

ORIGINAL

BUREAU OF MILITARY HISTORY 1913-21
BURO STAIRÉ MILEATA 1913-21
No. **W.S. 711**

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BUREAU OF MILITARY HISTORY, 1913-21.

STATEMENT BY WITNESS

DOCUMENT NO. **W.S.**..... **711**.....

Witness

John Travers,
Detective Branch,
Garda Síochána,
Dublin Castle.

and four others.

Identity.

Member of Garda Síochána.

Subject.

Battle between I.R.A. and British Forces
at Pettigo, Donegal-Fermanagh, 27/5/22-4/6/22.

Conditions, if any, Stipulated by Witness.

Nil

File No.S. 2022.....

Form B.S.M. 2

C O N T E N T S

This statement covers a period of eight days, during which military operations were carried out by the Irish Republican Army against the Northern Ireland police force, assisted by British military forces.

This fight continued over an area in Co. Fermanagh and in a few places in Co. Donegal, all within a radius of seven or eight miles from the town of Pettigo. The capture of Pettigo from the I.R.A. forces seems to have been the objective of the Northern Ireland police and the British Army, which was accomplished about the 4th June, 1922.

The nature of this statement doesn't lend itself to a detailed list of contents, which would, I think, be of little assistance to future readers.

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The fight at Pettigo and neighbourhood

27th May 1922 - 4th June 1922.

Pettigo, that little dismembered village, half in County Fermanagh, half in County Donegal, half free and half unfree, recalls to thousands of us very vivid memories of our Pilgrimage to Saint Patrick's Purgatory, Lough Derg. There we left the train and assembled with much misgiving to await the bus to take us on the last stage of our weary journey to the Island and penitential exercises. But Pettigo should have another claim on our memories because there was made the last stand in our also weary tho' glorious journey to freedom.

This stand made by less than one hundred I.R.A. Volunteers against overwhelming numbers of British forces and lasting over a week, began on Saturday, May 27th 1922. On that day a hundred Specials crossed Lough Erne in a pleasure steamer called "The Lady of the Lake", towing a number of small boats, and landed above Belleek. They marched to Magherameena Castle, the residence of the late Reverend E. O'Kierans, then P.P. of Pettigo, and ordered him to leave immediately, which he did. A party of thirty I.R.A. Volunteers advanced down the railway line towards Magherameena Castle. On their way they were intercepted by a patrol of Specials who engaged them and then retreated to Magherameena Castle, pursued by the I.R.A. Volunteers. The Specials then abandoned the Castle for good, retreated to their boats on the Lough and withdrew in them to the Buck Island in Lough Erne, where they were reinforced by another hundred Specials with medical attendants who treated their wounded. The Volunteers had suffered but a few minor injuries.

On Sunday, May 28th, a number of Crossley tenders accompanied by an armoured car left Enniskillen to assist their comrades at Magherameena Castle, but they were intercepted as they crossed into Donegal at Belleek by the I.R.A. Volunteers, and after a short but sharp engagement, in which the driver of the armoured car was killed, they retreated leaving behind them the Crossleys and armoured car which were taken possession of by the Volunteers.

On the same evening, May 28th, the I.R.A. Volunteers in Pettigo got information that big contingents of A and B Specials were converging on Pettigo and therefore they blocked the bridges at Pettigo between Donegal and Fermanagh and took up defensive positions. During that Sunday night a big contingent of Specials advanced from their headquarters at Clonelly, County Fermanagh, to Pettigo on which they opened fire with a view to obtaining a right-of-way through it to their beleaguered comrades on the Buck Island in Lough Erne. The I.R.A. Volunteers returned the fire and after a two hour engagement these Specials retreated to their convoy of Crossleys. Then on Sunday night they attempted an outflanking movement to reach their comrades on the Buck Island through Lowry. To do this they would have to cross a narrow isthmus of Donegal territory, known as the Waterfoot, which juts out into Lough Erne between Letter and Lowry which are both situated in County Fermanagh. A Section of the I.R.A. Volunteers were sent to this isthmus on Monday morning, May 29th, where they entrenched themselves and prevented the Specials crossing it. From then until Thursday, June 1st, the Specials contented themselves with sporadic firing into the town from the surrounding country-side.

On Thursday, June 1st, a number of lorry loads of British soldiers followed by four Crossley loads of Specials advanced on the town of Pettigo. The Specials opened fire with rifles and machine guns on the I.R.A. Volunteer outposts stationed on Drumhariff Hill and at Pettigo railway station. The I.R.A. returned the fire and then the British soldiers joined in with rifles and machine guns. This engagement lasted an hour and a half during which a number of British soldiers were killed and a number wounded. They then retreated. During Thursday and Friday nights there was intensive sniping at Pettigo by Specials which were now reinforced from Belfast. During Friday, June 2nd, and Saturday, June 3rd, the British commandeered all the boats on Lough Erne and assembled them at Portonode, from which they transported in them a battalion of British soldiers across the Lough to Boa Island. They were marched through the Island and from thence they were transported in the boats to Letter which is two miles below Pettigo. In the meantime another battalion of British soldiers advanced during the night from Kesh to Lowry with a view to joining the battalion at Letter. This would entail crossing the isthmus at the Waterfoot but the I.R.A. Volunteer outpost established there since Monday were determined to prevent this union. All throughout Saturday night both battalions of British soldiers made repeated attacks on the I.R.A. Volunteers at the Waterfoot in the hope of dislodging them but they failed to do so. During the intense fighting on Saturday night a section of the I.R.A. Volunteers crept from Pettigo, a distance of a mile, to assist their comrades at the Waterfoot.

During the week, a large party of Specials had gone

into Donegal through Lettercran which is five miles from Pettigo, and had terrorised the people, had shot and seriously wounded two girls. Now on this Saturday night of June 3rd this party of Specials, about two hundred, tried to cross at Lettercran from Fermanagh into Donegal so as to attack Pettigo from the rear but a party of I.R.A. Volunteers foreseeing their intentions intercepted them there and after a fierce engagement put them to flight burdened with their dead and wounded.

The third engagement of this eventful night took place in Pettigo town. Two British Battalions tried in vain to take the town. Then on Sunday morning, June 4th, a fleet of armoured cars and infantry again attacked it but the driver of the leading armoured car was shot dead through the head and the car overturned and blocked the road. Fire from the Volunteers prevented them from clearing the way for some time. At this stage a battery of Howitzers Artillery was brought into action by the British. Under this fire the unit of Volunteers covering the bridge was forced to withdraw to new positions and the British then cleared the obstructing car and the barricade at the bridge and advanced into the town. As this main thrust was being made, two other columns of British troops, that which had been stationed at Letter and another from the right by Lough Derg road, attempted to join forces so as to encircle the town, but fire from the Volunteers on each flank kept them at bay and left the escape route open to the main body of the Volunteers who withdrew to the hills and kept up a running fire until 5 p.m. when they retreated to Donegal town. But the machine gun post of about eight I.R.A. Volunteers which manned Drumhariff Hill covering the approach to the town, held their position until their ammunition was exhausted and then the post was

surround and captured. Three of the gallant defenders, Patrick Flood of Pettigo, Bernard McCanny and William Kearney of Drumquin, were killed at their post.

While the fighting was taking place in Pettigo town, the post which manned the Waterfoot was heavily engaged by vastly superior numbers of British forces and were forced to surrender after two hours.

Thus ended the Battle of Pettigo, a battle that is unique in two things, namely, it is the only place where there was a stand-up fight with a defined battle line, and it is the only place in Ireland where artillery was used against the I.R.A.

A monument is to be unveiled at Pettigo town on August 15th this year to commemorate those who died in that battle and in other engagements in the still unfree counties. It is expected that all surviving members of the Northern I.R.A. Brigades will be present at the unveiling ceremony.

The following British Battalions took part in the Battle of Pettigo: - The Lincolnshires, The Manchesters, The Staffordshires, A Howitzer Battery, Airforce Details and the 2nd Battalion of the Scottish Borderers. There were in all twenty Battalions standing by.

These Battalions of British soldiers were sent to Ulster by Mr. Winston Churchill, the then Secretary for War in England, on the advice of Field Marshal Sir Henry Wilson, Military Adviser to the 'Ulster' Government, because the pick of his Specials had been routed by less than one hundred I.R.A. Volunteers in their teens who withstood that final week under continuous fire without

sleep or rest, although poorly armed mostly with weapons captured in earlier engagements.

We the undersigned who have compiled the above account of the events which took place at Pettigo and its neighbourhood from the 27th May 1922 and which continued up to the early hours of the 4th June 1922 were active participants as members of the I.R.A. Volunteer Force in the events described. We have checked over the various versions which each of us remembered and we have discussed and checked the statement with others who also took part. We are all satisfied that this document is as accurate as we can now make it.

Signed: John Travers
(John Travers)

James Scollan
(James Scollan)

Nicholas Smyth
(Nicholas Smyth)

Denis Monaghan
(Denis Monaghan)

Felix McCabe
(Felix McCabe).

DATE 24th July 1952

Witness:

John McCoy
(John McCoy)

Date:

24th July 52

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