

ORIGINAL

BUREAU OF MILITARY HISTORY 1913-21

BURO STAIRE MILEATA 1913-21

No. W.S. 831

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BUREAU OF MILITARY HISTORY, 1913-21.

STATEMENT BY WITNESS

DOCUMENT NO. W.S. 831

Witness.

Thomas Culhane
Main Street,
Buttevant,
Co. Cork.

Identity.

Member of Irish Volunteers, Charleville,
1916 - ;

Member of Battalion ~~Rolling~~ Column, Cork.

Subject.

(a) Irish Volunteers, Charleville,
1916-1921;

(b) Clonbanin (Co. Cork) Ambush,
5th March, 1921.

Conditions, if any, Stipulated by Witness.

Nil

File No. S. 2127

Form B.S.M. 2

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STATEMENT

BY

THOMAS CULHANE, MAIN STREET, BUTTEVANT, COUNTY CORK.

'A' (CHARLEVILLE) COMPANY, 3RD (CHARLEVILLE) BATTALION,
CORK IV BRIGADE, AND MEMBER OF BATTALION COLUMN.

This is a statement of my activities as a member of the I.R.A. which I joined about May, 1916.

About July, 1916, I took part in a parade to Charleville railway station to welcome home released prisoners - Seán O'Dea, Company Captain, and others. We were attacked by a hostile mob on returning to town, composed of British soldiers' wives and relatives, but this mob came out second best.

During the above month I was summoned under the Defence of the Realm Act for assaulting a British soldier, such act likely to cause disaffection among the civil population at Charleville. The Court dismissed the case.

I took part in other engagements against the mob mentioned above during the year 1916, and attended parades on different occasions.

I attended a meeting at Ardpatrick on 17th March, 1917. This meeting at Ardpatrick was addressed by Countess Markievicz, R.I.P., I also took part in a parade to Kilmallock about June, 1917, where a meeting was addressed by Thomas Ashe, R.I.P.

I also took part in several other parades during the year 1917, which included a march to Shinanagh about 9th

December, where we met the Churchtown Company of the I.R.A., which was accompanied by some members of the R.I.C.

About February, 1918, I took part in a parade to Dromcollogher where several Companies of the I.R.A. attended - Comdt. Brislane, the O.C. Battalion, was in charge.

17th March, 1918: Parade of I.R.A. to Ardpatrick, in which I took part. Comdt. Brislane was in charge of this parade too, for which he got imprisonment later.

I took part in a parade to Charleville railway station about April, 1918, from where three I.R.A. prisoners were being removed by train to Cork prison - Con McCarthy, John Cronin and Joe Culhane. All three were from Charleville Company and all three are now dead, R.I.P. All members of the I.R.A. who took part in this parade were armed with sticks, etc., and Comdt. Brislane was in charge. On arrival at the Station we were refused admission by armed R.I.C., but after a short while we got on to the platform where missiles were thrown at the R.I.C. who held their rifles at the ready.

On the 23rd November, 1918, a parade of I.R.A. for the anniversary of the Manchester Martyrs took place in Charleville, in which I took part. Notice was given in the daily and evening papers proclaiming same all over Ireland by the British authority. The parade was attacked by R.I.C. and a company of soldiers armed with rifles. A fight took place and continued for about two hours, with the result that a number of soldiers were wounded by stones, etc., No shots were fired. Vice-Comdt. O'Driscoll was in charge.

Year, 1919: With other members of the I.R.A., I cleaned Company arms and made searches in a number of houses for arms. We were training with a miniature rifle and revolvers and held several parades. We also prepared a reception for U.S.A. delegates. We also took part in preparations for a Feis held in Charleville which was addressed by Pat (Paidin) O'Keefe, T.D., North Cork, who got a term of imprisonment for the same address.

I took part in a parade to Kilmallock where a meeting was addressed by Rev. Fr. O'Flanagan.

On 2nd February, 1920, I took up a position with other members of the I.R.A. at Gurteenroe, Liscarroll. It was decided to attack Freemount R.I.C. Barracks and it was anticipated that military would be requested from Buttevant Barracks, which we were to ambush. The attack on Freemount Barracks was called off as a few members of the I.R.A. did not arrive in time.

February, 1920: Owing to a number of robberies having taken place in the town of Charleville and district, and the R.I.C. doing little night duty, Comdt. Brislane decided to form a Vigilance Committee. I was a member of this Committee and on a few occasions we were held up by R.I.C. and some military and compelled to leave the town at the point of the gun.

April, 1920: Night of the attack on Ballylanders R.I.C. Barracks. I had instructions from Comdt. Brislane to report to him activities of R.I.C. or military in

Charleville, but I made no report as they were not active.

28th May, 1920: Night of the attack on Kilmallock R.I.C. Barracks. With other members of the I.R.A. I was on outpost duty at Charleville railway station: we were armed and Comdt. Brislane was in charge.

I was active during the following weeks preparing for local elections. I was also on duty at booths and on guard over ballot boxes for one night. The military were very active on this occasion.

June, 1920: With other members of the I.R.A. we held up the mail train from Dublin to Cork about 10 p.m. at Charleville railway station on instructions from Comdt. Brislane. We ordered the driver to drive slowly for a distance of one mile when all military mails were unloaded and conveyed to Battalion Headquarters. My house was searched by military the following day.

15th August, 1920: On instructions from Comdt. Brislane, I, with other members of the I.R.A., prevented the Cattle Fair from being held in Charleville. This action was taken owing to the Baron of the Fair applying to the British Military authority for a permit to hold same.

During the month of August, 1920, I, with other members of the I.R.A., made several searches for arms, including the residence of Robert Saunders, Charleville, who was most hostile to the I.R.A. We secured a number of shot-guns here. This residence was difficult to search as at the time the military had it under observation. The military called at

my house a few days after this search and informed my people that if anything serious occurred in the district they would hold me responsible.

Early in September, 1920, Comdt. Brislane received information that a lorry with six armed soldiers travelled almost every day on the main road from Newmarket to Buttevant Military Barracks. Comdt. Brislane, with seven other members of the I.R.A., decided to ambush same at Lisgriffin. (I was one of the seven). Lisgriffin is at a distance of about $2\frac{1}{2}$ miles from Buttevant where a large force of military was stationed at the time. The I.R.A. took up positions just inside the fence which adjoins the road already mentioned. Very soon - that is, at about 2 p.m. - three carts were observed to be approaching from Newmarket direction: all three were drawn by mules and each cart had two soldiers. These fired at least one shot a short distance from the ambush position. When they arrived at same position they were asked to halt but this they refused to do, with the result that an exchange of shots followed. The mules got into a stampede and travelled the road to Buttevant at great speed. One soldier was wounded and one mule died of gun-shot wounds. The I.R.A. suffered no casualties. I think this was the second exchange of fire in North Cork with British forces during the Black and Tan period. Time - about 2 p.m.

December, 1920: Took up positions at Churchtown with other members of the I.R.A., the object being to ambush a party of R.I.C. but same did not arrive.

I, with other members of I.R.A., opened fire on two R.I.C.

near Milford. The fire was at long range - no casualties. Ed. Ryan, Column Commander, in charge.

I took part in the hold-up of the night mail train at Charleville which was proceeding from Dublin to Cork. All mails and parcels were removed. Comdt. Brislane was in charge.

January, 1921: Comdt. Brislane decided to have a large trench cut in the main road from Cork to Limerick at Shinanagh, Ballyhea, which is a distance of about five miles from Charleville and same from Buttevant, where a large force of military was stationed at the time. It was also about two miles from Ballyvonare Camp which held a similar force. Two barricades were erected on above road, one at the Charleville side of the trench and the other at Buttevant side, each being about $\frac{1}{2}$ mile distant from the trench. Five armed men took up positions just inside the fence adjoining the road at each barricade, with instructions to fire five rounds into any military who might approach, and retreat immediately, as at the time large forces of military travelled this road day and night. The purpose of the fire was to hold up the military and give men engaged at the trench time to get away. The barricade on the Charleville side comprised two heavy farm carts chained together. I was one of the five armed men at this barricade. About midnight a very large car approached at great speed from the Charleville direction. When it came close to the barricade fire was opened on it and an exchange of shots followed but the car crashed into the barricade and smashed the farm carts, reducing its own speed

with the result that it jumped clean over the trench which was almost complete, but the car was badly smashed. Its occupants, Colonel Hope and Staff, stationed at Ballyvonare Camp, took to the fields where they had a second exchange of fire with other members of I.R.A., Colonel Hope and his Staff left their papers in the car. Some were captured from which military information was secured. One soldier was wounded and Hope himself was seen to be lame for a time after this engagement, and could only walk with the aid of a stick. A military sergeant with a revolver was captured as he was proceeding on foot from Charleville to Buttevant and he was disarmed. The I.R.A. suffered no casualties. Comdt. Brislane was in charge.

January, 1921: I, with other members of the I.R.A., made an attack on Buttevant Military Barracks with rifle fire. This attack lasted for only a few minutes as a very large number of soldiers was stationed here at the time. Comdt. Brislane was in charge. The attack was about 11 p.m.

During February, 1921, about 11 p.m., I, with about seven other members of the I.R.A., opened rifle fire on Charleville Military Barracks (two in number), as it was expected that military would be requested from Buttevant or Ballyvonare, and another party of I.R.A. was in position to ambush some military, but they did not arrive. Volunteer Con McCarthy was in charge of the seven members.

February, 1921: It was decided to make a slight attack on Churchtown R.I.C. Barracks, the purpose being to bring military reinforcements from Buttevant, which is a

distance of four miles from Churchtown. A number of I.R.A. were holding positions ready to ambush same on the road leading from Buttevant to Churchtown. This attack was made about 11 p.m. One R.I.C. man was killed. The I.R.A. (six in number) suffered no casualties. No military arrived. Column Commander Ed. Ryan was in charge.

March, 1921: Brigade O.C., Seán Moylan, and Vice O.C. Paddy O'Brien, in charge of the I.R.A. Column. We took up positions for two days between Rathmore and Killarney ready to attack a party of military which we expected, but they did not arrive.

On the following day, the 5th March, 1921, we took up positions at Clonbanin where we ambushed a large force of military and R.I.C. A large number was killed and wounded, General Cummins being one of the dead. I expect that a complete description has already been given of this ambush and after very careful consideration I find that I am only able to describe the position I occupied in the ambush. I was in a position at the extreme end and for this reason I could view much further than where I actually was.

As it is now thirty-two years since the date of the Clonbanin ambush and as I have never seen the ambush position prior to that time or, indeed, since then it is not easy for me to give an accurate description of what happened on that day, even as far as the events in which I was directly concerned.

I was a member of the 3rd Battalion Column of Cork

held positions with us. Seán Moylan, O.C. Brigade, was in charge of this Column. In addition, we had a Kerry Column with us, but I cannot think of who was in charge of it.

On 5th March all three Columns arrived at Clonbanin and I think the Millstreet Column came also. Seán Moylan took charge of the entire force.

Nine members of the 3rd Battalion or Charleville Column, including myself, took up a position at the extreme Northern end of the ambush position, which was at the left-hand side of the road as you would proceed from Rathmore to Buttevant. This position was, I think, at a distance of over one hundred yards from the road and we were above road level. Included within our position was a passage from the road which led up to one or more farmhouses. Our position was very important as, if enemy soldiers got possession of it, they could get to the rear of the I.R.A. positions on the Northern side of the road. Positions were held by I.R.A. on the opposite side of the road to us.

The names of the 3rd Battalion Column on that day were: Michael Regan, R.I.P., Con McCarthy, R.I.P., Pat Sheedy, R.I.P., Don O'Brien, R.I.P., brother of the Vice O.C. Brigade - he was executed by the British the following May - Maurice O'Brien, Denis Motherway, Robert O'Connell, James Jago, Edmond McCarthy, P.J. O'Brien, Pat Russell, Paddy O'Brien, V/O.C. Brigade and Edmond Ryan, O/C. Column, and myself, Thomas Culhane.

While nine of us occupied the position mentioned, the other five - Paddy O'Brien, P.J. O'Brien, Pat Russell, Edmond

Newmarket Column.

We were all supplied with 30 rounds of .303 ammunition with instructions to hold five of these in a separate pocket to be used in the event of a retreat.

A number of land mines were already placed in position in the roadway. We had orders not to fire on any enemy soldiers until we first heard the explosion of a land mine.

About 10 a.m. we were informed that three lorries of enemy troops were approaching from Buttevant direction going in the direction of Rathmore. We got ready and were very careful not to allow the enemy to see us. When the lorries came close to our position we could hear the sound of music and it appeared to us that a mouth organ was being played in each lorry.

To our great surprise the lorries passed through the entire ambush position without a shot being fired nor a land mine being exploded. The fact was that the mines failed to work.

It was decided to hold all I.R.A. positions until evening. About 3 p.m. a young lady arrived at our position with a basket which contained tea, bread and butter. She came from a convenient farmhouse. We were delighted and thanked her and as she had just handed out the first cup of tea we received information that a large force of enemy soldiers in lorries and accompanied by an armoured car was fast approaching from the Rathmore or Kerry direction.

for action. Within a few minutes we heard a few rifle shots, followed by machine gun fire. This never ceased during the entire engagement. Thousands and thousands of rounds must have been fired from enemy machine guns on that evening.

About ten minutes after the engagement had commenced, from our position we observed three or four soldiers on the road below us in single file. They kept close to the fence on our side of the road and were in a crouched position. We opened fire on them and as far as we could see they dropped to the ground. While this was going on a few more soldiers, two or three in number, continued to approach our position, all of whom we fired on.

We could hear the moans of the wounded from the road. This continued for a long time. We could also hear the most filthy language which was kept up for a long time too. This, I believe, came from a few Black and Tans who must have been intoxicated. As we guessed that a few of the enemy were either killed or wounded we were thinking that some of us should get down to the road and see if it were possible to capture their rifles. However, we considered that for a number of reasons this would not be wise. We had to consider the machine gun fire, the position we held, and above all, we did not know what we were going to meet on the road.

A short time prior to receiving orders to retire we heard a number of rifle shots to our right and these appeared to be fired in the fields. As a result of these shots we began to feel a little anxious, as we were aware that if we

had to retreat we would be going in the direction from where we heard the shots.

Very soon one of the I.R.A. arrived at our position and informed us we were to retire immediately. He also explained that a British Officer and four or five soldiers did get into the fields and that the I.R.A. had opened fire on them and forced them to return to the road.

I think the ambush must have lasted over two hours. Anyway, the I.R.A. suffered no casualties. Neither did we capture any arms. I also think my comrades and myself were the last to retire, perhaps it was that we were the last to receive instructions to move from the scene of the ambush.

The three lorries which passed through the ambush position in the morning appeared to have travelled from Buttevant to Rathmore where they met General Cummins, he who was killed in the ambush. It was believed at the time that the occupants of the lorries wanted to make sure that the road was safe for General Cummins's journey to Buttevant.

The land mines failed to work during the engagement. What the enemy casualties were I do not know exactly, though it was said afterwards there were thirteen killed and fifteen wounded.

About 9th March, 1921, I, with other members of I.R.A., prepared for an attack on a large force of R.I.C., which arrived in Kiskeam, but we did not get an opportunity for same.

Later in the same month with other members of I.R.A., I

was on outpost duty while the bridge at Ballydesmond was being destroyed.

I was on the same duty while Guiney Bridge was being destroyed also in March.

About the first week in April, 1921, with other members of the I.R.A., I was on outpost duty while a number of bridges were being destroyed on the main road from Buttevant to Charleville.

In April, also, we took up positions near Churchtown to ambush R.I.C. but got no opportunity for same.

In April, too, a very large enemy round-up took place: at least two of our Company members were captured. Thousands of soldiers were engaged on this round-up.

May, 1921: Tulladuff, Liscarroll: On receipt of information that three Black and Tans in civilian clothes were proceeding on bicycles along the road leading to Drumcollogher, it was decided to ambush them on the return journey. I, with five other members of the I.R.A., advanced a distance of about half a mile to the above road, armed with revolvers, but when we reached Tulladuff, which is a junction of five roads, we observed about ten men coming from the Drumcollogher direction; all were on bicycles and these we believed to be Black and Tans. Owing to the ambush position being most unsuitable it was decided not to attack. However, three of the party advanced to the road junction; these were the Tans with whom an exchange of shots followed. All three got away but they abandoned one bicycle. The other members of the party were

civilians and they were not aware that the three were Tans, but they did not come as far as the road junction. The I.R.A. had no casualties. Time - about 3 p.m. Vice Brigade O.C. P. O'Brien was in charge.

May, 1921: We commandeered motor cars, and we also commandeered men at Lisgriffin, Buttevant, for the purpose of trenching roads.

June, 1921: Vice Brigade O.C. P. O'Brien in charge. I took part in the ambush of a large force of Auxiliaries at Rathcoole, Millstreet, a number of same being killed and wounded. I expect that a complete description is already given of this ambush, and for this reason I will just give my account of the fight as I could see it from the position I occupied. I was towards the left of the position held by the I.R.A. and so could not see everything that happened, as the enemy approached from the right and only one lorry load of Auxiliaries came near to where I was.

This was in June, 1921, the 16th, I think.

A large force of Auxiliaries who were stationed at Millstreet travelled three times each day on lorries to the town of Kanturk. They left Millstreet about 9 a.m., 1 p.m., and 5 p.m. The distance from Millstreet to Kanturk is about nine miles.

The 3rd Battalion Column, of which I was a member, was in the parish of Dromina, near Charleville, when we got instructions to proceed to Rathcoole. This was a distance of about fourteen miles. We travelled by horse and cart and the

journey took two days and two nights as the enemy - the military - were very busy at the time, searching and rounding up whole districts, even where we would have to pass. Under the circumstances we had to avoid going through those districts and make for Rathcoole in a roundabout way.

We arrived in Rathcoole about 3 a.m. on the morning of the ambush. We had tea in a farmhouse about 5 a.m. and were then taken to a wood which was a short distance from the ambush position. All the I.R.A. taking part were mobilised there. The weather was very warm and on that day the sun shone from a cloudless sky.

From the wood at Rathcoole we had a clear view of the Auxiliaries five times prior to they being ambushed, while they travelled to and from Kanturk. They were ambushed as they made their final return journey from Kanturk to Millstreet about 6.30 p.m.

In the wood the I.R.A. were divided up into six Sections. Each Section had a land mine which was already concealed underneath the surface of the road and which was to be fired by a battery. Each Section moved into its ambush position about 6 p.m. The Section of which I was a member held a position at the right hand side of the road as you would proceed from Millstreet to Kanturk and the position would be, I think, a distance of about 100 yards from the road.

The ambush position was about six miles from Kanturk and three from Millstreet. The Section of I.R.A. holding the position to the left of the Section I was in, that is, on the

Millstreet side of us, had orders to attack the leading enemy when it was opposite their position, while our Section was to attack the second. The attack was to open by firing the land mine as the lorry was just passing over it. We were supplied with 30 rounds of .303 ammunition, with instructions to hold five rounds for retreat.

About 6.30 p.m. we were informed that the Auxiliaries' lorries were approaching from the Kanturk direction and in a few minutes we observed the first lorry coming towards our position. It appeared to be armour plated and had loopholes. Very soon it travelled over our land mine and passed our position.

Up to this time we had not heard a shot or the explosion of a land mine, but in a few minutes we did hear the first explosion of a land mine which was followed by rifle and machine gun fire. This took place away to our right on the Kanturk side of our position. Then we observed the first lorry which had already passed by, setting back and travelling again in the Kanturk direction. It was evident that its occupants had heard the explosion and the rifle and machine gun fire and had decided to go to the assistance of their comrades.

None of the occupants of this lorry appeared to have left it and so we decided to attack it. As it passed over our land mine we fired the mine and with the explosion the lorry appeared to lift about two feet off the road, while its occupants were enveloped in a cloud of smoke and dust for a few seconds.

Immediately after the explosion of the land mine our Section opened fire on the Auxiliaries, of whom there were about eight. A few, at least, of them were out on the roadside and took up positions and opened fire on us. They fired rifle grenades, too, and a number of these fell close to our position. We were very surprised at these as we had never before heard of such a thing as a rifle grenade.

The ambush lasted about an hour and the I.R.A. suffered no casualties. I do not know what casualties the enemy had, but they did have a number killed and wounded before we got orders to retire.

During the last week of June, 1921, I, with other members of the I.R.A., was engaged at Ballydesmond in the manufacture of land mines.

With other members of the I.R.A. I spent a few days, ending on 12th July, 1921, at Tournafulla, Co. Limerick, in a position ready to ambush a party of military which we expected would travel a certain road, but they did not arrive.

I did not sleep in my own house from about the month of May, 1920, to 13th July, 1921, and was a member of the Column (A.S.U.).

Manufacture of Land Mines: The land mines we used were comprised of powder which was packed into a metal case about 1½ to 2 feet long and about 4 to 6 inches in diameter and the shape of which was similar to that of a water or sewer pipe. The metal case had an iron plate at each end and the two plates were connected by a bolt.

The land mines were fired by a battery having a wire which was connected to a detonator in contact with the powder within the metal case.

Signed: Thomas Culhane
(Thomas Culhane)

Witnessed: C. Saurin LT.-COL.,
(C. Saurin)

Date: 17th April 1953

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