford Brigade. The Company commander at the time was John Murphy, now deceased. He was not a relation of mine. Bernard Dowd and George McCann were the Lieutenants of the Company. I took over the training of the Company. I had no previous Army experience but I had picked up a lot from watching the old National Volunteers drilling and this, supplemented by the study of British Army manuals which were available to me, enabled me to master the subject and to impart instruction successfully. I always had a distinct flair for anything of a military nature. We had no arms at this time and did our training with wooden guns. Instruction included physical training and extended order drill. The strength of the Company at this time was about sixty, all told.

The bye-election for South Longford was on at this time. It was during the period of this election that the Volunteers were formed in the area. The Volunteers took a very active part in the election - organising and canvassing voters - protection duty at the polling stations, bringing voters to the booths, escorting the ballot boxes and suchlike work.

After this election, our numbers increased to approximately one hundred. The Ancient Order of Hibernians (Board of Erin) were then in existence in fair strength in the area but, after the election, they died out and their members generally went over to the Sinn Féin organisation, which was now gathering strength everywhere. I was now appointed Secretary of the local branch of the Ancient Order of Hibernians (American Alliance). Seán Milroy was then head of this organisation. It was a separate and distinct organisation from Sinn Féin, but worked in complete harmony with it.

Nothing of any importance happened during 1917. We continued our training as best we could, and also the tightening-up of the organisation. We still had no arms of any description at this time. We did our drilling and training in the open, under the eyes of the R.I.C. who did not interfere with us. Everything carried on in a very normal way until the Conscription Act for Ireland was passed in the English Parliament. When this crisis arose, our numbers went up by leaps and bounds, and the strength of the Company rose to about two hundred. When this threat

was over, our strength reverted to about our original numbers.

During the crisis mentioned, a Battalion was organised in the area - previously the organisation had been on a Company basis. As far as I can remember, M.P. Connolly was appointed Officer Commanding. Michael Cox of Ballymahon Street, Longford, was Adjutant. The Quartermaster was Tommy Farrell of Feaefad. The Companies were "A" Feaefad, "B" Newtownforbes, "C" Ballymacormack, "D" Longford town. The Battalion area ran along the Shannon from about four miles from Lanesboro', on the Kilashee side, and included the town of Longford and nearly up to Drumlish and back via the Shannon to near ~~Lanesboro'~~ ^{RODSKEY}. The area roughly took in the three parishes of Clonguish, Longford and Ballymacormack. "A" Company was commanded by Patrick Doyle of Lisduff, "B" Company by George McCann of Creeva, Longford, "C" Company by Charles Maguire of Curry, and "D" Company by Colman Mulkerrins of Longford town. ^{NAGH}

In the end of 1918, the general election took place and the Volunteers again took a very active part. They were engaged in checking the register of voters, organising transport to take the voters to the polls, guarding and protection duty at the polling stations, and escorting the ballot boxes and such duties. There was considerable hostility to the Volunteers in many places, particularly in Longford town. This opposition was generally from the wives of Irishmen who were serving in the British Army and from the camp followers of the British Army.

In January of 1919, the first Dáil assembled and took over responsibility for the Volunteers who now became the

I.R.A., and each member was required to take an oath of allegiance to the Irish Republic. We had some deflections at this time. Some of the men who had joined up at the time of the conscription crisis now lost interest and faded out. By now, we had a number of shotguns and some revolvers of various types and calibres. We also had a small amount of ammunition for these revolvers.

There was little of importance took place in the area until about August of this year. Drilling and training went on as usual and still in the open. About August, 1919, an aeriocht was held at Aughnaclyff. This was attended by a large number of Volunteers, but there were no official parades or such. When the people were coming home from this, the police at Drumlish opened fire on them and wounded seriously two men. One of these men was crippled for life. I do not remember their names but they were Volunteers. I do not remember why the police fired or what reasons they gave for doing so. The Sergeant in charge of the police was Sergeant McClean, who was from the North of Ireland and, I understand, an "Orangeman". This was the first blood that flowed in Longford area.

About this time I joined the I.R.B. I was called to sit on a courtmartial in Seán Duffy's house. On arrival there, I was informed that I could not sit unless I was a member of the I.R.B. I agreed to join, and was sworn in by Seán Cawley of Granard who administered the oath of the I.R.B. to me. We formed a local circle, of which Bernard Dowd was head. Our membership was about ten, all of whom were Volunteers. If there was any very serious duty to be performed, it was the I.R.B. members who were detailed for it.

By this time I had been appointed to the position of second in command of the Battalion. Shortly after joining the I.R.B., I was called by the Brigade Commander, Reddington, to Esker Hall. Arrangements were made here to dispose of Sergeant McClean of Drumlish who had been the main mover in the shooting affairs at Drumlish. About eight or ten were picked for this job. The Assizes Court was due to sit in Longford, and Sergeant McClean and the police from Drumlish would be attending it. We were to ambush this party at Letrim Crossroads on their return from Longford. It was only intended to do in Sergeant McClean and to disarm the remainder.

We took up position at the Cross-roads, armed with shotguns and revolvers. Only two of the police returned by this route. They were held up and disarmed. McClean and the other police returned by another route and so escaped. McClean was never got. This incident took place about October, 1919.

We still had got no service weapons, such as rifles, in our Battalion area. At Christmas, 1919, Frank Thornton came down from Dublin. He was a General Headquarters organiser. He was an insurance agent and he used this as cover for his I.R.A. activities. Just before Christmas, we were doing training in the Hall at Briskill. We were preparing to raid the R.I.C. Barracks at Newtownforbes. One of the Volunteers accidentally discharged a revolver and killed Volunteer John Mahon. The police from Drumlish and Newtownforbes attended at the inquest. The verdict was accidental death. The police arrested Nolan and proceeded against him at a local Court. We had got at the

Magistrates before the trial, with the result that Nolan was released.

In January, 1920, Drumlish R.I.C. Barracks was attacked. Our Battalion took part in this attack. The job allotted to us was to block the roads leading from Longford town to Drumlish and to cut the telephone and telegraph wires. Those demolitions were carried out successfully. The Barracks was not captured.

After this, the R.I.C. evacuated Drumlish and also all the small outlying barracks held by them and concentrated their force in larger garrisons. On Easter Saturday night of 1920, all the evacuated stations were burned by the I.R.A. This operation took place throughout the whole country, and acted as an insight to us of the extent of the I.R.A. organisation.

About June, 1920, it was planned to attack Edgeworthstown R.I.C. Barracks. The task allotted to our Battalion was to block all roads leading from Longford to Edgeworthstown and Ballinalee and cut all communications to these centres. Again, our task was carried through successfully, although it was a formidable task to block the main Dublin-Longford Road. The attack on the Barracks was called off at the last moment. A party of Lancers left the Barracks in Longford and went out towards Ardagh. It was thought that they had been informed of the impending attack. We afterwards discovered that this was not the case and that they were only carrying out night exercises. No contact was made with any of the enemy that night.

After this, a general raid for arms was made in the area. This was also a country-wide operation. Every

house, known to have arms of any sort, was visited. In most cases, it was only a matter of asking for the arms and they were handed up, as the people were sympathetic to us. We collected a large amount of material, mostly shot-guns. We did succeed in getting a few sporting rifles. These were got from Lord Granard's place. We also collected a few good .22 rifles. We collected a fair amount of shot-gun ammunition and also some ammunition for the sporting rifles. We did not get any service rifles. Quite a lot of the people volunteered what arms they had to us. All these arms were placed in dumps which were made of large drain pipes dug into the ground.

By this time, Captain Pat Garrett, a Staff Officer from G.H.Q., and who had served in the British Army, was sent down to us as an instructor. He visited all the Battalions and Companies in turn, and imparted instruction to them. I got some service rifles from M.F. Reynolds of the 1st Battalion, and we used these for instruction purposes. Garrett was a good instructor, even if he was a bit antiquated in his methods. He gave us a fair good grinding in musketry which was very useful.

About this time, Constable Dennehy was kidnapped in Slatta. This was done by the Roscommon Volunteers. He was subsequently shot. I understand he was engaged on intelligence work for the police. The R.I.C. now threatened to burn Rooskey as a reprisal. I was detailed by the Brigade O.C. to protect Rooskey. I placed eight men, armed with rifles, and four bombers in buildings in the town to meet such an event. The R.I.C. did not attempt any burning. The R.I.C. had a Barracks in the town at this time. We

took up positions for three successive nights, but nothing happened.

There was a reorganisation in November of this year and I was appointed O/C. of the battalion. Colman Mulherrins was appointed vice O/C. Andy Quinn was adjutant, Tom Farrell Quartermaster, and Michael Grogan, Intelligence Officer. The companies were commanded by Patrick Doyle, "A" Company; Joseph Nolan, "B" Company, Mick Scally, "C" Company, Dick Callanan, "D" Company, who was later replaced by Joe Sheerin when Callanan was arrested after the raid on the Post Office in Longford. The battalion area remained the same. At this time a number of the principal men had slacked off in their activities and these were all replaced.

On 1st November 1920, I picked a party of about twelve men from the battalion and having armed six of them with rifles and the remainder with shotguns we proceeded to Cloondra near Termonbarry to ambush a patrol of R.I.C. who were in the habit of inspecting the local publichouses there. As the patrol came up to the village one of our party let off an accidental shot. This warned the patrol and instead of ambushing them we had to clear out and the whole thing was abortive.

The rifles that we had at this time were then sent to Ballinalee for the defence of that place by Sean McKeon of the 1st Battalion. This left us without any service rifles. The next incident in which the battalion took part was in connection with the Terlicken ambush. Our job was to block the roads leading from the town of Longford to Ballymahon to prevent reinforcements getting out from Longford. We got the roads blocked successfully. No reinforcements made an attempt to get out in that direction. The main roads from Dublin to the west were continually being blocked by us.

Some time about February 1921, the Post Office in Longford

was raided by a party of "D" Company under Dick Callanan and all the mails were taken. Callanan was arrested a few days afterwards. There were also some others of "D" Company arrested. All were courtmartialled and sent to Dartmoor Prison in England and held there until the general release of prisoners. I attended all the Brigade Council meetings and I was present when the plans were drawn up for the attack on Arva, Mohill, Ballinamore, and Granard Barracks, in conjunction with the Leitrim Brigade. Only the attack on Arva took place. The remainder were called off due to enemy activity in the areas concerned which looked like as if they had information of our intentions.

Enemy activity was now very intense in our area which took in the very large garrison centre in Longford and it was almost impossible to move anywhere without running into some portion of the enemy forces. Longford at this time was the main enemy garrison centre in the county and had two military barracks plus detachments of R.I.C., Black and Tans and Auxiliaries.

There was nothing of any great note took place in the area at this period until June 1921, when sniping operations were carried out against the garrison of 'Auxies' in the County Infirmary, Longford Town. I understand this operation was carried out by the Brigade C/C. Reddington. My battalion did not take any official part in it.

About a week before the Truce the last Brigade Council meeting was held at Rosse's of Newport, Edgeworthstown. At this meeting we were informed that the British had decided to establish chains of Blockhouses on the Boer War system throughout the country. These were discussed and possible centres of occupation noted with the intention of having them destroyed or burned. The Truce came shortly afterwards to everyone's great relief.

The main British forces were all centred in our battalion area and as such it was impossible to carry out any serious operations and further to this all the rifles and grenades and equipment we had were collected off us to equip the two columns in the brigade area. The Truce found us with very little in the way of munitions except shotguns which could only be used by covering parties. A fair supply of 'buck-shot' was made and loaded into cartridges during the time in this area. We also loaded ball bearings into cartridges.

There was one spy - a man named Sweeney - dealt with in this area. This man was tried in his absence by courtmartial of spying for the enemy. The evidence against him was strong. This man was also in the habit of travelling around with the enemy in their lorries. He was sentenced to death which was duly confirmed by the then Minister of Defence. One night he was taken from his home and informed that he was about to be executed. He was given the offices of a clergyman - a Catholic priest - as he was a Catholic, and then shot in the Bog of Curry. Actually he was only severely wounded and he succeeded in making his way to the Auxies in the Infirmary. He lived, but disappeared shortly afterwards and never returned. Another spy, a woman this time, was the subject of discussion at several Council meetings. Copies of letters, sent by her to Inspector E.C.34, Dublin Castle, were sent to us by G.H.Q. However, the Truce intervened before she could be dealt with, so she escaped death. On one occasion the Authorities at Dublin Castle paid her by official draft which she had to cash at a Post Office. She wrote back to them asking them not to do this again, but to send her her remuneration in cash. Everyone balked at shooting a woman, so it was finally decided to throw petrol on her and burn her.

As stated previously, the Trace found us with practically no arms or munitions and if the fight had to be resumed we would require a good supply of such material and even with that it is very doubtful if anything in the nature of large operations could be undertaken owing to the vast strength of the enemy garrisons in the area. All ranks were, however, still in good form and anxious to carry on.

Signed: Michael Murphy Comdt.

Date: 23rd. Feb. 1951

Witness: Matthew Dacey Comdt.

