

# ORIGINAL

BUREAU OF MILITARY HISTORY 1913-21

BURO STAIRÉ MILEATA 1913-21

No. W.S. 874

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BUREAU OF MILITARY HISTORY, 1913-21.

STATEMENT BY WITNESS.

DOCUMENT NO. W.S. 874.....

Witness

Gilbert Morrissey,  
Cahercrin,  
Athenry,  
Co. Galway.

Identity.

Member of Rockfield Company (Co. Galway)  
Irish Volunteers, 1913 - ;

O/C. Athenry Battalion, 1917 - .

Subject.

- (a) Athenry, Co. Galway,  
Easter Week 1916;
- (b) Irish Volunteer activities, Co. Galway,  
1913-1920.

Conditions, if any, Stipulated by Witness.

Nil

File No. S. 2175.....

Form B.S.M. 2

STATEMENT BY GILBERT MORRISSEY,Cahercrin, Athenry.

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I started a company of Volunteers at a place called Rockfield, Craughwell, Co. Galway, in the year 1913, with the assistance of a man named Morgan Healy. The roll call then was about 40 men. We engaged an ex-soldier instructor from Athenry to drill us and instruct us in the use of arms. Morgan Healy died shortly afterwards and I was appointed company captain. About twelve of these men including myself belonged to the I.R.B. which was fairly active in the area about that time. I believe the above company to be the second company in the west of Ireland.

Early in 1914 companies were started in all parishes in the area and, later, they were formed into a battalion called the Athenry Battalion with Larry Lardner as Battalion O/C. He ordered all company captains to prepare to arm as best they could. In my company area I carried out raids for arms on houses of people who were not in sympathy with us. We collected a considerable number; they were mostly double-barreled and single shotguns.

After the Howth gun-running, we got a dozen Howth rifles for the battalion. They were sent to the Athenry Company. The Battalion O/C., Larry Lardner, ordered four companies into the town in August of that year. The companies' names were: Rockfield, Derrydonnel, Newcastle and Athenry. He selected twelve men from the Athenry Company to carry these twelve rifles in the open, with the four companies to protect them should the police force try to disarm them. The police force, which consisted of a District Inspector, Head Constable, two sergeants and 27 men, surrounded us. Then our O/C. ordered the twelve rifle-men to fire three rounds each.

Seeing that we were prepared to fight, the District Inspector gave no orders to his men. He went into consultation with our O/C. who told him that Carson's Volunteers were carrying rifles in the north without hindrance and that we would do so in the south, and he got away with it. From that onwards we carried rifles and shotguns in the open. These were the first rifles carried in the west of Ireland up to then as I believe it was supposed to be high treason to do so up to that particular time.

The split in the Volunteers which took place as a result of Redmond's appeal to Irishmen to join the British army did not affect my company. All the men remained loyal to the Volunteer Executive.

The company continued to parade two nights weekly for drill, and instruction in the use of arms, bayonet training, etc. In addition, manoeuvres and field exercises were frequently held on Sundays. The company also attended all battalion parades. Some time during the summer of 1915 Captain Liam Mellows came to Galway as organiser. Following his arrival, training in the whole area was intensified.

Some time before Easter Week 1916, Mellows told me and other members of the Irish Republican Brotherhood who were in the Volunteers to be prepared for any eventuality that might take place. We realised then that a rising was intended.

By the time the Rising took place I had the company fully armed. Each man had some sort of weapon, such as a shotgun, pike or bayonet. During Holy Week I got instructions from the Battalion O/C. to parade the company at three o'clock on Easter Sunday evening and to await further instructions. All arms, ammunition and equipment to be carried as well as 24 hours' rations.

The company mobilised as instructed. At about 8 o'clock I received word from the Battalion O/C. to dismiss the company, but to tell the men to be ready for another mobilisation. The company mobilised again on Easter Monday.

Thomas Kenny, our Galway Centre for the I.R.B., came from Dublin late on Easter Monday night and visited us at our place of mobilisation and told us that the rebellion was called off in Dublin and that he was speaking to Thomas Clarke and Sean MacDermott and others. He was a member of my company and, I believe, represented Connacht as Centre for the I.R.B. He also told us that he expected that a certain section of Dublin men would strike. I asked him if he was in favour of a rising and he said he was against it; that he believed the time was not ripe.

This man, Kenny, took a small part in the rebellion, escaped arrest and got to America. I certainly believe if captured he would have been executed. You may have seen the report of his death some two years ago, about the part he played in the movement prior to the rebellion. You may have heard about him as he was wellknown to all officers in Galway.

On Easter Tuesday morning I got a dispatch from Captain Mellowes about 5.30 a.m. that they were fighting in Dublin and to mobilise. I did so. All men in the company answered the call. I sent him a dispatch that I was ready and awaiting his orders. He sent word to me to proceed to the farmyard at Athenry and that I would contact the main body of men there. I arrived at the yard just as Mellowes and his men arrived there. Soon after our arrival, R.I.C. approached the farmyard and fighting took place. I was one of a party which was sent

out the back entrance to try to capture them, but they retreated towards Athenry. They did not attempt to come near us afterwards. We remained at the farmyard overnight. The following day (Wednesday) the main body, under the command of Mellows, left the farmyard and marched to Moyode Castle. On arrival there my company was put on outpost duty as it was most familiar with the locality. The Castle was situated close to my company area. All other companies took it in turn. There was a fight with a police patrol and, after an exchange of shots, the police were driven back to Athenry. Next day, Thursday, I got orders from Captain Mellows to take my company out to break the railway line.

I took out two lengths of rails, one near Athenry and the other near Craughwell railway station. Mellows expected that military might come from Limerick by rail. Limerick trains were passing freely and, therefore, he knew that the Volunteers on the south side of us failed to turn out. I instructed Michael Callinan, the porter at to allow the first train if it was a military one to proceed - if it was the usual passenger train, to hold it at Craughwell station.

On Friday night I left Moyode Castle with the main body and marched to Lime Park. Soon after our arrival at Lime Park a meeting of the officers was held. This meeting was attended by Fr. Tom Fahy - now professor at University College, Galway. The meeting decided that the Volunteers should disband. I was not present at the meeting. Later, all the Volunteers were assembled in the courtyard at Lime Park and addressed by Father Fahy. He told us that the Volunteers in Dublin had surrendered, and that it had been decided that we should disband and return

to our homes. He also told us to hide our arms and ammunition and not allow them to fall into the hands of the military or police.

I took the company home and evaded arrest for a few days. I was captured in the general round up by police and British forces that had landed at Galway. Myself and three other brothers were taken to Galway jail, also all the company and several others who were in sympathy with us. After a week I was sent to Richmond Barracks, Dublin; from there with 200 others marched to the North Wall and put on a cattle boat for Glasgow. We were marched through Glasgow city to Barlinnie prison. One hundred of these men were sent to Perth jail, and one hundred interned at Barlinnie.

I got solitary confinement for the first week. With all others I started an agitation for prisoner of war treatment. Our spokesman was Dr. Moloney from Tipperary. We succeeded and were allowed to receive tobacco and foodstuffs from Irish sympathisers from Glasgow city and we had plenty of them. After one month we were transferred to Frongoch Camp, North Wales. After a few months there I was taken with others to Wandsworth Prison, London, to appear before the Sankey Commission. I was severely interrogated as to the part I played in the rebellion. I didn't deny anything as he had plenty of information from the police as to my movements before and during that memorable week. I was again sent back to Frongoch Camp. I took part in the hunger strike inside the Camp which lasted for two days and all other activities organised by our Camp staff for our rights as prisoners of war. We occasionally went on route marches and on these occasions were accompanied by an armed guard. The Camp staff were contemplating disarming the guard on one of these marches

and taking over the Camp, but before arrangements were completed, word came that there was to be a general amnesty for prisoners. I expected to take part in that action. I was released with all others and returned to my home at the end of December 1916.

The following are the names of the men of my company who answered the call in Easter Week :-

Tom Morrissey	T. Callinan	J. Forde
R. Morrissey	J. Deely	M. Quinn
M. Morrissey	P. Golding	M. Barrett
P. Morrissey	M. Kelly	
J. Rooney	M. McEvoy	
M. Rooney	M. Furey	
P. Rooney	M. Hession	
J. Fahy	T. Shaughnessy	
P. Fahy	T. Callinan	
T. Fahy	J. Farrell	
A. Fahy	M. Farrell	
J.J. Kennedy	M. Higgins	
M. Kennedy	T. Kenny	
J. Kennedy	P. Hynes	
M. Nestor	J. Moloney	
P.J. Morrissey	M. Kennedy	
J. Morrissey	F. Curran	

and a few others.

At the reorganisation of the I.R.A., 1917, I was appointed Battalion O/C. Athenry Battalion, which later became the 3rd Battalion, 2nd Galway Brigade, which comprised the following companies - Athenry, Craughwell, Derryconnell, Carnane, Newcastle, Cregmore, Kilconiron, Kiltulla, Killimore-daly, Monivea. All these companies mobilised for the rebellion; at the reorganisation, Rockfield Company changed its name to Craughwell.

I carried out all instructions from Brigade Headquarters at Galway city and gave the oath of allegiance to over one thousand men.

During the 1918 election all the companies in my

battalion took an active part in support of the Sinn  
Fein candidate.

I was ordered by the Brigade to take two companies to  
Loughrea on election eve to defend the ballot boxes. I  
was attacked by a drunken mob which was supported by police  
and military at Loughrea town. There were no firearms  
used on either side, but plenty of sticks, bottles and  
stones. All boxes were delivered safe. The companies  
were Craughwell, Kilconiron and some men from Athenry.  
During 1919, I assisted in the formation of Republican  
Courts, and appointed a Republican Police force to enforce the  
decrees of the Courts. I saw to all orders of the Courts  
being duly carried out and found secret places within  
the battalion area for detention of convicted persons.

In June 1920, orders came from Headquarters  
to attack police barracks, such attacks to be  
carried out by battalion officers within their  
battalion areas. I s elected an outlying



Barracks called Bookeen, about two miles from Dunsandle. It was a well constructed two-storey detached building situated about 20 yards from the road, and separated from the road by a low wall. There were five windows and a door in front, and two windows and a door in the rere. All the windows had steel shutters. In addition, there were double portholes in the gables through which bombs could be dropped out. A high wall at the rere enclosed a yard in which there was a coal-house. It was garrisoned by a sergeant and thirteen constables. I heard it had been passed as impregnable by two British army engineers against the types of explosives or arms in the possession of the Irish Republican Army.

My plan was to blow the gables with mines and to remove roof slates, pour in petrol and set it on fire. I selected 30 men from the battalion with two company captains, Captain Edward Burke, Killimoredaly, and Captain Martin Rooney, Craughwell. I also had the services of Company Captain Martin Nevin and ten men from an East Galway battalion who were strangers to the police. They were to take charge in the event of a surrender. One brigade officer, Pat Callinan, was present from the brigade to report on how the attack was carried out. The brigade headquarters were to send two engineers with explosives to blow the gable. These men failed to turn up. They also failed on a previous occasion. I had provisions made to have a step ladder and petrol near the barracks. All men were present at 11 p.m. on the 1st of July. I explained to them that the engineers were not present and asked if they were prepared to go on with the attack in their absence. I got the unanimous approval of the men to carry on.

I had eight rifles with about 50 rounds of ammunition for each; the remainder double-barreled and single-barreled shotguns and a good supply of cartridges for them. Two rifles were long Lee-Enfield magazine rifles. The rest were single loaders. I placed the men in position, the riflemen in front behind the low wall, and men with shotguns at the rere, having the barracks completely surrounded. I also had outposts on all the roads. Captain Burke volunteered with four others to take the ladder to the rere of the building and get on to the roof, a few feet from the gable, where he had a slight protection from the Mills bomb at the gable end. He got on to the roof with hammer and tin of petrol. When he first hit the slates, this was the first intimation the police had of the attack. Their watchdog then gave the alarm but was quickly disposed of by one of the men at the rere. The police fired through the roof at Burke's position, threw out the Verey lights and bombs, but he had the job complete in less than a minute. He left the petrol tin pouring in and set it alight by a torch from one of the men. I called on them to surrender but got no response. By this time the fire was rapid by both sides from all positions for about ten minutes. Then then ceased firing from inside. The cause of this was due to our long Lee Enfield rifles piercing their steel shutters (I found this out afterwards). They could not use the portholes made in the steel shutters. All roads leading to the barrack were blocked by the surrounding companies, Craughwell, Kilconiron, Athenry, Killimoredaly, and all barracks at Loughrea, Craughwell and Athenry kept under observation.

The roof was slow in catching fire and after about twenty minutes it got under way. Portion of the roof fell

in and exploded the Mills bomb which must have been on the top floor and blew the entire roof off, and the floor went down. I expected by this time that the garrison had been wiped out, but they escaped with the aid of smoke into a small coalhouse near the back door. They left everything in the flames, rifles, small arms, ammunition and all their belongings. This was a serious loss to us as the arms and ammunition were our main objective, and I had very little of our own ammunition left when the attack was over.

Great credit was due to Captain Burke for his bravery under fire in a dangerous position. He emigrated to Australia after the Civil War and died in 1944. There was a monument erected to his memory ~~to his memory~~ by some of his fellow officers and men in that country at Melbourne General Cemetery. It was unveiled by Dr. Kiernan, the Irish Minister in that country, in 1948. Bookeen Barracks was the second barrack destroyed in Eire. I believe Roscarbery in Cork was the first. This was the opening of the war of Independence in the west. The attack lasted about one hour and three quarters. The police went to Loughrea Barracks at daybreak most of them attired in their pyjamas.

The rifles used in this attack were later lent to the 2nd Battalion to carry out an ambush at Castledaly in which two R.I.C. men were shot. They were also used at the ambush at Ballyturen, Gort. These rifles were never returned to us.

We continued to harass the enemy by cutting telephone wires, blocking roads, etc. until the truce came in July 1921.

Signed: Gilbert Morrissey  
(Gilbert Morrissey)  
Date: 26/6/28

Witness: Sean Brennan  
(Sean Brennan)

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