

ORIGINAL

W.S. 830

BUREAU OF MILITARY HISTORY 1913-21
BURD STAIRÉ MILEATA 1913-21
No. W.S. 830

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BUREAU OF MILITARY HISTORY, 1913-21.

STATEMENT BY WITNESS

DOCUMENT NO. W.S. 830

Witness

Patrick Joseph Cannon,
"Mountain View",
Castlebar,
Co. Mayo.

Identity.

Adjutant Islandeady (Co. Mayo) Company
Irish Volunteers, 1918 - ;

Vice O/C. 1st Battalion, West Mayo Brigade,
1921.

Subject.

National activities, West-Mayo,
1917-1921.

Conditions, if any, Stipulated by Witness.

Nil

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STATEMENT BY PATRICK JOSEPH CANNON,

"Mountain View", Castlebar, Co. Mayo.

My father was a member of the Fenian organisation and connected with their activities and from him I developed the separatist outlook. I joined Sinn Féin some time around the end of 1917 or early 1918, and at the same time, or around that period, I joined the Irish Volunteers. This was the Islandeady Company. Paddy Jordan was the Company Captain. Peter Tuohy was the Vice Captain and I was the Adjutant. Our strength was about 35. The only armament we had consisted of some shotguns and a few small calibre revolvers, for which there was very little in the way of ammunition. All members paid a small weekly subscription towards the equipping of the Company. Parades were held regularly, but there was practically nothing done in the way of training at this period.

When the conscription crisis became acute, our numbers jumped to 80 or 90. When this threat had subsided, our strength also subsided and we reverted to our original numbers. During the crisis we constructed a number of rough dug-outs and made arrangements to resist any attempt to enforce the Act, in conformity with the other parts of the nation. We made arrangements for food supplies and the Cumann na mBan, who were also organised in the area, made supplies of bandages and first-aid equipment. They usually met twice per week.

There was nothing of any importance happened after that until the general election of 1918. Prior to and during the elections, we were kept very busy in such

activities as canvassing voters and checking the registers, the protection of speakers at the meetings, arranging transport to convey voters to the polling stations and so forth. The elections went off quietly and there were no clashes with the British authorities.

Early in 1919 the first Dáil assembled and our members were now required to take an oath of allegiance to the Irish Republic. The Irish Volunteers now became the Army of the Republic and the Dáil assumed responsibility for the Army and for its actions. The oath was administered to our men by Michael Staunton, who was also President of the local Sinn Féin Club.

I think we had now secured a .32 rifle and a few rounds of ammunition. Where we got this weapon I cannot now say. There was nothing of any great importance took place during 1919 except the usual routine of training and administration. There was an old police barracks in the Company area. It had been evacuated some years previously. This was the only barracks in the area and we burned it down on Easter Saturday, 1920, to prevent its re-occupation. This burning of evacuated barracks was a country-wide operation and gave a good insight into the extent of the organisation of the I.R.A.

The R.I.C. now started raiding and searching houses of prominent members of Sinn Féin and I.R.A. My house was raided a few times and I went on the run, that is to say, I did not sleep at home at night but otherwise I performed my normal duties. About this time we purchased two rifles (Mausers) and 400 or 500 rounds of ammunition. We also got a few revolvers in the same consignment which was received from our General Headquarters in Dublin. For this lot of armament we paid Headquarters about £22. To get this money,

we ran dances and raffles and so forth. Our men also paid a small weekly subscription. We had now obtained the services of an ex Sergeant-Major of the British Army to give us training in the rifle and we had some firing practice also. Our strength had increased slightly by now.

The Sinn Féin Courts now began to operate successfully throughout the country and, as their range and scope developed, so also did the work of the Volunteers, who were now given the duty of policing the country. Arrests and detentions under very adverse circumstances had to be made by the Volunteers. Places of detention for prisoners had of necessity to be kept secret and it was quite a regular thing to see in the press where such a person had been arrested by the I.R.A. or Republican Police and lodged in "an unknown destination". The Courts set up under Sinn Féin were made good use of by the people, as a whole, and the decisions given by such Courts were loyally carried out. The British Courts were boycotted and, but for a few hangers-on, were deserted. The local solicitors all practised at the Sinn Féin Courts which were often held at night time. All of this placed a huge amount of work on the shoulders of the Volunteers who, being a voluntary unpaid force, could only give their spare time to the work. Indeed many of them, who could ill afford to do so, gave all their time to Volunteer and Sinn Féin duties. The Sinn Féin organisation and the I.R.A., or Volunteers, could almost be said to be the one body, as practically all Volunteers were members of Sinn Féin and it was they who kept the organisation moving.

Towards the end of 1920 a general raid for arms was carried out in this area in conformity with the other parts

of the country. In this raid, or round-up of arms, we secured a few revolvers but practically no ammunition. We also acquired a couple of .22 rifles and a sizeable collection of shotguns. There was no trouble of any serious nature during this raiding and no shooting occurred.

About the end of October, 1920, a Brigade was organised in West Mayo. Michael Kilroy of Newport was appointed Brigade O.C. Edward Moane was made Vice O.C. The Adjutant was Seán Gibbons, and the Quartermaster, Tom Kitterick. The Battalions forming the Brigade were: 1st - Castlebar; 2nd - Newport; 3rd - Westport; and the 4th - Louisburgh.

The Brigade functioned successfully throughout the period and regular Brigade Council meetings were held. Prior to this, a Battalion organisation had come into being in the Castlebar area and this was now known as the 1st (Castlebar) Battalion. The O.C. of the Battalion was Michael McHugh and the Vice O.C. was Michael Staunton. I cannot remember now who the Adjutant was. The Quartermaster was Mark Killilea. The Companies comprising the Battalion were: "A" - Castlebar; "B" - Ballyheane; "C" - Islandeady; "D" - Glenisland; "E" - Crimlin; "F" - Ballyvarey; "G" - Ballintubber; "H" - Burren; "I" - Breachy; and "J" - Castlebar No. 2, formed when the original Company overflowed. Regular Battalion Council meetings were held and the Battalion, from the administrative point of view, functioned successfully. The Battalion Staff co-ordinated the training and work of the Battalion.

Early in 1921 Dr. John^{A.} Madden, who was a member of the Brigade Staff visited the Battalion. He was looking for Volunteers to form an Active Service Unit, or Flying

Columns as they came to be known later. A few of us, including Paddy Jordan and I, volunteered our services. An Active Service Unit now came into being in the Battalion area. There were about 12 or 14 men in the Unit and it was only part-time service, but was always available on call. For armament we had 7 or 8 rifles (2 Mausers and 5 or 6 Lee Enfields) and the remainder had shotguns. As far as I can recollect, some at least of the Lee Enfield rifles were purchased from soldiers out of the local British army garrison. This was the 1st Battalion Active Service Unit and later this combined with the other Brigade Units but still keeping its own identity within the Brigade Active Service Unit. The Unit concentrated in the village of Doogary and kept their arms in a house there.

In the meantime, Commandant McHugh was arrested by the British and Staunton had to go on the run. James Chambers now became O.C. of the Battalion and Paddy Jordan was appointed Vice O.C. Jordan also became O.C. of the Battalion Active Service Unit. The British now found out that there was an Active Service Unit in the area and they carried out a series of encircling round-ups. They did not succeed, however, in catching any of the Column or its armament.

On the first Friday in May, 1921, a combined attempt was made to ambush a party of the enemy at the Big Wall, on the Westport side of the Half-Way House which is on the road between Castlebar and Westport. Men from the Castlebar, Westport and Newport Battalion Columns combined in this Brigade operation.

We had no information about the enemy and just anticipated that some such would pass that way some time during the day. We of the 1st Battalion Unit were

detailed for road blocking operations, which were to be put down on the road about one mile or so on the Castlebar side of the ambush position. No blocking, of course, was to be done until an enemy patrol or party passed through from Castlebar in the direction of Westport. Then we were to block the road to prevent reinforcements from Castlebar getting to the ambush area. We were unarmed. There were no trees available for felling at this point, but on each side of the road there were substantial dry stone wall fences and it was decided to use these by throwing them on to the road and so obstructing it. The same operation was to be carried out on the Westport side, in the event of an enemy force coming from that side. This blocking was to be carried out in depth along the road.

We had sentries on a hill about half a mile on the Castlebar side of our position. The duty of these men was to signal to us when the enemy were approaching. They had vision towards Castlebar for about two miles. We took up our positions about seven or eight o'clock in the morning. We were only about an hour in position when our sentries signalled the approach of an enemy from the Castlebar side. We took cover and, in due course, a Crossley tender, loaded with Tans and R.I.C., passed through travelling towards Westport. We expected to hear firing from the ambush position but could not hear any. Having waited for a few minutes to ensure that there was not a second party of enemy, we got out on to the road and proceeded to block it with stones. We had got about 60 yards of the road blocked with stones when our sentries on the hill started to signal again, indicating that more enemy were approaching. We rushed to cover behind the nearest fence which was about 50 or 60 yards from the road. We now observed that it was the same

party of Tans and R.I.C. returning towards Castlebar, having apparently not been engaged by our main or ambush party.

The police tender pulled up at the road obstruction and immediately rifle grenades were fired into where we were taking cover. Two of our men were killed, two were captured by the enemy and the remainder of us succeeded in getting away safely. We had no arms at the time; our normal arms were with the main ambush party. The names of the men who were killed were O'Malley and Lally. They were not actually members of the Column and were only called out for duty for that particular incident. They were from Islandeady. There were about 30 all told engaged in this operation on our side and our particular party was about 8 or 9 strong. We afterwards learned that the party of police had not travelled as far as the ambush position. They had gone out to raid Staunton's house, which was situated some distance short of where the ambush position was, and having accomplished that, were returning to Castlebar.

The ambush at Kilmeena took place about a week or ten days later - actually on the 19th May, 1921. Two nights before this ambush, five or six of the Westport Volunteers and an equal number of the Castlebar Volunteers, all equipped with small arms, were instructed to go into the respective towns and shoot up any patrols or parties of the enemy they could find. No enemy were encountered either in Westport or Castlebar. In Newport a party of Volunteers sniped the police barracks there, from across the river, and shot one policeman. A Sergeant of the police was also wounded. This man was down at the river fishing at the time and was wounded by rifle fire from his own barracks

We met the remainder of the Battalion Active Service Columns, less the men who were engaged in the above operations, at the village of Ballinacarriga, Westport, at about one o'clock on the morning of the 19th May. We also found that the Brigade Staff were assembled there. Michael Kilroy, who was our O.C., had just received a report about the shooting of the police in Newport which had taken place about six or seven hours previously and concluded that there would be a round-up and possibly reprisals in the Newport area. This would be an opportunity to stage an ambush on the Westport-Newport road, as parties of enemy were bound to pass that way.

We started off, across country mostly, and arrived at Kilmeena at daylight. Michael Kilroy was in charge. We got into position quickly, about 20 or 30 yards from the road and on one side only. The position overlooked the road in front of us, but did not give us a good view of the road on either flanks. Our main body was in position beside the present dance hall. A party of 5 or 6 men were put out on the flank on the Newport side, and one or two on the Westport side. These parties were to protect our flanks and keep any enemy from getting round in our rear.

We were in position about 6 a.m. Our party was about 21 or 22 strong, all told. Our armament was of a very mixed nature. We had some rifles, Lee Enfield and Mauser, and quite a number were armed with shotguns. The ambush position was set to deal with anything coming from the Newport side; it was not suitable for dealing with an enemy approaching from Westport direction. It was from Newport side we expected the enemy to come.

We remained in position throughout the day until about 3 or 4 o'clock in the afternoon and were then just

about to withdraw, when two Crossley tenders full of enemy, about a quarter of a mile apart, came into our position from the Westport side. The first tender was directly in front of us before we realised it and we just blazed into it. It was travelling at about 35 miles per hour. This tender succeeded in getting through our position and around a bridge at the school and was out of sight in a flash. The second tender halted at about 400 yards from our position on the Westport side, and in our view. We opened fire on this party. They had a Lewis gun which came into action immediately against us. We just kept potting away at this party at this distance.

Meanwhile, the occupants of the first tender having got to cover around the bend in the road, had pulled up and dismounted and, coming back to the bend, advanced up a by-road on our flank and got between our main body and our flank party. The enemy had now got to a position partly in our rear, from which they opened heavy fire on us. We fought it out in this position for about half an hour. We then made our way back to the rear - slowly - from fence to fence taking two of our men who were wounded with us. Two of our men had been killed prior to this and we were now in a bad plight.

We succeeded in breaking off the engagement and retired to Skirdagh, bringing two of our wounded with us. In addition to having some of our men killed and wounded, we lost some of our armament and used up a good spot of our already none too plentiful supply of ammunition. At least one policeman was killed and one severely wounded. We now billeted in the village of Skirdagh which is a straggling type of place, the houses extending for over a mile.

About daylight on Monday, 23rd May, 1921, the man who

owned the house in which I was sleeping rushed into the house and said that there was shooting taking place in the village about a half-mile away. Another man, named Kelly, was with me at this time. We got out and made our way to where the firing was taking place. When about half way to there, we met the men who had been wounded at Kilmeena making their way towards the rear, and Kelly accompanied them with others. I next contacted Tom Kitterick, John Gibbons and Jack McDonagh and we all headed towards the place where the firing was taking place. On arrival there, we found three others of the Column, Michael Kilroy, Dr. Madden and Jack Connolly. It was now about four o'clock in the morning and was daylight. We took up a position and shot it out with the enemy there until about twelve o'clock in the forenoon.

The enemy were R.I.C. and Tans and, during the engagement, reinforcements arrived for them consisting of a couple of lorry loads of police, who also joined in the fight. By now our wounded men had had time to make good their escape and we decided that it was time for us to get out also, so we moved back some distance and took up a position of hiding on the flank. From here we watched the enemy advance. They numbered about 40 and had one or two Lewis guns. They advanced up through the Glenlara valley. We stayed in our position until night when we came down to the village again. The enemy did not return to the village and our wounded had got clean away.

Our Commanding Officer, Michael Kilroy, had a map of the area and he and Dr. Madden were studying it to see if they could get out of a possible round-up in the area. Dr. Madden remarked that, if we could get to a certain cross-roads on the Castlebar-Glenisland-Newport road by daylight, we would probably be outside any round-up area. We started out to get to this point at about eleven o'clock that night.

About three o'clock the following morning we observed the lights of lorries approaching some miles away and we ran the last few hundred yards to get to the point which had been our target. We could not leave the road, as the land on either side was very boggy. Suddenly the headlights of a lorry swept around the bend in the road some distance in front of us and actually shone on us. Headlights were then not very powerful and apparently they did not see us. We jumped off the road into the bog on the side and got around a small mound, behind which we took cover. Dr. Madden, however, got stuck in the drain alongside the road and had to remain there. A few lorries passed by, but the last one pulled up just opposite us and beside Dr. Madden in the drain. Some soldiers got off this lorry and crossed the road on the other side from us and headed towards Skirdagh, which we had left. Madden now joined us. He was covered with mud up to his shoulders. There were only seven of us together now, the remainder of the Column having gone off with the wounded men in the Crossmolina direction.

We slept that night in Mucknagh village and on the third night we were in Rockfield, Aughagower. We were still only seven strong. We then moved on to Aughagower. We met there the portion of the Westport Column which had gone into Westport previous to Kilmeena and also some of the Newport Column we picked up in the village of Curvey. We stayed the night there and then moved on towards Carrowkennedy via Owenwee and Letterbrock, and finally billeted in the Boheh area east of Carrowkennedy, arriving there around twelve or one o'clock at night. In the meantime, we had picked up the remnant of the Column which had been missing since the previous incidents.

We were now about 31 strong. That night I was on

sentry duty over the Column and went to bed about 8 o'clock in the morning. At about 3 or 4 o'clock in the afternoon I was pulled out of bed and told that the Tans were in the vicinity. The other man who was with me and I got dressed immediately. In the meantime, we were informed that two Crossley tenders and a private car loaded with Tans had proceeded along the road towards Leenane. A local man, named Johnny Duffy, who was with us said they would have to come back this road again, as Erriff bridge had been destroyed and was now impassable. The O.C., Michael Kilroy, immediately moved the whole Column to an ambush position at Carrowkennedy adjacent to the schoolhouse. We were divided into three sections. My section had not actually decided on what position they would occupy, when we heard the lorries approaching again. The O.C. pointed out a position to us and we rushed to this.

Our instructions were that we were to let the first lorry through and to engage the second one, and our men on the hill on the other side of the road would take on what was left. The first lorry or tender passed through; the second one never got up to our position; the car had broken down and it was now being towed by the second tender. This tender came into the ambush position and was fired on from across the road by our men on the other side. It was not visible to us and we had to move to a new position over it on the road, from which we opened fire on the occupants. The enemy now jumped from the tender and took cover on the side of the road and behind the vehicle and so forth. Close to the position where the enemy was, there was a small thatched house which was occupied by an old woman. The enemy who were not hit in the first volley rushed into this house. We peppered the door and windows and roof for about a quarter of an hour.

The first lorry had been engaged by our other section and the driver was shot dead, and the District Inspector, who was sitting beside him, was mortally wounded. The lorry came to a halt. A Lewis gun was part of the armament of the men on this tender. When they were fired on and the driver was shot, the other men jumped from the lorry and took cover on the roadside where they endeavoured to get the Lewis gun into action. They were 30 or 40 feet below our men and, as such, the Lewis gun was ineffective as it was impossible to get sufficient elevation on it. They fired 4 or 5 bursts from the gun but to no avail. They continued to hold on to their position for about two hours, firing occasional rifle grenades towards our position. We could not see where the rifle grenades were coming from.

On the side of the enemy lorry there was a white circle painted. One of our fellows, Walsh, fired at this white circle, as he could see nothing else to fire at. At this time 4 or 5 others of our men had crept down by a wall to try and bomb the enemy. Immediately Walsh fired at the circle, a bomb exploded inside the lorry. A white flag was now hoisted from the lorry. Some of us now left our position and went down to the lorry to discover that the only effective enemy left was the man who hoisted the white flag. We disarmed this man and then, followed by two of our men and carrying the white flag, we ordered him to proceed to the thatched house, where the other enemy party were still holding out, and to get them to surrender. As he approached the house, followed by our men, he was fired on by the enemy occupants but was not hit. I think this was a mistake. The enemy did not see or understand the significance of the white flag. He explained to the enemy in the house what had happened outside and asked them to

surrender. After a short period they came out of the house, grounding their arms outside the door as they did so.

We procured a cycle and gave it to one of the policemen and told him to proceed immediately to Westport for medical assistance, which he did. We burned the lorries and the car, having first collected all the enemy armament and equipment which consisted of belts and bandoliers. All the police had service revolvers. We got a Lewis gun, two grenade rifles and about 20 Lee Enfield Service rifles, about 40 or 50 Mills grenades and a few hundred rounds of service ammunition. We now left the police and headed east and then, when out of their view, we turned west. This was done in order to mislead the police as to the direction we had taken. We now headed towards the west side of the Reek. We had no casualties in the fight. District Inspector Stephenson and a number of police - about 5 or 6 - were killed and an equal number wounded.

We now dumped a lot of our old rifles and equipped the men with the captured Lee Enfield rifles. I kept my Mauser rifle, however, as I had a good supply of ammunition for it. We also issued the men with the captured belts and bandoliers.

The Column now moved to the village of Durlas west of the Reek and billeted there. We had no further fights with the enemy. We kept moving around that area and a few days before the Truce we got caught inside the area of a large encirclement operation by the enemy. We dumped and hid our arms and most of the men succeeded in getting through the cordon. Not one of the Active Service Unit was captured by the enemy in this round-up.

The Truce found us in good form and our morale high. The victory at Carrowkennedy had pushed this up. We had

about 100 rounds per rifle. In fact, we had more arms than we had ammunition for. We could put more men under arms by re-distributing the ammunition and this was our intention, had it come to a resumption of fighting. However, we were very glad to get a decent rest, a good clean-up and regular meals once again.

Jordan, who was wounded and captured at Kilmeena, died in a Dublin hospital about a fortnight afterwards. I was then appointed Vice O.C. of the Battalion, an appointment I still held at the time of the signing of the Truce. I took charge of the remains of the Castlebar sub-Column then and continued to do so until the Truce.

Our casualties at the Kilmeena ambush were Volunteers Collins, McEvelly, O'Donnell and Staunton - killed. Wounded and captured - Volunteers Jordan and O'Malley. Wounded but not captured - Volunteers Swift and Hughes. Jordan subsequently died in George V. Military Hospital, Dublin, which is now known as St. Bricin's Military Hospital.

In the fight at Skirdagh we had one Volunteer killed and one wounded. We were at a disadvantage in the area, in that we had no proper intelligence service operating and the ambushes which we did carry out were purely hit-and-miss affairs. There were no spies dealt with in the area either. I am not in a position to deal with matters of intelligence then and will leave it to others who are better informed in the matter. As far as I know, there were no munitions MADE, except buckshot until after the Truce.

SIGNED:

P. J. Cannon
(P. J. Cannon)

DATE:

27th March 1953

27th March 1953.

WITNESS:

Matthew Barry
(Matthew Barry) Comd't.

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