

ORIGINAL

BUREAU OF MILITARY HISTORY 1913-21

BURO STAIRÉ ANNAIRÉ 1913-21

No. W.S. 794

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BUREAU OF MILITARY HISTORY, 1913-21.

STATEMENT BY WITNESS

DOCUMENT NO. W.S. 794

Witness

Patrick O'Sullivan,
Ivy House,
Gurranleigh,
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Identity.

Member of Ballyvourney (Co. Cork) Company
Irish Volunteers, 1917 - ;

Company Captain (Ballyvourney) 1919 - ;

Vice/O.C. Ballyvourney Batt'n. 1920.

Subject.

Irish Volunteers, North-West Cork,
1917-1921.

Conditions, if any, Stipulated by Witness.

Nil

File No. S. 2060

Form B.S.M. 2

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BUREAU STAFF MILITARY 1912-21
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STATEMENT

BY

PATRICK O'SULLIVAN, IVY HOUSE, GURRANLEIGH,
CROOKSTOWN, CO. CORK.

VICE O/C., 8TH (BALLYVOURNEY) BATTALION, CORK I BRIGADE.

There was no place in Ireland more torn asunder in the years from 1909 on by the opposing political parties, the O'Brienites and the Redmondites, than Ballyvourney. So that it was all the more surprising that the Volunteers should be started there at all and by young men whose fathers had been at one another's throats.

Even when the Sinn Féin Clubs were started we had to be careful that, for instance, if the Chairman was an O'Brienite the Vice-Chairman would have to be a Redmondite. As a matter of fact, this system even found its way to some extent into the Volunteer Companies. It was all, of course, for the sake of unity.

I joined the Volunteers in the start of 1917. There were only nine or ten in Ballyvourney then as they were only forming at that time. It wasn't long until I was made Section Commander. The usual parades and drilling were being carried out and, in fact, we used do this openly to defy the R.I.C. While we had just 20 in the Company through this year, when it came to the threat of conscription in 1918 the strength increased to over 100. As elsewhere, this figure dwindled down once conscription was defeated, but still in the later years more men who were in earnest joined and took part in the fight. When it came to the Truce, Company strength was up

to 130.

We were preparing our war material and made slugs for shot-guns. We had picked up a number of shot-guns; they had been given to us voluntarily. We also made pikes, both the heads and the shafts, and also acquired a certain amount of gelignite.

We made an attempt to capture Ballyvourney R.I.C. Barracks on 1st March, 1918, for the purpose of getting the arms of the four or five policemen there. One of our number went to the door and, giving an assumed name, asked for a permit to sell a sow. The remainder of us, armed with sticks, though I had a revolver, hung close to the door to rush in when it would be opened. However, this didn't happen as the R.I.C. man inside told the applicant to come again the next day. He protested but it was no use. He wouldn't be let in and so our ruse failed. The next day, when he didn't go for his permit, the R.I.C. made enquiries and found the real owner of the name hadn't been there at all and so they were suspicious and on the alert after that.

On 6th October, 1918; six of us - Daniel McSweeney, Cornelius O'Sullivan, Jeremiah Lucey, James Lyhane, Michael Dineen and myself - tried to disarm a Sergeant and Constable while they were on patrol. It was a pitch dark night and we thought if we came up behind them, jumped on their backs and struck them down with sticks we might succeed in getting away with their rifles and revolvers. I knocked the Sergeant alright, but the Constable, a fine hefty young man, shook off

O'Sullivan in the dark and, getting clear, opened fire with his revolver. Lucey had jumped on the Sergeant's back and I had given him a few cracks of my stick, but as he lay half stunned on the ground, I couldn't succeed in getting his belt undone to get his revolver. The Constable was firing at all six of us and we had to clear off in the darkness without getting anything. The Sergeant and Constable emptied their rifles and revolver at us as we got away. The next day there was a big raid and my brother and some others were arrested and got six months each in Cork Gaol. They were released before their time anyway as the 'flu epidemic was raging and they were all down with it. None of them had been charged with the attack on the police, but with refusing to make any statement. After this, quite a number of us had to go on the run in earnest. Martial law was proclaimed in the area, military were drafted in and anyone wanting to come into the parish had to have a permit. This continued for four months in theory but in reality it lapsed as the military couldn't enforce it.

I was elected Company Captain in the beginning of 1919. There were some changes in Officers. Twohig and Collins were, respectively, Company Captain before me but in turn each of them had to go away to jobs. I remained in the appointment until January, 1920, when I became Vice O/C. Battalion. I was sorry to leave the Company as it was becoming a great unit and I had utter confidence in every man in it.

An ex-soldier suggested to me that if one of the old cannons in front of Macroom Castle could be got out and filled

with 28 oz. bowls (as used in the game) and charged with black powder, he would touch it off and blow the R.I.C. Barracks in Ballyvourney to bits. Thirty of us marched by bye-roads, with two carts drawn by a horse and a jennet, to Macroom, being careful not to be seen by any of Dan Corkery's Volunteers for we were going to trespass in his area. We also had to dodge the R.I.C. and military in Macroom. We got into the Castle grounds at one o'clock in the morning and tried to lever up one of the cannons with stout poles we had brought. But it was entirely beyond our strength. It was a massive thing and must have been about 6 tons. Back we had to go the full fourteen miles without accomplishing anything, except displaying the spirit that was in us at the time, every man anxious to be doing something for the national cause.

We had the idea then of getting a light cannon that was at Ross Castle, Killarney, but Seán Moylan and Ernie O'Malley forestalled us in this and got the cannon away for some project of their own.

The remainder of 1919 was really quiet. It had been intended to carry out an attack on Ballyvourney Barracks and I submitted my plan to McNeilus, who was on the run in our area after his rescue from Cork Gaol the previous year. This attack was, however, called off by Brigade. Our principal activities then were parades for drilling and organising which were more or less carried out in secret. Also we were endeavouring to improve our armament. It was only a small amount we managed to get together, principally

shot-guns and ammunition.

1920 came and we attacked Inchigeela Barracks on 3rd January. It was a Battalion job and I was still O.C. Ballyvourney Company. 30 or 40 men were drawn from each Company and the plan was to burst in the gable end and throw in petrol while fire was directed on the Barracks from the front and back. I was in front. Unfortunately, a man of the covering party at the gable end fired off his shot-gun too soon and the demolition party didn't get their job done. We were firing on the Barracks and the fire was being returned by the police when an order came to withdraw and so the attack came to an end without the capture of the Barracks. There were no casualties on our side but a policeman was running towards the Barracks and was wounded in the leg. It was found then that he was unarmed. He had been halted but wouldn't stop.

Just after that I was elected Vice-Commandant of the Battalion. I was present at another attempted attack on Inchigeela when Florrie O'Donoghue, the Brigade Adjutant, came out for the purpose of blowing in the gable end with guncotton. The whole Battalion was mobilised for this job and held the roads in the area. The job didn't come off as it was discovered that the police had made loop-holes in the gable end and had a lot of barbed wire spread out, preventing anyone getting near the wall.

As Vice-Commandant, I had to go round to each Company in the Battalion (there were five Companies) and organise the Special Services, that is, scouting, engineering, signalling,

transport, communications. As regards scouting, the whole Battalion area was exceptionally well organised and every mountain and every peak had its watchers and there was a system of flares by night and calls by horns by day to announce the arrival in any Company area of enemy forces.

All evacuated buildings, such as R.I.C. Barracks and Courthouses, were burned in the Spring of 1920. On the 4th April I was second in charge of the burning of the old Courthouse in Ballyvourney. We surrounded the R.I.C. Barracks, which was only 200 yards from the Courthouse and had 20 men, to prevent any interference by the police but they didn't come out; they thought we were going to attack them. The preparations for the burning of the Courthouse were very thorough but someone set off a match while some of our men were inside and they were badly burned and had to be taken to hospital. I got some burns myself. The Courthouse was destroyed.

Sir George Bowen-Colthurst of Blarney owned a big house in Ballyvourney and it was to be burned but some people prevailed on us not to do it as it would not be of any military use they said. However, when we saw British Officers and R.I.C. going to inspect it we guessed it was likely to be garrisoned and so we prevented anything like this happening and burned it in June.

I was second in charge at the Coolavokig ambush in July, 1920. We had been watching for days for military lorries and had scouts posted at each side of our positions to signal when anything was coming. To the East, our scouts could see

three miles along the road towards Macroom. They had signals arranged to inform us whether any vehicles coming were enemy cars or civilian cars.

This particular day, the two scouts to the East signalled to us that a military lorry was approaching. We heard the sound of it just as soon and prepared to shove a cart we had ready out on to the road to block it just as the lorry should arrive.

Almost at the same time our scouts to the West signalled that a car was approaching and we then saw that it was a civilian car. We had no proper time to decide what to do, but, anyway, the cart wasn't pushed out. The civilian car passed the military lorry just directly under our position and as it did we decided to open fire. The two vehicles had just cleared one another when we fired. The military driver was shot through the neck and the hand and lost control and the lorry crashed into a rock on one side of the road, swerved across and mounted a low bank, running along it for about 20 feet. Another inch over the bank and it would have toppled over into a ravine. However, the wounded driver regained control and drove on, the lorry wobbling from side to side.

Just near Ballyvourney the lorry came to a halt as it had run out of petrol apparently through a bullet hole in the tank. We ran across the rocks to cut it off but reinforcements had come out from Ballyvourney and had scouts out at vantage points while the casualties were removed. Captain Airey was killed and there were five or six wounded. We heard later that a couple died.

We had one rifle only and the rest had shot-guns so couldn't get near enough to engage the reinforcements and we retired. The civilian car got away unharmed.

What I believe to have been the first fight with British military in the Tan war was carried out at Knockanure on 17th April, 1920. I was in charge of the Ballyvourney Company for the purpose of disarming a cycle patrol of military when it would pass through the village of Ballyma-keera but when we took up positions along the street some women observed us and became hysterical. We retired from the village and decided to ambush the patrol on its way back to Ballyvourney. We thought it would come along the main road from Macroom but scouts brought us the word that it was travelling on the other road to the North so we hastened across country and I put our one rifleman and the others armed with shot-guns in suitable positions and I myself took up a point, armed with a revolver, where I could see the patrol advancing and in such a place that I could call on them to surrender before they would be actually in the middle of our ambush position. As they had to swing around a bend, I guessed they would be rather bunched together. And so they were. There were 11 soldiers and an Officer in front. As they cycled along just under me I stood up and called out to them to surrender. They looked up and then called to one another to keep on and not mind the so-and-sos. I called again to them to surrender but they kept on and just as they got into the place where I wanted them I called on my men to fire.

Fire was opened immediately and five fell off their bikes, the Officer shot dead and the four others wounded. The other soldiers dropped to the ground and opened fire on us, firing up towards the rocks but without effect. A couple more were wounded and when only three were left we left our positions and closed in on them. They then surrendered.

We tried to do the best we could to give them first aid but could do nothing much so after ordering some of my party to remove the arms and ammunition and eleven of the bikes I gave the last one to one of the prisoners and told him to cycle off and bring out doctors to look after the wounded.

We cleared off then, going in a particular direction seen by the British and then doubling round when out of their sight in case reinforcements came to follow us up. Actually, the soldier we let go back to Ballyvourney brought out 20 with fixed bayonets and I felt if we had attacked them then with the captured rifles we could have accounted for them and got still more arms. But perhaps we were too humane. Anyway, we got one revolver and eleven rifles and ammunition for all and the bicycles too.

We dumped all the stuff safely and it was never found. A big round up in the area was carried out shortly after, hundreds of troops taking part in it, but they didn't get a single man or a round of ammunition.

About a fortnight after this the British tried a trap

by pretending that one of three lorries had broken down on the road outside Ballyvourney. After tinkering with the engine of the lorry, they all, apparently, climbed into the other two and drove off leaving the third by the roadside. It had a canvas cover over it and I suddenly spotted it as I came round a bend on my own bicycle. I was aware that my brother and another (Captain P. Lynch) would be following me on two of the bicycles captured at Knockanure as we were all bound for a Battalion meeting at Reanriree.

I got off my bicycle and started pumping the tyre and then, pretending to give it up as a bad job, turned and went back the way I had come. I was in time to warn the other two before they started off. That it was a trick on the part of the British was right for shortly after the canvas was lifted and fire was opened on some of our lads, a Section Leader named Hegarty being shot dead and another man, who wasn't a Volunteer, being killed also.

Ballyvourney was evacuated by both police and military on 16th October. The military had been quartered in the doctor's house, which was vacant at the time. The Auxiliaries moved into Macroom in September and occupied the Castle and Dennehy's Hotel, while there were military in the R.I.C. Barracks. Four tenders of Auxiliaries actually came into Ballyvourney the day the vacant Barracks was being set on fire and the four men engaged on the job had a narrow escape, getting away up the hillside and into the woods under intense fire from the Auxiliaries. They were particularly lucky, as the Barracks was being set on fire at 10 o'clock in the

morning.

The Brigade Column was formed in January, 1921. There were three Sections in the Column and I was in charge of No. 1 Section. Every man in the Column had a rifle and we also had two Lewis guns. There were 10 men from Ballyvourney Company in the Column but, normally, there were about six from each Company. When all assembled there were about 40 in the Column, including those from Cork City Battalions whose numbers varied from time to time.

My Section always led the Column moving through the country or going into or out of an ambush position as I knew all the country very well.

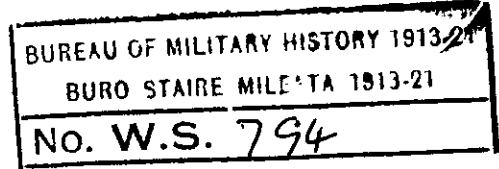
The big Coolnacaheragh ambush on the main road between Ballymakeera and Macroom took place on 26th February, 1921. Here eight lorries of Auxiliaries were ambushed with heavy casualties. Major Grant, the Officer in charge, was killed and several others too, while a big number were wounded out of a total of about 90. Counting in a party from the 7th (Macroom) Battalion, we had about 45 rifles and some shot-guns too, as well as our two Lewis guns. The Auxiliaries were fought until they retreated into two cottages and as we had no explosives to try and blast them out of these they held out until reinforcements arrived from Ballincollig and Cork. After an exchange of shots with these we had to break off the fight owing to their vastly superior numbers. Before nightfall they were on their way to the scene from all sides, from Buttevant, Bantry, Bandon and Killarney. We retired safely towards the North in good order and without a single casualty.

The Column travelled into Kerry and as far as Kilgarvan where we took up ambush positions, though eventually no enemy appeared here.

In May, 1921, when the Column was billeted all over the Battalion area, 8 of us had an encounter with a strong party of Auxiliaries travelling in six armour-plated lorries at Knockacharing near Kilnamartyra. We didn't make any impression on the lorries as they passed by but fired into the open ends of them, wounding several. A couple of the lorries stopped but the occupants didn't come out at all. They fired rifle grenades in the general direction of our position and they came over us very close but did no harm. The lorries then went on while we held our position.

During a tremendously big round-up in June, when the British employed 15,000 troops and combed the country from Millstreet to Kenmare, stretching as far to the right as Rathmore and to the left to Ballyvourney, the whole 8th Battalion did wonderfully good work in scouting the enemy movements and passing wanted men through the enemy lines at night to places of safety, having watched every move and every advance of the comb out during the daytime.

By the time the Truce arrived, we were almost a self-contained Republic in the 8th Battalion area, where every road was trenched or blocked and every precaution was taken to safeguard Brigade and Divisional Headquarters and our dumps. The enemy made several attempts to penetrate the area, without success. Only a huge garrison permanently stationed in the area would have had a chance of holding us down at that



particular time.

At this time Divisional Headquarters was at Gurtyrahilly in 'C' Company area, actually for several months before the Truce. Brigade Headquarters was at Gurtnafinca in 'B' Company area, also for the same period.

The dumps generally were underground rooms scooped out on the side of the hills and covered over and camouflaged. Dumps were also built in very big piles of stone and they were lined inside with boards and felt. There was a great number of small dumps, such made of wooden boxes concealed in the caves or fences, for holding papers and documents. Of course the fact that Divisional and Brigade Staffs were in the Battalion area meant that everything had to be perfected for their safety and the safety of all dispatches and documents; also, all the dispatch riders and the various officers coming and going through the Battalion area were our responsibility.

In conclusion, I might add that while I was a member of the I.R.B., I was in the I.R.A. first and needed no incentive other than being a member of the Volunteers to fight in the National cause. I consider that the I.R.B. was awfully valuable in the years from the Fenian movement down to the formation of the Irish Volunteers as a link to keep the movement alive but when we became Volunteers and were prepared to fight openly then we needed no other encouragement.

Signed: P. O'Sullivan
(P. O'Sullivan)

Witnessed: C. Saurin LT.-COLONEL.
(C. Saurin)

Date: 3rd February 1953