

ORIGINAL

BUREAU OF MILITARY HISTORY 1913-21
BURO STAIRÉ MILEATA 1913-21
NO. W.S. 791

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BUREAU OF MILITARY HISTORY, 1913-21.

STATEMENT BY WITNESS

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Witness

Sean O'Rourke,
Killaney,
Garvaghey,
Banbridge,
Co. Down.

Identity.

O/C. Banbridge Battalion, 1920 - .

Subject.

National activities, Co. Down,
1912-1921.

Conditions, if any, Stipulated by Witness.

Nil

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Statement by Sean O'Rourke,
Killaney, Garvaghey, Banbridge, Co. Down.

About the end of 1912, the Unionists, under the leadership of Sir Edward Carson organised a Volunteer Force which was known as Carson's Volunteers. The official name of the Force was The Ulster Volunteers. An active company of this Force was in existence in the Corbet area. A Unionist named Lindsey Hare was in charge of all Banbridge district in the Ulster Volunteers. When the Ulster Volunteers drilled locally they openly carried arms on their road marches and exercises. About 1914 the National Volunteers were organised locally. The organisation of the National Volunteers was a counter-blast to the Carsonite Volunteers. Members of the Hibernian organisation were the prime movers locally in organising the National Volunteers. About eighteen men of varying ages - from youth to middle-age - joined up. Drills were held a few times weekly. A man named Byrnes who was an ex-British Army soldier trained us. He gave us a lot of drilling before we got any rifles. The first consignment of rifles which came to our area was about 25 and they were distributed to our local Company. The rifles were of Italian make and were obsolete and we had no ammunition for them. A further distribution of rifles was made later. We did rifle drill but never carried out rifle practice as we had no ammunition with which to practice. A big review as held in Dublin about 1914. About 35 to 40 men travelled to Dublin from this area from both Annaclone and our Company which was then known as Knock Company. We travelled to Dublin by train

and we marched, carrying our rifles from Amiens Street Station. John E. Redmond, M.P., leader of the Irish Parliamentary Party in the British House of Commons took the salute at, I think, the Parnell Monument. After we marched past the saluting base in O'Connell Street the entire party proceeded to Phoenix Park where a large review was held comprising Volunteers from all over Ireland. I am not sure of the exact time this review took place but it was round about the time the 1914-1918 war broke out.

When the Great War began there was no great difference of opinion about the War question but the local Volunteer Movement petered out. Redmond's attitude to the war caused the local interest in Volunteering to cease. The question of partition which was being incorporated in the Home Rule Bill then before the British House of Commons caused a complete loss of confidence in the leadership of John E. Redmond amongst all local Volunteers. This feeling of loss of confidence brought all Volunteering activity to a stop. The Hibernians, however, continued their organisation in a limited way through the war years. There was no local Volunteer organisation in the year 1916 when the Rising took place.

The Volunteers were re-organised locally about February 1918. A Newry man named Paid O'Rourke and Seamus Monaghan from Banbridge called out and organised a Company of Volunteers at Knock. This was the first re-organisation locally after 1916. Later a Company was organised comprising Loughbrickland and Lawrencetown. In 1918 we were connected with the Newry Battalion. About 1919 a Battalion Staff was formed locally. We discovered that it would take three Companies at least to justify the formation of a Battalion. We

had the nucleus of three Companies in Knock, Loughbrickland and Lawrencetown; so the Battalion was formed. Seamus Monaghan was the first O.C. The Battalion was not long in existence when Seamus Monaghan was arrested and then John Henry Byrne was appointed O.C. He was later arrested and Sean O'Rourke (myself) was appointed Battalion O.C. and was in fact acting as such until the Truce. The Battalion Adjutant was Emile Hillen. The Quartermaster was James Green and later Seamus C. Byrne. The Company Captains in Banbridge Battalion were: -
 Knock and Ballybrick Company - Bernard Doyle;
 Lawrencetown - Bernard Savage; Loughbricken - Dan McGivern. In the years 1918 and 1919 local Orangemen didn't pay much attention to the Irish Volunteers drilling and training. We drilled quite openly and paraded on the roads at this period. The Unionists didn't seem inclined to seek any trouble with us. In fact they seemed afraid to cause any friction. On many occasions when young Unionists were snooping around, watching us drilling or training we chased them away and they went. There was little activity outside ordinary drills, training and route marches up to the end of 1919. In connection with the display of arms in Banbridge Battalion - up to early 1920 we had only shotguns, a few revolvers and about two rifles.

Destruction of vacated Barracks:

On the 3rd April, 1920, we mobilised at Loughbrickland. We had explosives with us and we went to the local Barracks which the R.I.C. had just vacated and made holes in the walls and put charges and explosives into the building and exploded the charges. The mining of the walls was carried out by quarry men who were members of the Volunteers and worked in

Gorrhagwood quarries, on the Great Northern Railway Line. These men were used to explosives through their work. However, the job they did on the Barracks didn't succeed, as we had hoped. We were expecting the building to be reduced to ruins but only portions of the walls were effected by the explosives. About a month later we got a quantity of paraffin oil and we went again to Loughbrickland Barracks and made a complete job of it on the second occasion. About this time also we burned down Lawrencetown vacated Barracks,

The next item of importance was a raid on Inglis bread vans. One raid took place at Loughbrickland in April, 1920. Four men took part in this raid. The bread van was intercepted and destroyed. After this operation raids took place on many I.R.A. houses. All the houses in our town were raided. A Volunteer named Dan MacArdle was arrested. He was tried and sentenced. Great influence was exerted by his uncle and some local Orangemen on his behalf and he was released. It transpired later that two clips of rifle ammunition which were found in his house were planked there by the raiders.

Raids for Arms:

About July 1920 we had raids for arms all over the Battalion area on Unionists houses. In about two Unionists houses there was opposition to the raids being carried out. In Nelsons of Ballela and at Currans of Corbet shooting took place. We didn't succeed in raiding these houses as there were women in both houses and we didn't like to endanger their lives. In all the other houses we raided there was no active opposition. During these raids we captured about 12 shotguns, 2 rifles, 1 revolver and

an assortment of ammunition for both shotguns, rifles and revolvers. In August, 1920, we got the orders to isolate all communications around the town of Banbridge. We cut all the telephone wires leading to and from Banbridge in the various directions and made a complete smashup of all telephone communications. These tactics were carried out at regular intervals afterwards.

On the 1st November 1920 in the Knock Company area we held up a train at Kates Bridge and took all the mails from the train. These mails were censored by us and later returned to the vicinity of Annaclone Postoffice. About the end of November at the same place we carried out a similar operation. On or about the 8th September, 1920, we got information from a maid who worked in Cardwells, a Unionist House, that arms and ammunition were in the house. We proceeded to Cardwells, raided the house without any opposition and got a rifle.

After the raid on the mails on the 1st November, 1920, John J. Byrne, the Battalion O.C. was arrested. He knew that the police would be looking for him but there was a sick horse on his farm and he called one evening to attend to the sick horse. The police were apparently watching out for him and rushed into the stable where he was and arrested him. A search was made of his person and some ammunition was found in his pockets. He was taken to Belfast prison, was later tried and sentenced to two years hard labour which he served. He was released after the signing of the Truce in January, 1922.

The houses of Byrnes of Tullorier and Doyles were raided very frequently. In December, 1920, a car curfew was imposed on all motorcars. This curfew forbade the use of cars after 8 p.m. each day. On the imposition of this curfew police lorries got out on

the roads and on their journeys round the district young men were held up on several occasions and watches, valuables and cash taken from them by the police. During the year 1920 and up to December 1920 there was very little evidence of any opposition from the former members of the Ulster Volunteer force in Banbridge locality. Except around about the 12th July there was very little political activity on the part of the Orangemen. Only for our little activities the district would be comparatively quiet.

Attack at the Egyptian Arch, Newry.

On Sunday night 12th December, 1920, myself and Peter McGarritty were mobilised for active service in Newry. We knew we were to take part in an ambush which was planned to take place at the Egyptian Arch on the Camlough side of Newry. Crown forces coming to the relief of Camlough Barracks which was to be attacked that night were to be intercepted there. We travelled into Newry and joined up with a number of Newry men. I was directed to Mrs. Baileys of King Street. There I found a number of the Newry Officers. The purpose of their meeting there was to acquaint all the officers present of their different jobs that night. In Baileys I was handed 3 handgrenades and was told what my position was to be. The other men were detailed to take up positions along the sides of the road on the Newry side of the Bridge. During the discussions in Mrs. Baileys it transpired that the arms which were intended for this operation had been dumped for some time at a place called Corragh in County Down and were still out there. Only some of the officers at the meeting knew that the arms had not been removed into Newry. One of the Newry Officers made an announcement that up to then it had proved

impossible to get a car to go out to Corragh for those arms. Sean Quinn, who was Brigade Quartermaster at the time asked me if I would go out and try to hire a car on the pretext that a car in which I was travelling from Newry to Warrenpoint had broken down some distance outside Newry on the Warrenpoint road. He detailed a man named Shevlin who was O.C. of Warrenpoint Company to come with me. I asked for a gun to take with me on this job and I was told that it would not be necessary because Shevlin was armed. We went out and called at Ross and Ross which was a large taxi firm in Hill Street. This firm was a Unionist concern and all their drivers were Ulster Volunteers. I went into one of the members of the firm and told him my story. I stated that I wanted them to send a car out from town to tow my car into the garage for repairs. In addition to our efforts to obtain a car one of the men in Mrs. Baileys was sent out at the same time as we left to a point agreed, on the Warrenpoint road. His duty was to be on hand when we arrived with the car. The man to whom I spoke in Ross and Ross's ordered a driver to get a large car ready for the road and he sent another man out with the driver to give him a hand in taking the disabled car in. These two men sat in the front of the car and Shevlin and I got in behind. I told the driver that I would tell him when we arrived at the farmhouse where my car was broken down. When we arrived at the appointed place where the third man was already waiting I told the driver to pull up the car. Shevlin then got out of the car. I waited for him to cover one of the two men in the front with his gun. Then, though I had no gun, I felt capable of dealing with the other man from behind. Shevlin made no effort to use his gun. He began to walk up the road. When I saw this

I got out of the car to look for him as it was very dark but he wasn't to be found near the car. I heard a whistle up the road and went towards the sound. I found Shevlin about 20 yards up the road and I asked him why he hadn't carried out his part of the arrangements. He told me that he wouldn't mind shooting a policeman or a soldier but he wouldn't shoot an orangeman. At the time I was discussing the arrangements with Shevlin the driver of the car had apparently become suspicious and turned his car on the road and drove back into Newry. Shevlin and I and the other man who had been watching there began to walk into newry. What happened later to Shevlin and the other man I dont know. I was feeling in bad form over the mis-carriage of our arrangements and I went on along to Baileys of Kings ^{or,} and when I arrived there I found that the men who attended the meeting with me sometime previously had all gone from there.

When I called at Baileys a niece of Mrs. Baileys, Bridget McVerry, was alone in the house. She told me all the boys had left for the Arch. She also stated that a parcel of gelignite was left in the house. I took up the parcel and examined it and found about 90 sticks of gelignite in it. Miss McVerry asked me to help her to take the stuff to a place of safety as she expected the place would be raided after that nights operations at the Egyptian Arch. I helped her to remove the explosives to a place of safety. I then proceeded up the Camlough Road to the Egyptian Arch and contacted the others who were there. I was put with a band of men of whom Pat Larey was in charge. It was the original intention as already stated that Pat Larey and all his crowd would line the road side near the Arch and bomb lorries approaching the Arch when passing our position. This plan was cancelled

before I arrived there and all the attackers were ordered to man the parapet on top of the bridge.

The road on the Newry side of the Arch was blocked with fallen trees.

When the Crown Forces (all military) came up to the barricade on the road we opened fire on them from the parapet of the bridge and in return we were subjected to a terrible fusilade of rifle and machine gun fire from the soldiers. All our men armed with rifles continued firing on the soldiers and any of us carrying handgrenades fired them. We were told that when we had got rid of our handgrenades we were to retreat from the arch in parties of three. On account of the intense fire directed on our position and also the fact that a handgrenade exploded amongst a party of our men on one part of the parapet of the bridge killing one of our men and seriously wounding several others. We all retreated along the railway line in the direction of the bridge over the main Dublin-Belfast road about two miles distant from the Egyptian Arch. Myself and two others got into fields near this bridge and made our way towards Cloghue chapel grounds. We saw two men approaching the bridge from Newry. We carefully watched them approach the bridge in order to find out if a military guard had been placed on the bridge. We heard the men being held up. We then knew that any approach in that direction was dangerous as military were occupying positions near the bridge. We then went past the side of the chapel and into a field at the rear. We selected a suitable place near a fence and laid down to rest. We soon fell asleep. Bob Savage was one of the men with me and another was a lad from Williams Street, Newry. We slept to day light on Monday morning. When we woke

we were covered with snow. We then parted each going into the town of Newry singly. I went to Baileys in Kings Street. One or two of the Newry men were in from the Arch when I arrived there. I went to bed in Baileys after a feed and had a few hours sleep. I got up then and dressed. I left Newry by cycle and reached home about dark that evening.

Emile Hillen was arrested sometime in 1921.

