

**ORIGINAL**

BUREAU OF MILITARY HISTORY 1913-21  
BURO STAIRE MILITAI 1913-21  
No. W.S. 595

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COSANTA

BUREAU OF MILITARY HISTORY, 1913-21.

STATEMENT BY WITNESS

DOCUMENT NO. W.S. 595

Witness

William Norris,  
Oldfield House,  
Kilmashogue,  
Rathfarnham,  
Co. Dublin.

Identity.

Member of Caheragh (Co. Cork) Company Irish Vol's, 1915—  
Lieutenant same Company, later;  
Member Flying Column Cork III Brigade, 1921.

Subject.

- (a) National activities, Bandon area 1915 - ;
- (b) Military engagements of Cork III Brigade, 1921.

Conditions, if any, Stipulated by Witness.

Nil

File No. S.1516

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STATEMENT OF MR. WILLIAM NORRIS

Oldfield House, Kilmashogue, Rathfarnham.

(Caheragh Coy. 5th (Bantry) Bn. Cork III Bde.)

I joined the Volunteers in October 1915. On November Day, I marched to Drimoleague with the Caheragh Coy. to meet Terence MacSwiney and another Volunteer officer named Donovan of Cork City. When we met them they were dressed in full Volunteer uniform. We marched back that night to Caheragh and Terence MacSwiney delivered an oration there that evening, asking young men to join the Volunteers and the young women to join the Cumann na mBan and to help the Volunteers in every way they could. Immediately after this I was appointed section commander of my company. I kept on working all the time, giving my whole time to it, trying to organise the Volunteers. We attended Council meetings in Bantry and different places and did all the other routine work.

At the time the British Government was trying to enforce conscription, our company was very strong. Some time before the Rebellion in Dublin I remember we were on parade on a Sunday evening and we were asked by a man named John Holland if we got arms and were called on to fight how many men would volunteer to go. I volunteered at that time, but we were not called. Some time later a lot of the Volunteers fell away, but I remained in them all the time working. Things were fairly quiet then until 1918 and 1919.

At the end of 1919 I was warned to be careful, that I was a 'wanted' man. At that time our company got strong again. I was then appointed company quartermaster and during that period, from 1919, we had a lot of work to do. We got an order to put down a certain number of dumps and to make dugouts in the company area. I was then along with my company captain. Later, I was appointed 1st Lieut. of the company and we were

sleeping in haysheds and barns and different places. Denis Daly was the company O/C. at that time; other officers were John Cotter and Denis Keohane. I was appointed in Keohane's place when he became vice-commandant of the Bantry battalion.

At the end of 1919 there was a raid for arms on a British submarine chaser moored off Bantry. I was not there, but I was suspected of being there. On the Sunday night following the raid I was returning from a place called Drominady when I met the military on the road. They held me up with fixed bayonets, questioning me and asking me my name. I gave them a false name and got away from them. I was informed later that it was for me they were looking that night.

In March 1920, I was warned to go to Durrus for an attack on a barrack there which we were not able to take. Some of the police got wounded there the same night. When the military were approaching from Bantry we had to retreat. This was my first engagement. There were about a dozen men drawn from different companies of the battalion. Ted Sullivan, the battalion O/C. was in charge of the attack, and Mossie Donegan was there. We had rifles and shotguns and a few revolvers and bombs. Ted Sullivan climbed on the roof and broke a hole through and poured in petrol and paraffin to set the barracks alight. One part of the barracks was ablaze when we had to retreat. The police succeeded in putting out the fire. One constable lost his hand when we threw in a bomb and we supposed that he had tried to catch it to throw it out again.

During the summer of 1920 we had a lot of trouble in the company area from people who were hostile to us. There was trouble over a post office there. The post office being removed, myself and four or five other men had to guard the place where it was removed to, for several nights. The owner of the post office was moved from one place to another as

there were complaints from people as to having their letters interfered with, so the Volunteers took action. There were some people up against us at the time whom we suspected. It looked as if there was a kind of unofficial censorship by the hostile element. We then arrested some of the people who were causing the trouble and brought them to battalion headquarters; they were brought to a place called Kealkil and I believe it was Ted Sullivan and Maurice Donegan who dealt with them there. My battalion was Bantry battalion and Ted Sullivan was O/C.

In November 1919 I was detailed to go to Wilkinson's Wood. On my way there, there was a military raid and my battalion O/C. and I lay for a half day in a dyke of water. On the following morning I went into Bantry to attack the R.I.C. and Tans who had arrived there then. We did not attack them; we left Bantry that evening and went to Kealkil. We were passed by a convoy of military on the road who did not notice us because we were inside a house. We were all armed at the time. We had revolvers and we had a few rifles. We went to Drimoleague that night (it was a Saturday night) to attack the R.I.C. there. We had the village to ourselves from the early hours of the evening until 12 o'clock that night. No policeman appeared in public. The following week we were again called to Bantry to attack the police again. We went into Bantry town during the early hours of Monday morning and stayed there until the evening and neither the police nor military appeared on the streets, hence we had the town to ourselves. I think that would be about November 1920. On the second day we went into Bantry, Maurice Donegan was on the hill over the railway station with two other men armed with rifles and he told us if the police appeared on the street we were to open fire on them and that he would open fire at long range across the town on the military barracks to keep the military in. In between the two attempts in Bantry, the police barracks was burned, as the R.I.C. had moved to the

the military barracks in the meantime. That would be about September or October 1920.

Maurice Donegan was arrested the day of Kilmichael ambush - about the 26th November 1920. I was not at Kilmichael. I would not be allowed to go on the column then. It was in January I first went to the column. I had volunteered to go on it earlier but my battalion O/C. said I was more useful in the battalion area and would not give me permission to go. Everything was quiet during December, but we had to keep on the "run" all the time. At Christmas 1920, I was warned by my Parish Priest to be careful around Christmas and not to sleep at home. Some time towards the end of December we had a big company parade. Ted Sullivan was there. He was then still battalion O/C. He asked for Volunteers for the column, so I volunteered. My company captain was against letting me go at the time, but I told him as I was on the "run", I preferred to be with the column. In the early part of January 1921 I joined the flying column, Cork No. III Brigade. As far as I remember, I was knocking around for some days before I was mobilised. I think it was at Ballineen we first got arms out of a dump. We did not go far; we were somewhere around Castletown for a few days. Commandant-General Barry paraded us and he cautioned us with regard to the duties of the flying column, and our knowledge of the use of firearms. He had us in a hay-barn for a few days where he instructed us in the use of firearms.

Sometime about the 20th or 22nd January, we were going to a place called Castletownkenneigh and in the early hours of the morning we held up a spy on the road. We took him along with us and the following morning he was tried by court-martial and shot and left on the road labelled. We lay there in ambush all day. Neither military nor police turned up. That evening we retreated from there. I think it was that day Liam Deasy and Sean Lorden and another questioned a passer-by

on the road. This man thought they were Auxiliary officers and gave them a certain amount of information. He thought they were enemy troops. We took him along with us that night and he was tried by courtmartial and shot in the early hours of the morning by his own confession that he was an informer.

We lay in ambush near Bandon; we were waiting for 7 or 8 hours. Neither military nor police appeared. That night we crossed the Bandon river and entered the town of Bandon. Having walked in our stockinged feet to attack the curfew patrol there, they did not turn out. After we were there for a certain length of time and the curfew patrol was not turning out, Commandant Barry fired shots in the air to draw the military out, but they did not come out. At the same time he signalled a section who were on the Bandon Bridge to open fire on the barracks. We then retreated out of Bandon. There was one man lost there; I think Volunteer O'Reilly was his name; he was killed. They were using Lewis guns from the barracks. On our retreat from the barracks that morning, when we were miles away, they were still firing Lewis guns from the barracks.

A few days later we went to Innishannon and occupied an ambush position there. The military did not appear. We again went into Bandon to attack the Bandon garrison, but it was of no avail. We were watching for the curfew patrol who did not turn out at any time.

At the end of January we went to a place called Ahiohill and we marched to Burgatia House (the house of a loyalist) to attack Roscarbery barracks. The house was a few hundred yards from the main road. Before we approached the house we were lectured by Commandant Barry to the effect that this man was a loyalist and our enemy, and to be careful that there were no British officers in the house at the time, as they were in the habit of going there. We surrounded the house. Comdt.

Barry knocked on the door, whereon a man spoke from a window asking who was there. The reply was that they were military soldiers of the Republican Army, so the man said he refused to open the door. He was answered by Commandant Barry, who said that we would enter anyway, that we would have to get in, we had to break a window to enter a room in the house and open the door from the inside. We entered the house. Commandant Barry approached the man in his room and questioned him as to why he didn't open the door. As far as I know, he had a revolver which would not work. Commandant Barry asked him did he know him and he said: "No", on which Commandant Barry commented that he supposed he would not want to know him. Commandant Barry then told him that he would be a prisoner in his own home until that night, but that he would be supplied with anything he required, that one of his maids would be allowed to wait on him. There was an armed guard at the door all the time. Commandant Barry cautioned the owner further that if there was an attack on the house before the following evening, he would return and burn it. He also cautioned him about the manner in which he had been treating the people who were living under him. As far as I know, he gave him a specific time to leave the country or, if not, he could put up with the consequences. We remained there that night. There was plenty of food in the house. We prepared and cooked the food ourselves and had sentries placed on the avenue leading to the main road with instructions what to do if the enemy approached. In the early hours of the following morning the post-boy came to the house delivering the mail. He was permitted to go. The sentries were withdrawn from the avenue. I think two men with revolvers were placed in position and they also got instructions what to do. Some time that evening, about three o'clock, we got the signal that the enemy were on the main road and approaching the house. Commandant Barry gave us orders to 'stand to' as quickly as possible and 'fall in' outside in the yard. We 'fell in' outside in the yard and at

that time we were under heavy fire. We were divided into sections. One section was told to go into the house and barricade the windows and make a barrack of it. We got instructions how to retreat from there. We were some time waiting there to see if the military would approach us and we did not open fire until we got orders to do so. Some of the military and police were in the avenue at the time and retreated back to the main road. We opened fire on them at the same time. We then had to retreat under a heavy fusillade of fire. We retreated to the edge of the sea to get away. We retreated some distance from there without halting. We had one wounded man - Brennan from Drimoleague. When we halted that evening I got orders from Commandant Barry, who gave me four men, to go back some distance. He gave me the name of the people where I was to call. I believe they were loyalists. He told me to commandeer a horse and trap and bring it along to remove the wounded man. Commandant Barry went back that night with a number of men and fired on Rosscarbery barrack. He went to Burgatia House and removed some of the furniture, all he could in the way of bedding and so forth, and burned the place. He brought from there a man who had been left there by the column, and a horse. I think they let the cattle out before they set the place on fire. At that time the column would have numbered only between 35 and 40 men, all armed with rifles and some with revolvers and a small amount of ammunition. The column went into billets after that for awhile

FROM THE BARRACKS

We billeted near Clonakilty after Burgatia House. We kept behind the British forces, following them up between Leap and Skibbereen. We went on to a place outside Skibbereen. A Volunteer named Pat Driscoll was accidentally shot dead changing sentries. We then went on to Gurrane and then we marched to Skibbereen. A party of men entered the town of



Skibbereen and the main body remained outside it to ambush any reinforcements that might be coming. There were no police nor military on the streets of Skibbereen that night. Shots were fired by the I.R.A. but no British forces ~~we~~ turned out. After being there some hours, shots were fired. Three British soldiers were captured unarmed and they were brought back by car to Gurrane. The quartermaster there was ordered by Comdt. Barry to feed and look after them, and the following day they were sent back to Skibbereen by car with a note from Commandant Barry that they were absent through no fault of their own, that they were captured by the Irish Republican forces in Skibbereen town. We left Gurrane that night and went near a place called Coloman. We next went to attack Drimoleague barracks. We went to within about a half mile of the barracks. We were lectured by Commandant Barry on our job. He ordered a party of men to go in front of the barracks with a mine and to slip it off two planks against the front door. He asked me did I know the back of the barracks and I told him I did. He then instructed me to advance to the back of the barracks and he gave me three men. We had to go in our stockinged feet. He gave us instructions when to rush the barracks if a breach were blown in it. No man was to enter the barracks in front of himself and, if he were wounded in entering the barracks, he was to be left there until such time as the work would be done and then removed. The mine was slipped into the front door of the barracks and a heavy fusilade of fire was opened from the barracks. We did not return the fire as we had not got orders to do so. Our instructions were not to fire except we got orders to do so. The mine did not cause any breach in the barracks; it exploded all right, but it caused no serious damage to the barracks, hence we could not make an entrance. After some time we had to retreat. We had no casualties.

At that time quite a number of men had been shot in our

brigade area by Crown forces. We were not able to do anything at the time. After that I left the column for some time and remained in my own battalion area.

The military, who were stationed in Skibbereen at the time, were the King's Liverpool Regiment. There was an officer in charge of them named Colonel Hudson, who was a very fair man to prisoners. After some few days, I had to report back to the column again. We lay in ambush near Clonakilty to ambush a train supposed to come from Cork to Skibbereen with troops. After being there some time, we got an account they had travelled by road. We then moved on towards Bandon again and on the 17th March we went to a place called Shippool where we lay in ambush from 5 a.m. until a late hour that evening. The British forces did not travel there that day. Shots were fired in the evening to try to draw the military from Kinsale barracks, which we were very near, but they did not turn out. We retreated from there in the evening and we were billeted near Innishannon where we remained the following day.

On the night of the 18th, we left that place and went to a place called Ballyhandle near Crossbarry at about 2 o'clock on the morning of the 19th. Commandant Barry visited the billets where the men were and told them not to undress or take off their boots, to be ready for action at any time. About half an hour later we were told to parade. He informed us that we were being surrounded on all sides. He said that he supposed the best thing we could do was to fight them as we had no other chance of getting out of the place. He said he did not like the position; so the men said they were prepared to stand their ground and fight the enemy no matter what the odds were. We were then dismissed and at about 4 o'clock in the morning we again paraded. He then divided the men up into sections, giving each section commander his own number of men. Liam Deasy asked

me would I take the gable window of Beasley's house overlooking the road. I told him I was quite satisfied to do so. Comdt. Barry then lectured the men what they were to do and what each section commander's task was and he said he hoped every man would do his part. He warned the men that they were not to fire on any wounded soldier or if any man had explosive ammunition he was not to use it; he said to give them a fair fight. As far as I can remember, it was between 7 and 8 o'clock when the military started to approach the scene of the ambush and there was a line of lorries along - about 20 in all, as well as I can remember. Some man behind a barricade exposed himself a bit and was seen by the enemy. They started to slow up and we had to open fire immediately on them. During the time the fire was going on a Volunteer named Flor Begley played the bagpipes. At the gate at the end of the house some man from inside the barricade threw a Mills bomb on the road which did not explode. A British soldier came running towards the gate. He was called by the men inside the gate to surrender and throw in his arms and to come inside and nothing would happen him. He threw his rifle and ammunition away over the barricade and ran away himself. When running he hit his foot against the bomb that was on the road. Immediately he did so the bomb exploded and blew him to pieces. There were four of us in the house, all told, and we got it very hard there for some time. Sean Hales called on us a few times to know if we were all right. When the fight started to ease off a bit I could hear a man named Mick Driscoll singing "The Rising of the Moon". Sean Hales next called on us to retreat from the house and when we went to the gate he told me to advance on to the road. I met James Murphy ("Spud") at the gate. He told me to take my time and be very cautious as enemy fire might come from underneath the cars. We next advanced to the road, collecting some firearms, rifles and ammunition, etc. and a Lewis gun. We then prepared to burn

some of the lorries. We had to remove the bodies of soldiers from around the cars. The bodies of dead soldiers were all over the road. After we set fire to the cars we advanced towards a laneway about 100 yards away and when we went into the laneway we observed about a company of military on our right. Commandant Barry gave us the order to open fire on them and, as far as I remember, we only fired a few rounds per man when they retreated. We then retreated from there. We had a lot of stuff to remove and we had two wounded men - these were Dan Corcoran and James Crowley. Corcoran was seriously wounded. We left three men behind, dead - Peter Monaghan, Jeremiah O'Leary of Leap, and Con Daly of Ballinascarthy. We then retreated for some time before we rested and we marched into Cork No. 1 Brigade area that night before we could get any food. We had been fasting from the previous day, but we were quite pleased with our victory and Commandant Barry said he was proud of us we had put up such a gallant fight, that it was a great victory. When the fight started we had very little ammunition - perhaps not 40 rounds per man. As far as I remember, the column was between 80 and 90 strong that day. We remained in the Cork No. 1 Brigade area the following day and on the morning of the 22nd, I think, we went to bury Charlie Hurley, our brigade O/C., who was shot dead on the morning of the 19th fighting in a house away from the scene of the ambush. He was wounded sometime before that. Charlie Hurley's funeral was in the early hours of the morning. They were undecided whether to give him a public funeral or not, but they knew they could not have the Volunteers at a public funeral. He was buried in Clogagh, near Timoleague, I think. He got a military burial in the early hours of the morning. Flor Begley played the pipes at the funeral and three volleys were fired over the grave. I think two or three priests were present and said the prayers at the grave. After that I was called back to my battalion area again and a

Volunteer named Denis O'Leary and myself had a very narrow escape from being captured. The danger was that close that we had to take shelter and search our pockets so that we would not have any incriminating evidence on us.

I reported back to the column again about March 31st 1921. I think we were to ambush a train going from Skibbereen to Clonakilty, but it did not come off.

About the end of March we went towards Ros<sup>4</sup>carbery to attack Ros<sup>4</sup>carbery barracks. We had a mine and bombs ready for the attack. About 12 o'clock at night we paraded and were issued with instructions from Commandant Barry as to what to do. We were divided up into sections. There were trees to be cut and roads to be blocked. We arrived there about 1 o'clock in the morning. The men were told off to put the mine against the front wall of the barracks. No one saw us entering the town as we marched about a mile into the town in our stocking feet. There was snow on the ground at the time. The attack started; the mine was placed against the wall. The mine went off but did not create any breach in the barrack wall so that we could enter. We went to a place where we could get petrol and paraffin oil. Someone, I cannot think who it was, went near enough to the barracks to get the stuff in and threw bombs into it. The fight lasted for about four hours; in the end we took the barracks. A sergeant and a constable were killed and about nine or ten constables wounded. There were no casualties on our side. The strength of the garrison would be about twenty to twenty-three. The barracks was on fire by this time and all the armament it contained went up in the fire. We conveyed the enemy wounded to private houses and to a convent nearby to be looked after. We then evacuated the town and marched about ten or eleven miles. We then had breakfast and rested for the day.

We started out and marched about 20 miles further on to the borders of Kerry.

During the month of April things were quiet. We could not get the military any place. About 29th April it was planned to break up the column into sections. The men from every battalion area were to report back to their own units and to bring off a general attack on the 14th May in each battalion, which we did - a party of us under Commandant Tom Ward. Our intention was to go to Bantry to attack Bantry.

We were met by a party of nine or ten R.I.C. from Drimoleague. They were in the ambush position; we were in the open. We opened fire on them and fought them for about an hour and retreated without casualties. I cannot say whether there were any police casualties or not.

Later on, Headquarters were in a place called Gurrans, Caheragh. We moved on towards Drimoleague again later on. We planned a big ambush between Drimoleague and Dunmanway at a place called Gluandaw Wood. We lay in ambush there all day. In the afternoon it was reported to us that the Auxiliaries left Dunmanway. They got information that we were laying an ambush for them and retreated back to Dunmanway. On that morning, between 9 and 10 o'clock, the local company of Drimoleague fired on a party of Black and Tans leaving the barracks. One of them was shot dead and another wounded. We were sure that the Auxiliaries would come from Dunmanway but they failed to do so. We then moved on to Rosscarbery near Clonakilty. We were around there for some few days. There was a Brigade Council meeting some place not far away and it was reported to us that a party of Auxiliaries had reached Rosscarbery town. We marched to Rosscarbery to meet them with Commandant Barry in charge. Commandant Barry went in advance and went to Rosscarbery town to find out what position the Auxiliaries were in. We were moving towards Rosscarbery.

We went into a field overlooking the town. There were scouts out from the Auxiliaries. We did not observe them. As we were about to enter the field, fire was opened on us. One Volunteer called Denis O'Mahony was wounded. We carried on and entered the field where we took up positions, and a short time later we observed a batch of Auxiliaries in the town. We opened fire on them and they returned the fire. There was a road on both sides of us leading from the town. They tried to surround us, but we beat them back. We fought them there for some hours and then we retired. There were no casualties on our side. We believed that there were some casualties amongst the Auxiliaries.

The column was disbanded after that and we returned to our own units. During the month of June there were several raids, train hold-ups, mails taken and military equipment seized.

On the Saturday evening previous to the Truce, myself, accompanied by my company captain, returned to our company area from Kealkil. We called to a certain licensed premises in the village to find out if there were any messages for us as there was a habit of leaving dispatches or messages there for us. When we entered the publichouse we saw about 10 or 11 men on bicycles halt outside. I said to the company captain that they were military in plain clothes. We were unarmed at the time. We made a run for it and got away. We went and got arms and reinforcements and returned later that night and searched for the enemy, but could not locate them. The following night we lay in ambush for them from 9 o'clock until 9 o'clock the following morning. They did not turn up. That was my last operation before the Truce.

During the years 1920 and 1921 I was also a member of a

local Sinn Fein club. In the early part of 1921 I was appointed a member of the committee of that club. Sinn Féin courts were being held in the district; we had quite a lot of work to do, police work, etc. when I was not away with the column.

I was a member of the I.R.B. It was Ted Sullivan who swore me in to it. That was in 1920 or 1921. It was mostly men of the column who were in my Circle and I believe it was Ted Sullivan who was the Centre.

I think it was about September 1920, that the Arms Fund was started. My company collected quite a lot of money for it. If anybody who was called upon did not subscribe when they had means, we told them we would seize some of their movable property to the value of the levy put on them. If we had to go back a second time then they subscribed. I got a warning from a sergeant in the R.I.C. to keep away out of my own district, that I was to be raided for on account of my connection with the Arms Fund. I took his warning and the raid did come off.

Signed: William Norris

Date: 12th October 1951

Witness: CSaurin, etc.

