

ORIGINAL

BUREAU OF MILITARY HISTORY 1913-21
BURO STAIRE MILEATA 1913-21
No. W.S. 701

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BUREAU OF MILITARY HISTORY, 1913-21.

STATEMENT BY WITNESS

DOCUMENT NO. W.S. 701

Witness

Thomas Kelly,
Carrigeen,
Ballymurray,
Co. Roscommon.

Identity.

Member of Knockcroghery Company (Co Roscommon)
Irish Volunteers, 1917- .

O/C. 4th Battalion South Roscommon Brigade, 1919. - .

Subject.

National activities Co. Roscommon,
1917-1921.

Conditions, if any, Stipulated by Witness.

Nil

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STATEMENT BY THOMAS KELLY No. W.S. 701

Carrigeen, Ballymurray, Co. Roscommon.

I was born and reared in this locality. My father was a prominent member of the United Irish League. I had a cousin who was a great admirer of the 1916 leaders. He was a school-teacher and it was he who engrained in me a love to see my country independent and free. This was prior to the Rebellion in 1916. This man was wont to talk to me and tell me about the men who led the Rebellion and of their doings and their speeches. He told me then that they were planning a rising but of course I did not believe him.

The start of the Volunteers in Knockcroghery.

When the Rebellion took place in 1916 and these men gave their lives for Ireland it opened the eyes of the people and from then on all my sympathy was given to their endeavours.

In the summer of 1917 Mr. Kelly of Lecarrow was in touch with Sean Hurley in Athlone and from this man's directions and encouragement we started a Company of Volunteers in Knockcroghery. We started on our own and without assistance from any organiser. Paddy Kelly of Lecarrow was appointed Company Captain unanimously. John Brehony was appointed 1st Lieutenant and I forget who was appointed 2nd Lieutenant.

At first we had about twelve members all told. This number increased by the end of the year to about twenty. We had a parade once a week which was held in public. The R.I.C. did not interfere with us in any way at that time. As far as I can remember all the arms we had was one revolver. John Gilmartin, who had been in the British Army, was our instructor. He was not a Volunteer. As well as drill he taught us signalling as he had been a signaller in the British Army. He taught us Semaphore and

Morse code of signalling. When the police began to take serious notice of our activities this man made a graceful exit.

The Conscription Crisis: Our membership remained around twenty or a few more until the conscription crisis loomed on the horizon when it went up with a jump to over eighty. Sometime later and while the crisis was still on Ernie O'Malley came down to this area and a parade of the Volunteers was held. At this parade O'Malley came out very strongly and told the Volunteers that it was not to fight conscription they had been formed but to fight for Irish Independence. As a result of this talk our membership dropped down to about thirty.

During this crisis we constructed dug-outs. These were dug on the flat and covered over with corrugated iron. We also collected First Aid equipment, and an account was taken of all foodstuffs in the area that could be gathered together if the crisis came to a head. We still had no arms except that most of the men had sporting shotguns and cartridges.

Organisation of the 4th Battalion, South Roscommon Brigade:

While the conscription crisis was still pending, a Battalion organisation came into being in this area. This was the 4th Battalion, South Roscommon Brigade. The Companies forming the Battalion were Knockcroghery, St. John's, Rahara, Curraghboy and Four Roads. Companies were then called after the districts in which they were organised.

Paddy Kelly of Lecarrow was appointed O/C of the Battalion. I cannot remember who were the Battalion Staff Officers at this time. The Company Commanders were: Knockcroghery - Joseph Coyne, St. John's - Patrick Grady, Rahara - Patrick Beatty, Curraghboy - "Sonny" Egan, Four Roads - Joe Galvin.

South Roscommon Brigade.

There was also a Brigade organisation in existence at this time. The battalions forming this brigade were - 1st Battalion, Castlerea area; 2nd Battalion, Oran Area; 3rd Battalion, Roscommon town and surrounding districts; 4th Battalion, Knockcroghery area. Jack Brennan of Athleague, who lived in Castleplunkett at the time was the Brigade O/C. James Brehony, who was a local man, was the Vice-O/C. of the Brigade. The Quartermaster was Matt Davis, and Adjutant, Edward Hegarty.

The General Election.

The general election in the end of 1918 was the next item of importance. We were all very busy then in connection with this. We were supplied with copies of a proclamation from headquarters in Dublin which we were required to paste up. I cannot remember what the contents of this document were. but I do know that they were highly seditious. I put this up in Knockcroghery village but the R.I.C. took it down soon afterwards. Quite a number of men throughout the country were prosecuted for being in possession of this document. We did a huge amount of canvassing of voters and made arrangements for transport to take them to the polling station. During the election campaign we provided protection for the speakers during the many meetings that were held. The campaign went off peacefully and there were no serious disorders. On the completion of the voting the Volunteers provided escorts to accompany the ballot boxes to the main centres. There were no clashes with the R.I.C. and they provided an escort party for the ballot boxes also.

The First Dáil and The Irish Volunteers.

In the early part of 1919 the first Dáil assembled in Dublin and amongst one of their first acts was to accept responsibility for the Volunteers and their actions. By a decree of the Dail the Volunteers had now to take an oath of allegiance to the Republic of

Ireland. All our members took this oath without any reservations. The Dáil now floated a loan of some millions of pounds and the Volunteers were instrumental in collecting a large sum of money for this and issuing the subscribers with the necessary Bonds. This loan was banned by the British Government and the ordinary line of communication could not be used, so the Volunteers or I.R.A. were ready as usual to fill the gap.

Evacuation and burning of R.I.C. Barracks.

As yet there were no rifles in the Battalion and all we had in the nature of armament were two or three revolvers which we had picked up in raids. By the early part of 1919 the only R.I.C. barracks in this area had been evacuated by the R.I.C. and its garrison transferred to other and bigger centres - some to Kiltomee and others to Athlone. On Easter Saturday night of that year we destroyed that barracks by burning it, having first given it a good soaking with paraffin oil.

The Sinn Fein Courts.

The Sinn Fein Courts had now been established and were functioning properly and efficiently. The work of policing the country now devolved on the I.R.A. and this entailed a large amount of work for all ranks. Likewise the Volunteers had to give effect to the decrees of the Courts. It must be said in fairness to all that the people abided loyally by the decisions of the Courts and the British Courts were neglected except by a very small loyal minority. The Volunteers were required to arrest and detain prisoners where necessary in what came to be known as "Unknown destinations"; so called because they were known to the Volunteers only. When it is remembered that the Volunteers were an ordinary cross-section of the inhabitants and had to follow their own callings to make their living it can be realised what all this additional work meant to them. However, their enthusiasm seemed to make up for their loss of sleep and energy.

There was one Sinn Fein Court for each parish in the battalion area. The members of the Courts were Volunteers as well as being members of Sinn Fein. One man was appointed Judge. He was not a Volunteer but was a member of Sinn Fein. As usual in Ireland, this time was not free from land troubles and in various places the Volunteers began to act rashly and without any authority or legality and entered into possession of land which they considered should be taken from the existing owners. In some cases the Volunteers drove the cattle off the lands in question. This was an ugly situation and if allowed to develop might have serious consequences on the whole movement for independence. It savoured a bit of a communistic outlook.

To meet this situation in this area, company officers got committees formed and those bodies decided what lands would be taken over and what cattle would be driven. In this way the matters were kept under control. In a few cases land was actually taken over and let out at a reasonable rent for grazing. In one case the land was taken off the existing owner and in another case land that had been acquired was returned to its owner. Generally in this way things worked out all right in time. The Dáil established the Land Bank for the purpose of dealing with such cases as this. We got in touch with their department but they did not do anything about our troubles.

Part re-organisation of the Battalion.

There was nothing of any importance took place during the remainder of the year 1919. Parades for training were held in secret now and always at night. Meetings of the Battalion Council which included the battalion staff and all the company commanders were also held regularly. The Battalion was enlarged now as further companies were formed in Kiltoom, Dysart and Ballygar in the end of 1920. There had been Volunteers units in those areas previously but they were now attached to our battalion as companies. Ballygar had been attached to Galway and Kiltoom to the Westmeath area. Battalion Council meetings were always held at Rahara.

The General Raid for Arms.

In the early part of the year 1920 a general raid for arms was ordered by General Headquarters. We collected all the arms in this area. We only got shotguns and a few revolvers, one .38 and one Bulldog revolver and another one, the calibre of which I cannot now remember. There were only a few rounds of ammunition secured for the revolvers, none of which would suit the Bulldog revolver. Most of the guns were handed up willingly but in a few cases we had trouble in securing them. One Volunteer was wounded while raiding a house in St. John's. The occupant of the house fired on the Volunteers when they approached it, wounding one man.

In Knockcroghery a man also fired on the Volunteers, wounding two of them in the legs. None of the wounding cases was very serious. The man in St. John's who did the firing was arrested and kept as a prisoner for a fortnight and was fined £50 which he paid. No action was taken against the man in Knockcroghery. A third man in Rahara also fired on the Volunteers. In doing so he burst his gun and did not wound anyone seriously. One Volunteer got a slight splinter in the finger. No action was taken against this man either.

Re-organisation of the Battalion Officers' Appointments.

About the middle of 1919 Patrick Kelly, who was the Battalion O/C., resigned his appointment for health reasons and I was then appointed O/C. of the 4th Battalion by the Brigade O/C. There were also some changes amongst the Company Officers. In St. John's, Hubert Murphy became Company Commander, replacing Pat Grady who was considered unsatisfactory. In Curraghboy, Dick Mee replaced Edward Egan. Egan was in bad health and was unable to carry on in the circumstances. My Vice O/C. was John Kilcline. The Adjutant was Tom Kelly. The Battalion Intelligence Officer was Paddy Kelly and the Quartermaster was Owen Curley.

The O/C. of Kiltoom Company was Brian Lenihan, Ballygar Company;
Dysart, Denny Gacquin.

Procurement of Arms.

During this year, 1919, a collection of money was made in order to acquire money to purchase arms. Some funds were also got from the proceeds of dances run for the same purpose. In all something between £50 and £100 was sent to Brigade Headquarters from this area, but with the exception of the two revolvers I think that was all the arms we got. We had a .22 rifle with which we did a little firing practice - not much, as ammunition for this weapon was also scarce.

Capture of two British soldiers at Knockcroghery.

Occasionally one of the Battalion Staff officers or myself attended and checked up on training and so forth within the companies. We had not the services of any ex-British army men for training purposes now. Sometime around the middle of the year 1920 two British soldiers were cycling from Athlone to Roscommon. They were not armed. Two Volunteers from Knockcroghery captured them and took their cycles from them. One of them was carrying some dispatches which the Volunteers also seized. The dispatches were not important, however, and were given to the Brigade Vice-Commandant who lived in the area.

Ambush of two R.I.C. men at Knockcroghery.

Later on in this year (1920) about the end of July or beginning of August, two R.I.C. men were cycling from Roscommon to Kiltoom. On arrival at Knockcroghery they went into a publichouse. A few of the Knockcroghery Coy. who had seen them waited for them outside the village at the railway station and ambushed them. The I.R.A. were armed with revolvers only. When the police came along they called on them to halt. They did not halt and the I.R.A. fired on them. One policeman was killed and the other made his

escape. The police were not carrying rifles and I do not know if they carried revolvers as the dead man was not searched. The police came out that night and removed the remains of the dead constable whose name was Potter. No reprisals for this were carried out by the police or military.

Kiltoom R.I.C. Barracks - Plans to capture:

The shooting of Constable Potter at Knockcroghery station was an unofficial affair and had not the sanction of the Battalion or Brigade needless to say, and had an unfortunate sequel. Captain Lenihan, O/C., Kiltoom Company, had been in touch with Sergeant Galligan who was in charge of the R.I.C. stationed there and also with at least one other constable at that station. Sergeant Galligan had informed Captain Lenihan that he was prepared to hand over the barracks and its armament provided a serious attack was made on it by the I.R.A. He wanted the barracks to be attacked in order to cover up or cloak from his superiors his actions in the affair. He also indicated that one or two of the constables was willing also to help the I.R.A. in the capture of the place.

This information was conveyed to the Brigade O/C, but he was tardy about doing anything about it and was suspicious that it might be a trap that was being laid by the police. Sergeant Galligan, however, was persistent in the matter and expressed a desire to meet the Brigade O/C. to arrange and plan the matters with him. After some further delay a meeting between Sergeant Galligan and the Brigadier was arranged to take place at the Priest's house at Curraghboy on a Sunday morning.

On the Wednesday previous to the date on which this meeting was to take place the two policemen were ambushed and Constable Potter killed. On the Friday following this affair the authorities closed down the barracks in Kiltoom and transferred the garrison and armament elsewhere. The barracks, therefore, no

longer existed on the date that Sergeant Galligan was to meet our Brigade O/C. A golden opportunity was lost here of acquiring some very valuable armament in the first instance by not acting quickly enough, and secondly by the unofficial ambushing of the police at Knockcroghery.

The strength of the police garrison in Kiltoom had been about fourteen men. This would have meant for us about fourteen rifles with a supply of ammunition and also fourteen revolvers and ammunition. There was also a large number of sporting shotguns and I expect some grenades. This armament would have meant a lot to our Brigade at that time and would probably have changed the whole face of our operations in south Roscommon.

Sergeant Galligan was transferred to Boyle. The police authorities got information somehow about his activities in connection with Kiltoom and he had to desert from the barracks in Boyle and make good his escape.

Dealing with Spies and Informers.

Towards the end of 1920 a man was arrested in Curraghboy area and charged with spying on behalf of the enemy. He was brought to Knockcroghery where he was courtmartialled. The evidence against him was strong and he was found guilty and sentenced to death. After confirmation of the sentence had been obtained he was bound and thrown into the Shannon. His body was never recovered.

Making of Munitions:

During the early part of 1921 a large amount of buckshot was made in the battalion area. Paddy Kelly made moulds with which to make this. It was turned out in several places in the battalion area and loaded into cartridges. Bombs or grenades were also made in the area. These were constructed from tin cans and contained a stick of gelnite which was ignited with an ordinary powder trail

fuze. The cans were filled with scrap metal. They were only used in practice and seemed to function all right. We were able to get a considerable amount of gelignite from the railway quarries at Lecarrow. The British authorities held a very strict supervision over explosives used in the quarries, but despite this our men were able to filch occasional small supplies.

My arrest and detention.

In January 1921, the Vice Brigade O/C. and I were both on the 'run' and were sleeping in a cock of hay near his house. His sister used to put up a sheet on a hedge by the house as a signal to us that all was clear and that we could come in for breakfast. This morning the sheet was put up as usual and we went into the house. Just as we sat down to eat Patrick Tennant arrived with a dispatch for me. Two lorries of military drove up to the door. We were able to get out of the house but they were around us as soon as we were and we all three were caught.

They did not get the dispatch however. We were taken to the Military Barracks in Roscommon and kept there overnight and then transferred to the barracks in Athlone. I, unfortunately, had one round of ammunition on me which I had forgotten and I was courtmartialled and sentenced to one year's imprisonment. My father had been arrested sometime previously during a raid on our house and was in Athlone Barracks when I was brought in there. He was released later on.

I served my sentence in Mountjoy, Wormwood Scrubbs, and Pentonville prisons. I was released on Christmas Eve 1921, as I had got no remission for my period in Mountjoy. I understand that the information leading to our arrest was given by a local ^{man} / who was an agent for the British and had observed our movements & the signal and knew about our going into the house for breakfast, This man was never suspected until the struggle was over & it was

then too late to do anything about it.

Around July, 1919, an ex-R.I.C. man, who was a native and living in the area, was suspected of supplying information to the enemy. He was warned about his activities and the results. He cleared out of the area and did not return.

Signed: Thomas Kelly
(Thomas Kelly)

Date: 20-6-52

20.6.52.

Witness: Matthew Barry
(Matthew Barry) Comd't.

