

W.S. 932

ORIGINAL

BUREAU OF MILITARY HISTORY 1913-21
BUIRO STAIRÉ MILEATA 1913-21
NO. W.S. 932

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BUREAU OF MILITARY HISTORY, 1913-21.

STATEMENT BY WITNESS.

DOCUMENT NO. W.S. 932

Witness

Commandant Matthew Barry,
Kilsallaghan,
Co. Meath.

Identity.

O/C. 'B' Coy. 2nd. Batt'n. 2nd. Meath Bgde.,
1918-1921;
Vice-Comd't. 2nd Btn. 2nd Meath Bgde. 1921-'22.

Subject.

Attempted attack on Troop Train at
Celbridge, 2nd July 1921.

Conditions, if any, Stipulated by Witness.

Nil

File No. S. 2239

Form B.S.M. 2

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Statement by Commandant Matthew Barry,
Kilsallaghan, Co. Dublin,
and
Bureau of Military History.

Attempted Attack on Troop Train at
Celbridge, July 2nd, 1921.

On the night of the 29th or 30th June 1921 a Battalion Council meeting of the 2nd Battalion 2nd Meath Brigade was held in a house on the Athlumley-Beauparc Road a few miles outside Navan. The Brigade O/C, the late Patrick Kelly of Johnstown, attended this meeting. After routine business had been dealt with, the Brigade O/C announced that he required Volunteers who were wanted for a "stunt" and that such Volunteers would report to Dunboyne at a certain hour the following evening. No indication was given to us as to where the "stunt" was to take place, but I assumed without asking any questions that it was in the Dunboyne area. He said, as well as I can remember, that he wanted about twenty Volunteers and that no arms were to be carried, as such weapons as we required would be supplied to us on reaching Dunboyne.

I immediately volunteered to go and stated that I would supply a number of men. William Booth volunteered likewise and Captain Stapleton, O/C Commons Company, stated that he could not go himself but that he would supply some men also. There was no response from the Navan Company. The meeting then terminated and Booth, Stapleton and I had a consultation and we decided that we should all mobilise at Walterstown the following day at one or two p.m., each man to have a good bicycle to travel on. I said I knew the way to Dunboyne and would take them there by a way which would avoid main roads on which we would be likely to run into enemy patrols.

I then came home, arriving there shortly after dawn, which was very early at this time of year. I did not go to bed but immediately harnessed a pair of horses to a mowing machine and proceeded to mow three acres of meadow. I wanted to have this ready for making up when I returned, if I ever did so. The people around that area were notorious as late risers and the few of them (workmen) who had to be up and saw me working at such an hour afterwards told me that they had concluded I had gone insane. The noise of the mowing machine had awakened some of them at three o'clock in the morning.

I finished my work early and after having a meal while my people were still asleep, I proceeded on my bicycle to different houses to collect some men for the job on hand. It was essential to get them before they went to work. I accomplished this satisfactorily. In the early afternoon of the 1st July we assembled at Walterstown. As far as I can remember now, there were about fourteen or fifteen all told. Each man had a bicycle, some of which did not look as if they could make the journey. Having given the men instructions that they were to ride in pairs about thirty to forty yards distance between pairs, and to always keep in sight of each other, we started off for Dunboyne.

William Booth and I led off and we travelled via the Five Roads, Oberstown, Corballon and Ratoath. We avoided the village of Ratoath by taking a bye-road which brought us on to the Fairyhouse Road. We now proceeded by some back roads until we arrived at The Flat House crossroads on the main Navan-Dublin road, which was used extensively by enemy forces. Here we were met by a young man named Moran from Dunboyne who informed us that he had been sent to meet us and guide us to our destination. He could not give us any idea

of what was afoot. Moran took us by some bye-roads to a house on the Summerhill-Dunboyne road and there put us into a field on the north-east side of the road and told us to hide our bicycles, which we did to the best of our ability. We then lay down in the field and Moran left us. From where we were lying we could see the house (Murtagh's) where Divisional Headquarters had been established. This house and around it was a hive of activity; Divisional Staff Officers and Brigade Staff Officers and Messengers were coming and going. Some of these officers were known to me but most of them were strangers.

We lay in the field for some hours and as the evening wore on everybody began to grouse for having volunteered. We seemed to be nobody's concern. Coming on towards dusk we were aroused by sharp words of command given a short distance away, such as "Form Single File; Form Double File", and in a few minutes the Fingal flying column came into the field where we were. They walked through a thick thorn hedge just as if it did not exist. They were a fine body of men dressed in civilian clothes of various types and each man was equipped with a bandolier and a Lee Enfield service rifle. They struck me as being older and more set than we were. We looked like mere boys. I was then just 21 years old and some of our lads were even much younger than that. They passed across the road and into the house on the other side (Murtaghs). The only one of them that I recognised was Paddy Mooney from Trim who was in command of the column. We were at a loss to know where they got all the grand rifles and made up our minds that we would join them as soon as we got a chance.

We remained in the field until it was getting dusk and were then taken by somebody into the house across the

road where we were given a meal of cold ham, tea and bread. After the meal a priest was hearing confessions in a room in the house and most of the men, not all, went to confession. Before the meal we had been informed that there would not be arms to equip all of us and that we were to send some of the men home, which we reluctantly did, so that our numbers were reduced to about half. After confessions were concluded we were fell in on parade in two ranks and were now joined by some other men who were strangers to us, presumably from the 1st Brigade area. Still we had no arms and no idea of what we were heading for. Mr. P. Clinton (R. I. P.), who was then I think Divisional Adjutant and afterward a Chief Superintendent in the Civic Guards, took charge of our outfit. Preceded by the Fingal column and perhaps others, we proceeded across country. It was amusing to hear the language now being used by men who had just been to confession and what was said about the Republic, as men slid into ditches or got caught in barbed wire which we had to cross and try and keep contact with one another. Of course we had been ordered to march in silence. I will say that any noise made was of a very subdued type. Eventually we got on to a road again, much to our relief, and moved forward at a nice marching pace. You could just see the outlines of the men near you in the dark. Now the whispering started again. Everyone wanted to know where we were going. We had no sense of direction by now. ~~The~~ man who was a stranger to us said he knew and that we were going to jump a train proceeding to Cork to reinforce the I. R. A. there who were being hard~~ly~~ pressed by the Crown forces. Being a stranger to us, we were inclined to give more credence to this story than if it had come from one of our own lads. My mind now went back to the meadow I had cut and which was awaiting me to make up, but before many

hours had elapsed, this thought did not worry me and the preservation of my skin seemed to be all that mattered. We tramped along the roads for what seemed endless miles. This was my third day and second night without sleep and, in addition, I must have cycled well over fifty miles.

En route, we had several false alarms and we were ordered to take cover in the ditches on the side of the road. It seemed to be so futile to be taking cover when our strongest weapon was a rosary beads or a penknife. Eventually we came down a hill into what seemed to be a village or small town. The light was better now and you could distinguish the houses of different sorts. As we tramped through, I wondered what was the reaction of the people who all seemed to be fast asleep. Our tramp, tramp, tramp made quite a din and echoed through the houses, and it must have awakened some of them, but not a sign of life was to be seen. (I shortly afterwards learned that this was the town of Leixlip on the Liffey and on the main road to Mullingar and the West of Ireland). Apparently, there were no enemy forces quartered there.

We now turned right off the main road and after proceeding a few miles turned in through an entrance gate with concrete piers and short walks on either side. We proceeded along an avenue and through a lawn which had some single trees growing therein and marched through two outer gates into what appeared to be the yard of a not too big gentleman's residence. I could see as we went in that there were numerous out-offices and quite a lot of machinery around, such as steam engines, etc., parked around the place. We were dismissed and told to go into the house and to get all the rest we could. As we entered the house we could hear someone thumping a piano and we made our way towards this which was on the ground floor and was presumably the living or sitting room of the house. A man named Maguire, commonly known as "The

Bok Maguire", was thumping the piano, ably assisted by another man named Crinnigan. Both men belonged to the Fingal column. The effect was not too harmonious, while all around the room men squatted on the floor trying to sing in various notes both flat and sharp. We joined in in this and as one of our men - Collins (R. I. P.) from the Yellow Furze Company - had a very nice voice he was much in demand. So much for the rest we were told to get. We did not wander around the house very much. It seemed to have lovely furniture and the walls carried portraits of the Royal Family and such like. Strange to relate, no one seemed to have molested any of such articles. It was apparently the house of a loyal British subject.

Some time in the early morning we moved around a bit more and out into the yard. Here, a sentry of ours was on duty outside an out-office door - the harness rooms, I concluded. We were anxious to know what he was guarding and he told us that the family who lived in the house were prisoners in that room. Later on, we saw others being brought in, such as a postman in uniform and apparently workmen, and being made prisoners. The sentry told us the family were called "Wardells". Still, we had no information of what was going to happen and no arms either, but it was apparent something big was afoot.

We now saw that we were alongside what appeared to be a main railway which ran alongside the house. A couple of hundred yards away was a bridge carrying a road over the railway and the line ran through a shallow cutting and under this bridge. We soon learned that this was the main railway line to Cork and soon numerous trains, passenger and goods, began to pass by. We could

see men with picks and shovels working on the line and I recognised one of them as Dick Taylor of Swords. We soon learned that the men were ours laying mines in the line.

We were now given breakfast consisting of a fried rasher, bread and tea, and were then called to a stable where we were each issued with a rifle and 25 rounds .303. The rifles were of the carbine type as had been used by the R. I. C., with a five round magazine and a "cut off" which, when pushed on, prevented a round from going up the breech when the bolt was pushed forward. We had never handled rifles of that sort before but had some experience of the Lee Enfield Service pattern. The rifles were very dirty as was the ammunition, being covered with grease and dirt and very rusty in spots. We received strict instructions that no one was to load his rifle until ordered, and to keep under cover from view of the trains passing by. We spent the morning cleaning the rifles and ammunition and made a right good job of them. During the night numerous cars and trucks of different types - I should say about twelve all told or more - which had apparently been commandeered by the I. R. A., had been driven in and parked facing towards the road along the avenue between the inner and centre gates. I understand these vehicles were to get us away after the fight.

We had lost all sense of time by now but sometime in the early part of the day the Fingal column men fell in and moved out. I should digress here to state that all the morning our men besieged Paddy Mooney to take them into the column but his answer was always the same: "If you can bring a rifle and a hundred rounds of .303 I will be glad to have you". There was also a man with us who carried a Thompson gun - a weapon that was new to us. I think he went with the Fingal column. After the Fingal men had moved out we were fell in also and Pat Clinton, who was

apparently still in charge of us, told us that we were going to ambush a troop train right beside where we were. This train which was proceeding to the Curragh from Belfast after the opening of the Northern Parliament, would contain several hundred troops. He stated that seven or nine mines - I forget which - had been placed between the outgoing tracks. We were to take up position on the top of the cutting, keeping low until the mines went off, when we were to rake the carriages with rifle fire.

I do not know what type of mine was to be used, but I visualised the large solid concrete type which had been made up in every company area. I had a slight experience of the power of explosive and I began to think what would be our position if seven or nine of such mines went up under a train right under our noses so to speak. Momentarily, I could see pieces of carriages, mangled men and arms flying into the air and coming down on top of us plus the shock we ourselves would get from the explosions, but before I could think further, we were called to attention and ordered to load. This done, we sloped arms, got the command "Right Turn, Quack March", and off we went, our arms swinging, shoulders high and our heads well up, full of the idea that we were great soldiers. The thought had a short life. It was the first time we had marched as a fully armed body.

We moved off in two files. I was the leading file of the left or front rank and Byrne (Midge) was the leading file of the rear rank or right section. We swung out of the yard and along the carriage-way with Clinton in command, and marching to the left rear of me about five or six paces behind. We had almost reached the outer yard or middle gate when I was amazed to see a British Army lorry stop dead on the road at the outer gate and five or six soldiers

jumped from it and ran through the gate in our direction and immediately took cover behind a fold in the ground, while others jumping from the lorry took cover behind the road ditch and walls which were at the entrance gate. An officer came through the gate and threw himself in the dyke behind where his men were lying in the field and we did not see him any more. Up to this I had always thought that it was an officer's duty to lead - I was still very green.

I do not know whether Clinton shouted "Take cover" or not - I think he did - but I immediately dived for the right hand pier of the gate while Byrne took cover likewise behind a small heap of railway sleepers about five yards away on my right. I did not see where the remainder of our party went, but I concluded they were in cover behind us. Just as I reached the pier of the gate, the British troops started firing. The pier was of concrete, about fifteen inches cubic and from it stretched a very light iron paling of three or four bars away to the right past and in front of where Byrne was behind the few sleepers. I immediately loaded my rifle as I thought and resting it on one of the paling bars on the right side of the pier, took aim and fired twice at soldiers whom I could see behind the bank or road ditch. I fired twice but apparently without effect. I could see Byrne's rifle spitting fire out of the corner of my eye. Byrne now shouted across at me - "Pull out your cut off" - which I did, and my rifle now seemed to be more effective.

By now the noise was bedlam let loose, not that there were so many rifles being used, but behind us there were galvanized sheds through which bullets were ripping and echoing and re-echoing each shot. The cars which were parked on the carriage-way behind us were also

receiving a fair share of the bullets the British were giving away. Quite a lot of the British fire seemed to be going high over our heads - this, I think, came from the troops who had taken cover behind the fold in the ground and who were ^{too} far back behind it and too low to deal effectively with us. Their pals on the road, however, were in an ideal position to plaster us, which they did. Targets were harder now to see and we were only taking snap shots at the men behind the road bank. One of the soldiers who had taken cover behind the fold in the ground now jumped up carrying his rifle in his right hand and made for cover behind one of the trees. Byrne and I both fired together at him and he did a most spectacular "die." He stopped dead in his tracks and raised his arms still holding the rifle. He then dropped the rifle and fell backwards with his arms extended and lay motionless, fully exposed to my view. Byrne now looked over at me and I looked over at him at the same time and we both smiled at each other. To my amazement, this man got up a few seconds later and ran to the tree. I did not attempt to fire at him as he was getting up, which I could have done, as I thought it was his dying agony, and when he ran for the tree without his rifle I was so amazed that the thought of doing so never occurred to me. The din that was going on behind me gave me the impression that the remainder of our party were engaging the enemy also from behind us and we continued to pot away at the enemy. The pier which I was behind was not at all a healthy place. To the enemy on the road it provided an ideal target and I was being smothered with dust and chunks of concrete were continually flying from it, but there was no "better hole to go to" and, even if there was, the enemy fire had me pinned down there. Luckily, they apparently had not a machine gun with them. If they had,

they would have cut it across in a few minutes and they were only about 130 or 150 yards away.

On looking up towards the left wall of the entrance gate which was half left to my position I could see the head and shoulders of a man looking over the wall. He had a heavy moustache and a beautiful military cap with the badge shining brightly. He looked like my impression of a Sergeant Major which I had gleaned from pictures at the time. I could not get a shot at him from my position without moving somewhat to my right and running the danger of exposing myself. I shouted over to Byrne, "Do you see the fellow looking over the wall? Have a shot at him". Byrne shouted back that he could not see him. I now started to ease my body off slightly to the right and having done so, placed the rifle on the bar of the paling to have a crack at the man. I was easing forward to get an aiming position when a bullet struck the woodwork of the rifle just in front of the magazine taking a good chip out of it and completely knocking it out of my grasp and carrying it back along side my feet. It was on full cock at the time and I was extremely lucky that my head and hand were not in the aiming position. I stretched back and grasped it by the muzzle and dragged it forward to me without moving my body. To my astonishment it was still on full cock. I eased it again on to the paling bar and let fly at my man. Like the man, when asked if he had hit the rabbit, replied "I don't know, but I made him leave that", I do not know if I hit him but he left there.

After firing a few more rounds I suddenly woke up to the fact that my ammunition was almost exhausted even though I had used it very sparingly. I turned over on my left side to see if I could see our leader, Pat Clinton, whom I thought was behind me with the rest of

the boys to get an indication from him as to what we should do. To my horror I now discovered that he and the rest of our party were not there and that Byrne and I were alone. I had been misled by the echos of the shots in the farm buildings. I shouted over to Byrne that our crowd was gone and he turned and looked back likewise. I now shouted to Byrne, "What are we going to do?", and promptly came the answer, "They will never hang me. I am going to keep one round to shoot myself". I shouted back, "I will do the same", and then took one round and put it in a separate vest pocket for this purpose. There did not seem to be a hope of our getting out of our position alive and it was only a short period before this date that the British had hanged Paddy Moran and others in Dublin and it was this thought that prompted me to make up my mind to shoot myself. We were in a desperate position and apart from the British troops who were in front of us I knew that the troop train was due and estimated that there would be some hundreds of troops converging on our rear. Despite the noise, a terrible feeling of lonesomeness came over me and there developed an awful vacuum-like feeling at the pit of my stomach. I began to think of my mother and my people and my pals whom I would never see again and to regret that I had not gone to confession the night before although I never thought of the next world.

As these thoughts were racing through my mind and all thoughts of danger disregarded for the moment, I heard a burst of Thompson machine gun fire. It seemed to come from somewhere half left of the British position but further away. This impression may be erroneous. I understand now that the Thompson gunner, as he was getting away, fired a burst in the air - a very foolish thing to do, but it saved our lives. Our opponents

must have thought they were being attacked in the rear because immediately all fire ceased on our position. I jumped to my feet shouting at Byrne as I did so, "Come on", and I could see him get up and follow me. Immediately we moved, the enemy opened fire on us again but their aiming at "running men" was erratic although a few times my ear drums were shocked by the air crack from passing bullets. We had to run the gauntlet of the enemy fire as we moved at breakneck speed back the carriage-way past the parked cars towards the yard. I, who was leading, now did a very silly thing. I wheeled sharply to my right along a wall, I think, of a shed and towards the railway, thus placing us at right angles to the line of fire and making an ideal running target of ourselves, when I should have continued through the yard and have taken advantage of the cover of the buildings. I know now that my mind revolted against going into buildings. I was a countryman and wanted the open country. As we ran along this wall, sparks were flying from it and it was miraculous how we reached the end of it after about twenty yards to jump over a low wall and into what appeared to be a haggard, but protected from enemy bullets.

We were now quickly brought to a halt by a high barbed wire fence which seemed to surround the haggard and through which there did not seem to be any escape. We now seemed to be in a right death trap. I was used to dealing with barbed wire fence and I quickly perceived a spot where the wire had been overstrained as if to allow a dog or something to get under it. I made for this and shouted to Byrne to cover me off while I crawled through and then I would cover him off. Byrne threw himself flat on the ground in a firing position and I pushed my rifle through and quickly crawled through after it. Once the other side, I took up a firing position and shouted

at Byrne to come on and he also got quickly through. Firing in the front of the house was now dying off considerably and I took it that the British troops were moving in on the place. As we darted away from the haggard with all the speed we could muster, a single railway engine passed along the railway line proceeding in a southerly direction. This, I believe, was the pilot engine which we had been told would travel in front of the troop train. We were in the fields alongside the railway.

We ran across some fields - jumping ditches without scanning them to see whether they were crossable or not and falling as we landed. We could not estimate the landing spot owing to the height of the grass. Now, we could see that some sort of a train which was enveloped in steam and the haze of a summers day was stopped about half a mile down the line and numerous men seemed to be around it. This, I took to be the troop train. I may be wrong - it might be only a ballast train with workmen, but any object on the line at that moment to me would be a troop train. We now veered away at half right angle from the railway line in order to get outside the flank of any troops that might have extended out through the fields from the train. We estimated that they could not have got very far within the time from when the pilot engine had passed.

After crossing a number of fields, some of which contained cocks of hay which we tried to use to cover us as we ran, I finally came to halt on a little mound of earth near a hedge. I ran up on this mound to see if I could see any of our fellows anywhere and a couple of fields further on I could see a man's head sticking up out of a field of wheat as he made his way through it. I told Byrne there were some of our fellows ahead and we made tracks in that direction. Firing at the house had

now ceased for some time. We caught up with the man in the wheat field who turned out to be William Booth and who had a couple of the other boys with him. We were now a party of five or six and all had their rifles still.

We pushed on and came into open fields again. Our object was to get as far away from Wardell's house and the railway as possible. Now, an aeroplane which had flown low down along the railway line a few minutes previously began to annoy us. In our hurry to get distance between us and the railway and house, we could not afford to waste any time, so we crossed straight across open fields instead of as normally going along by the fences. The plane several times swooped down on us and on one occasion we had to throw ourselves flat on the ground to avoid being rammed by it. Even then, it almost touched the ground. The boys wanted to fire at the plane but Booth and I forbade them to do so as that would give our location to the enemy. We agreed that his swooping or diving was indicating our position to his friends, but shooting would pin point us out. The plane now veered off and executed the same tactics in other areas. The pilot must have been a brave man as he must have seen that we were carrying rifles and he was an easy target as he came in low towards us. Likewise, he must not have any armament on the plane as had he had machine guns or even grenades, we were a lovely target for him.

We were now in a terrible state with thirst and my tongue was the full of my mouth. It was a broiling hot day with not a cloud in the sky. Our clothes were becoming more torn from scrambling through bushes and our underclothes were showing in many places and even then caused some fun as we tried to stuff our shirts

back into our trousers. Booth and I now had a consultation and we decided it was foolish for five of us to be going around with five rifles and ammunition, particularly so when we did not know where we were. We estimated that we were moving in a northerly direction from the sun and from our sense of our approach the night before to Wardells. In the distance we could see a very tall spire of a church (Maynooth) but we did not know what it was. I believed it was some town, but a town was the last place I wanted to see just then as a hundred to one it would be full of troops. We decided to dump our rifles now and having selected a clump of furze bushes on a hedgerow, we put them carefully away there. We pulled some linings from our pockets and wrapped the ammunition that was left in them and placed it alongside the rifles. Byrne and I had only a couple of rounds but the others had, I think, their full twenty-five each - that would in all be 75 or 80 rounds. We decided that if we were caught with the rifles, there would be no hope for us, but without them we might have a chance. I had no thought of shooting myself now.

We pushed on again now and eventually found ourselves on a golf links (Lucan) and, here, the aeroplane made its last effort on us as we scrambled behind a bunker. We made our way to a small house and on knocking at the door a man with all the appearance of an old soldier opened it. I asked him for a drink of water and he went into the house and returned with a large can of water and a mug. The door was now fully opened and as we drank quart after quart of water, I could see pictures of the King and Queen and so forth hanging on the walls. When we had quenched our thirst, I asked him where we could get across the river. I had only a vague idea that we should be near the Liffey. He replied that the only place we could cross would be at the weir but that was under observation

from the barracks and with a knowing look said "You won't chance that", and added that the only other place we could get across was at the bridge at Leixlip. We now had a rough idea of our location which was welcome. We asked him where the river was and what direction Leixlip was and he indicated both to us. We thanked him and I said, "You did not see us - if you did we will know you again". He answered, "By - , I did not see anyone". With further thanks for the water, we left him and made towards the Leixlip as indicated.

In the vicinity of the river we were safe from observation at least from the air as we made our way towards Leixlip. When we came near Leixlip our party sat down under some trees while I went forward to see if the bridge was held by the enemy, as I believed it would I was astonished to find that the bridge was quite free and everything seemed normal around, with no sign of enemy. I came back and told the boys and we then made our way across the bridge, walking singly as not to attract attention and up the street into the town or village. We asked a man the way to Dunboyne and he indicated the way to us and we were soon climbing up a steep hill away from the town. We were soon out in open country again and felt nine-tenths saved now. Our spirits rose quickly even though our bodies were hard to keep moving, young though they were. I remember musing to myself that sleep was not necessary. I had not had a rest for at least 72 hours and did not feel sleepy and felt that if I had a wash and a meal I would be O.K. Booth had left us. I cannot now remember whether it was before we crossed the river or not. He said he had friends in Summerhill and would make for there. We had decided to make for Dunboyne where we hoped our bicycles were. We trudged along for what appeared an awful distance along the road,

recounting what had happened to us and wondering what had happened to the Fingal column and the rest of the men at "Wardells", and now and again a funny episode would be told which caused us all to laugh and all the time blaming the leaders for having bungled the whole job, without knowing any of the details.

A girl now approached us on a bicycle and I recognised her as Miss Nan Murtagh of the house where we had been given the meal the night we assembled at Dunboyne. She was anxious to know what had happened to everyone and where were the rest of all the men that had left Dunboyne the night before. There was not very much that I could tell her except about ourselves. She had some cigarettes and chocolate which she gave us and, to me, she was an angel minus the wings. She said she would go back to Dunboyne and get a car to bring us in, and off she went. I had said that we would walk on in that direction. While I was speaking to her, the rest of our party had lain down on the side of the road and a couple of them seemed to be asleep. I tried to rouse them by telling them that we were to walk on and a car would pick us up, but was promptly informed that they were not going any further. I sat down, but did not feel sleepy and my eyes and ears were alert for the sound of a car or lorry that would contain Tans or British forces. I was in terror as to what would happen if a lorry of Tans came along with the lads in such a state of stupor from fatigue.

After a considerable time, I heard a car approaching from the Dunboyne direction and it soon appeared away in the distance. I had expected a small type of car such as a Ford, but this was a very big ^{TOURING} ~~towing~~ car with the hood up. I immediately concluded it was enemy and shouted "Tans". It was amazing how what appeared to be dead men came to life and were quickly through the hedge

and across country. As we ran, the car pulled up at where we had been lying and soon I could hear someone shouting, but no shots fired. We stopped our race and I made my way carefully back to see what it was. I could see a man standing on the bank on the roadside, waving his hands and soon recognised him as Bishop from Bohermeen, who was a diver at Divisional Headquarters. I called the boys and as we approached, Bishop was calling us a windy lot of so-and-sos. We soon had the car turned round and scrambled in and it seemed as if our troubles were over, but not exactly. Bishop was notorious as a speedy driver and we sped along at I suppose fifty miles an hour and on rounding a bend in the road, we suddenly perceived a lorry of Tans a few hundred yards in front of us travelling in the same direction. Brakes were immediately applied and the car swerved into the ditch and came to a standstill. As quickly as we were out of it and across country again, this time Bishop with us. We soon perceived that the lorry had not stopped - they apparently had not seen us - and we came back carefully to our car and soon had it on the road again, and this time proceeded more carefully lest the Tans would be pulled up on the road somewhere in front of us.

We did not see the Tans again and reached Dunboyne where Bishop unloaded us some distance from Murtagh's house, and returned to try and pick up more men. We proceeded towards Murtagh's and some distance from there Seán Boylan, Divisional O/C, put his head up over a hedge and called me and asked me what happened. I told him all I knew and he said we had better get our bicycles and get out of the area with all haste, as it would probably be searched soon. We were only too glad to do so. We found our bicycles as we had left them and soon were speeding for home via the way we came and reached there

without incident. The rest of the party had from 3 to 10 miles further to go than I, but all got home safely. As we cycled along we remarked on our appearance and, strange to say, none of us felt hungry, although our last scant meal had been very early that morning.

I had a meal and a wash and shave and then got on my bicycle and proceeded to Johnstown - four miles - where I contacted our Brigade O/C, Patrick Kelly, and made a verbal report of the whole affair to him. He listened to me very carefully and without comment, except for an occasional smile. When I had finished, he asked me if I would be able to find the rifles where we had hidden them. I said I was confident that if I got to "Wardell's" house, that I would find them. He asked about the other men who were in the affair also, and if there were any casualties. I could only tell him about our own few who had escaped with us. I now returned home and went to bed and after pondering on the affair for some time fell into a deep sleep and had actually to be dragged out of bed the following day at 10 a.m. by my sister to go to Mass.

I was now feeling very refreshed again but unsettled and I had a feeling that I would like to be behind the sights of a rifle again and longed for the comradeship of my pals and the excitement of a fight. Such is youth. In the afternoon I again cycled to Johnstown and again contacted the Brigade O/C. I knew that the Brigade had one Lee Enfield Service rifle and a small supply of ammunition. Bellewstown Races were due to take place in a few days time and I estimated that some of the Auxies who were stationed in Trim would attend the Races. They would probably travel through my Company area when either coming or going, they seldom

travelled the same road both ways. I had in view a good ambush position about half a mile from my own house where I was satisfied we could hit them up with safety. They never came this road at other times. I suggested to the O/C that if we could get the rifles and ammunition we had hidden together with the one the Brigade had, I would hit them up, or I would have a crack at them myself if we could not get the hidden rifles and if he would give me the one the Brigade had. I was very curtly told that my duty was to obey orders.

I returned home very disappointed and confirmed in a feeling that had been growing in my mind for some time arising out of some other incidents - that our leaders' conception of things was to command and not to lead. The following morning or the morning after, the Brigade O/C arrived at my house in a car. The driver of the car was not in the I.R.A., I think, but we had complete confidence in him. In the car with the Brigade O/C was Booth whom I was glad to see again and the Brigade Adjutant, Thomas Coyle of Oldtown. The Brigadier told me they were going for the rifles and to come along and to bring a revolver with me. I got into the car and we proceeded by bye-roads west of Dunshaughlin and Dunboyne and eventually reached "Wardells" without incident. En route, the O/C told me that all our men had got away safely from the ambush area. One man had broken his leg but was picked up by some friends and looked after. He was from the Summerhill district and was the guy who had told us we were headed for Cork.

When we reached "Wardells" the task of finding the rifles did not seem so easy as I had anticipated. The British had burned all the cocks of hay and the hedges in the vicinity of the house, probably thinking that we or arms were concealed therein. Despite this, however, we

were able to retrace our steps and found our rifles and ammunition just as we had left. We took them back to the car and stowed them away and made tracks for home, which we reached without any trouble. I did not dare to make any further suggestions regarding the use of the rifles which were taken by the Brigade O/C and Adjutant and that was the last I ever saw of them.

On the morning of the races I watched carefully for the Auxies but none came that way and I was now convinced that they would return by the road I mentioned previously. In the evening, I made my way over to my selected ambush area and took up a firing position just to see what it would be like. I was perfectly satisfied with it. After some time, I could hear the noise of Crossley tenders approaching - a noise peculiar to that type of vehicle - and soon two tenders loomed into sight. On the first one a Lewis gun was mounted on a pedestal but was hanging unmanned and the crews were all slouching in the body of the cars, apparently the worst for drink, and seemed to be all asleep or incapably drunk. It was galling to see them pass by so unmolested.

A few days afterwards, the Truce came into being. I was not glad as I was ashamed that we had done very little in our area to further the cause and that we would show up very badly in comparison with other counties such as Cork, which had borne such a large brunt of the fighting, and I had hoped that, with the advent of a few rifles in the area, something would be done.

So ended the affair of the attempted attack on a troop train at Suckumney, Celbridge. It was, as far as I know, the first operation carried out by the Divisional Staff which had not long been formed, and a very poor job they made of it. Looking back on it now, the whole thing

seems to have been badly planned and badly controlled. I am sure they learned a number of lessons from it which would have been applied had the fight continued or been restarted. I do not know yet what type of mine was being used and still wonder what the effect of them would be on ourselves as well as the enemy. I still wonder how lorries - I believe there were two - were able to drive right into the heart of the ambush position just at the wrong moment. Security measures were sadly lacking here. I don't think Wardells, which was situated in the ambush position and lying alongside the railway, should ever have been occupied. Control here was very bad and although men were warned not to expose themselves, they were walking around the yard with rifles slung on their shoulders. Some of the city-going trains were bound to have British officers, agents or sympathisers on them, who would observe the unusual activity around Wardells and perhaps armed men and report when they got to the city which was only a few minutes run from there. It would have been better to keep the men some distance from the line and bring them up at the right moment. We could see the people in the trains as they passed by, quite easily. We were not told that aircraft from Baldonnell, which was only a very short distance away, would be operating.

Had we had a leader of the calibre of Tom Barry or Seán McEoin, we could easily, I believe, have wiped out the British troops that came in the lorries by executing a slight manoeuvre. The approach and cover was there to get on their flank and behind them and their initiative and shooting did not seem to be of any higher standard than our own. It struck me that they were more intent on making noise than killing us, as they did not show any inclination to risk their skins. I believe we

could have done this and still got away safely. Of course, the attack of the troop train would have to go by the board. I understand now that we had nearly a hundred armed men in the area, and it was amazing that they were all able to get safely out of it.

I was very interested to see what report would be given to the press by the British about the affair. I cannot remember the wording of it now. As far as I remember, they admitted some casualties, but the ending of it will always remain in my mind on account of its falsehood....."A number of the rebels were seen to fall and were carried away by their comrades."

Signed Matthew Barry Comdt

(Matthew Barry) Comd't.

Date 16. 3. 54

16.3.54.

Witness Brennan (P.J. Brennan)

Secretary
Bureau of Military History, 1913-1921.

Secretary, Bureau of Military History, 1913-1921.

