

ORIGINAL

W.S. 949

BUREAU OF MILITARY HISTORY 1913-21
BURO STAIRS MILITAI 1913-21
No. W.S. 949

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BUREAU OF MILITARY HISTORY, 1913-21.

STATEMENT BY WITNESS.

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Witness

James O'Connell,
Ballymague,
Buttevant,
Co. Cork.

Identity.

Q.M. Kilbrin Company Irish Volunteers,
1917 - .
O.C. Kanturk Battalion, 1922.

Subject.

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(Co. Cork) 1918-1921.

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STATEMENT BY JAMES O'CONNELL,

Ballymague, Buttevant, County Cork.

I was born on the 14th February, 1887, at Knockanuss, Kanturk, County Cork, quite near the spot where the famous battle of that name was fought between the Irish and English forces in the year 1649. The Irish got the worst of it through a mistake made by their Commander. I was told this by Revd. Father Wall, P.P., Foynes, who wrote a history on these matters. He called around one day and we travelled over the scene of the battle. It must have been a bloody affair as large quantities of human bones were found buried near the place. These bones are now laid in Buttevant Abbey.

Local people knew very little of the history of the place but I heard old people say that the Irish General, McEllistrum, was killed by a treacherous blow while crossing a ford. (There is a river flowing through the battle-field).

My earliest recollection of politics was of the Redmond and O'Brien period - we were O'Brienites. We were farming stock and had a wholesome respect for our landlord and everything British - more or less of the Shoneen type. O'Brien at that time was in favour of fraternizing with the landlord class some of whom were nominated for local councils under the banner of the "All for Ireland League". Very few of them were, however, elected. Elections were stormy affairs then and a disgrace to any self-respecting nation. 'Twas a case of plenty of drink, fighting and mud-slinging - all of which was most pleasing to Mother England.

Candidates' supporters used travel long distances to meetings in sidecars and long cars to cheer and protect their man in rival

strongholds. Our M.P. (member of British Parliament) at that time was Paddy Guiney. He came of a highly respected family in the Newmarket area and he got elected I think more than once. His brother John Guiney - a solicitor in Kanturk - was elected after Paddy's death. Redmond's supporters were very strong too around Newmarket under the leadership of the late Michael Barry - a very aggressive man who emigrated to Oregon, U.S.A., in his early days and made good. They say he brought home a lot of money. There used to be frequent battles between these factions at election times - firearms were even used on some occasions. I cannot recollect the name of the Redmondite candidate. Anyway these were the spearheads in the conflict and people throughout the constituency had a healthy regard for them. These were the only politics we knew up to Easter Week 1916 for farmer or worker.

I went to America in 1909. I remained there only three years. I could not settle down there as my heart was in the old country. I brought home, however, new ideas about "John Bull" and the landlord who lorded it in the "Great House" and treated the poor farmers with contempt. The functions of the latter then were to pay their rents promptly and to show proper respect for his lordship.

Prior to Easter Week I was a regular reader of "The Leader", "The Nation" and all other Irish Ireland papers I could get. I was also interested in the language revival movement and was a member of the Gaelic League. Irish classes were held once weekly in Ballygraddy School - the teacher was Seán de Róist. The teacher before him (Pádraig Herlihy) was a pioneer in the language movement. There was no Volunteer Company in the immediate neighbourhood. The nearest Company was in Kanturk.

The happenings in Easter Week came as a surprise to me and as far as I can recollect to everybody in the district. At first the action of the Volunteers was condemned but later the public became more or less passive. However, as time passed, many people became more sympathetic.

Early in 1917 a unit of the Irish Volunteers was formed in Kilbrin. I think the organisation of this unit was undertaken by Denis Lyons who, at the time, was Captain of the Kanturk Company. The members of this unit were :- Dan Fitzgerald, Denis McNamara, Patrick McAuliffe, Tom McAuliffe, James O'Connell (witness), and Maurice O'Connell. All these were residing in the south side of the parish. As the year advanced the unit grew in strength and by the end of the year the membership was about thirty. At this stage Bart. Mullane, John Mullane, Denis Mullane, Dan Sheahan, Paddy O'Brien, Martin O'Brien, Tim Sullivan, Matt Bluett, Jim Bluett and David Hannigan - all from the north side of the parish - had taken part in organising the area.

The Company officers elected at the end of 1917 were :-

Captain - Dan Fitzgerald

1st.Lieut. - Bart. Mullane

2nd Lieut. - Tom McNamara

Q. M. - James O'Connell (witness).

During 1917 the members of the unit held parades about once a week - usually at week-ends - at which training in foot-drill took place in convenient fields. These were the only activities of anything approaching a military nature.

However, there was much work to be done in the political field in the organising of Sinn Féin clubs and the most of this work fell on the shoulders of the Volunteers and the members of their families who were

generally the pioneer members of Sinn Féin in the district. When this work was well advanced the Volunteers and Sinn Féin rented a hall at Castlecork where meetings were held. Irish Classes under the auspices of the Gaelic League were also held here as well as Irish Dance Classes and Ceilis. Mick McGrath, ^{Banteer} ~~Banteer~~, and later his brother Martin were the Irish teachers at this time.

Early in 1918 Kanturk Battalion was organised and formed a unit of Cork Brigade. The Companies in the Battalion at this time were :- Kanturk, Bawnmore, Kilbrin, Castlemagner, Banteer, Nadd, Dromtarriffe, Boherbue, Derrygallon and Lacklown. The strength of these units varied from thirty to sixty and these strengths were at this time fairly constant.

The first officers of the Battalion were :-

- O/C. - Denis Lyons
- Vice O/C. - Denis Murphy
- Q.M. - Mick Courtney
- Adjutant - Thomas Riordan.

I do not recollect the number of the Battalion in Cork Brigade.

The only arms held at this time were three or four shotguns with about twenty-five cartridges which were the personal property of members of the Company. However, it was decided early in 1918 to collect all shotguns not held by Volunteers and the day of the Races in Ballyheen, Kanturk - about the end of April - was selected to carry out a general raid. This date was chosen as the majority of the gun-owners would be away at the Races. This operation was carried out by Dan Fitzgerald, O/C., Tim J. McAuliffe, Denis McNamara, Tom McNamara, Edward Fitzgerald and James O'Connell (witness). About twenty or twenty-five shotguns and nearly 500 rounds of ammunition for same were taken in this raid. The guns and ammunition were distributed amongst reliable Volunteers in the area who were responsible for their maintenance and safe custody.

During the Conscription scare in 1918 the membership of the Company increased to about sixty, but very few of the new recruits continued to serve after the threat had passed.

All Volunteers took an active part in the General Election in 1918 on behalf of Sinn Féin while during this period the usual drills and parades were held. Route marches to other Company areas and field exercises with neighbouring Companies were sometimes carried out on Sunday evenings.

In 1919 the usual drilling and general activities in connection with the work of the other Irish Ireland organisations continued at this time. The success of the political wing (Sinn Féin) at the General Election in December 1918 gave a general boost to our activities. About this time several raids were carried out on the local mails but no information of military value was discovered.

I think that it was about this time that Local Government Elections were held. I was elected a Sinn Féin member of Kanturk Rural District Council which was controlled by the Sinn Féin members. Other members of the Council were Seán Moylan, Seán Noonan, Maurice Clancy, Paddy McCarthy (later killed in a scrap at Millstreet), Jack Cremin, Patrick Calvin (Newtownshandrum). As the military activity in the area became more intense a large number of members of the Council were compelled to go "on the run" and at one stage the business was transacted mainly by James O'Connell (witness who was Vice-Chairman), Jack Cremin (Castlemagner), Patrick Calvin (Newtownshandrum) and Maurice Clancy (Farrand^{OYLE}~~agh~~). As can be understood, we had very little experience of Local Government administration, but the work of the Council went on satisfactorily with the assistance and co-operation of William Murphy who was Clerk to the Council at the time. Later on when it was decided to overthrow the British Local Government system,

the Council and its officials co-operated wholeheartedly and ensured that all business was transacted with Dáil Department of Home Affairs instead of with the British Department of Local Government.

During this period also Republican Courts were organised under the authority of Dáil Éireann. Parish Courts were established in each parish. The members of the Court for Kilbrin were :- . . . ; Leary (Ballyclough) and I cannot recollect the name of the Kilbrin representative. James O'Connell (witness) was Court Clerk. Most of the cases referred to the Court related to trespass, rights-of-way etc. Usually the cases were settled after discussion between the members of the Court and litigants. I have no recollection of any case in which it was necessary to impose a penalty for failure to carry out the orders of the Court.

The Republican police, who were in charge of Denis McNamara, carried out all normal police duties during this time.

When Cork II. Brigade was formed in January, 1919, Kanturk Battalion became one of the units of this Brigade. The other Battalions were :- Fermoy, Castletownroche, Mallow, Newmarket, Millstreet and Charleville. The Brigade officers were, I think, -

O/C.	Liam Lynch
Vice O/C.	Dan Hegarty
Q.M.	Jeremiah Buckley
Adjutant	George Power.

1920:

The usual drilling activities continued during the early part of this year. The general order issued by G.H.Q. to destroy all vacated R.I.C. posts and to deal similarly with all papers held in Income Tax offices did not lead to any activity in our area as there was no R.I.C. barracks or Income Tax office in the district. We, however, carried

out a number of raids on local mails with no success. The Volunteers during this period were co-operating in every way in the general endeavour to impede British administration.

On 11th October, 1920, a party of military numbering ten was ambushed by the Brigade Column under Liam Lynch., Ernie O'Malley and Seán Moylan at Ballydrochane about one mile outside Kanturk on the Newmarket road, detachments from my Company (Kilbrin), Bawnmore, Derrygallon and Kanturk Companies were also engaged in various capacities in this action. With about twenty other members of Kilbrin Company armed with shotguns I was on outpost duty on the high road between the scene of the ambush and Newmarket. There was no activity in our position as the enemy did not reach it. The driver of the lorry was killed and most of the enemy wounded by the opening volley. When the action had concluded we returned to our own area, but as reprisals were expected in Kanturk that night we were ordered to move into the town at short notice. The Brigade Column was in the town until dawn next day but no enemy forces appeared. I think the Column got ten rifles in this ambush, which took place about 10 a.m. and which was over in about ten minutes. This engagement is known as Ballydrochane ambush.

1921:

Early in 1921 Kanturk Battalion Column was formed. The members were - Denis Murphy, O/C., Denis Lyons, Mick Courtney, Thomas Riordan, Jim Hayes, John Winters, Ned Donoghue, Martin McGrath, Eugene Duggan, Dan Fitzgerald, Denis Mulchinock, Seán Kennedy, Jack Hummerstown, John McCarthy, Andy Murphy and Mick Keating. All these men were "on the run" at the time.

The arms carried by the Column included ten rifles while the remainder were armed with shotguns. There were also three or four revolvers.

The Column was billeted in Kilbrin Company area for some time. As a result members of the local Company were engaged on guard duties at night and scout work by day especially while the Column was in the district. About this time also the local Volunteers were engaged in blocking roads and cutting enemy communications. While the Column was in the Kilbrin area they carried out training exercises - a small amount of musketry training as ammunition was scarce and also training in the use of ground and cover.

When the Battalion Column went into position at Father Murphy's Bridge in the Banteer Company area on 8th March, 1921, I was with about 20 or 25 members of Kilbrin Company on outpost duty on the Gortmore-Banteer road about one mile from the ambush position. My party was armed with shotguns. The site of the ambush at Father Murphy's Bridge was about one mile from Banteer on the Banteer Nadd road. The enemy party involved consisted of a sergeant and three constables of the R.I.C. One of the constables was killed and one wounded. The Column obtained four revolvers from this action. There was no activity in the position covered by my party and when the engagement was finished we returned to our own Company area.

Between March and June, 1921, all members of the Kilbrin Company were continually on active service on the smashing of enemy lines of communication by demolishing bridges, cutting trenches, falling trees. This work was very important as the Battalion Columns from Mallow, Newmarket and Kanturk were often in the area.

Sometime early in April, members of Kilbrin Company surrounded three British soldiers who were visiting houses in the area. They were carrying revolvers, which were seized. Only a few rounds of ammunition were obtained. This operation was carried out by Tom McAuliffe,

Tom McNamara, Tim Dennehy, Tim J. McAuliffe, Edward Fitzgerald, Dan Fitzgerald and James O'Connell (witness).

About this time it was decided to attack a convoy of Auxiliaries which used to travel regularly between Millstreet and Kanturk. The five Battalion Columns (Millstreet, Mallow, Charleville, Kanturk and Newmarket) were called together for this operation under the control of Brigade O/C. Paddy O'Brien. All the Columns met in a wood near Rathcoole on the night of 15th June, 1921. On the morning of 16th June, a number of mines were laid on the road between Rathcoole and Drishane over a distance of about 1,000 yards. The position selected is about $\frac{2}{2}$ miles east of Millstreet. The combined Columns with the assistance of the local Company numbered about 150 men. About 80 men had rifles and the remainder shotguns. There was also one Hotchkiss gun. All the members of the Column with the exception of three or four were on the south side of the road. They were divided into sections to cover the positions in which mines were laid. Each section had instructions as to their line of retreat. All the work on the mine laying had been finished in the early morning and we all remained in the wood until about 3 p.m. when we were ordered to take up the positions allocated to the various sections earlier in the day. I was with the party covering the position occupied by the last lorry in the convoy which was blown up right opposite our position which was within fifty yards of the road. The Convoy ran into ambush about 4 p.m. We immediately opened fire and continued to fire intermittently until the engagement was called off by the Brigade O/C. after about an hour. My section retired in a southerly direction towards Nadd which we reached safely next morning. We had no casualties, while the general report was that fifteen to twenty of the enemy had been killed or wounded. The following members of Kilbrin Company took part in this

action with me :- Dan Fitzgerald, Tom McAuliffe, Tom McNamara, Edward Fitzgerald, James O'Connell (witness), while Castlemagner Company members present were :- J.M. O'Connell, John Curran, Tim Cronin, and Pat O'Dwyer. I remember that shortly after leaving our position we met an old man who, although he must have heard all the shooting, greeted us with the remark "Boys, was there any trouble?" and then passed on.

On 10th July, 1921, just prior to the Truce, Cork IV. Brigade was formed. It consisted of Millstreet (1st), Newmarket (2nd), Charleville (3rd), Kanturk(4th), and Mallow (5th) Battalions of Cork II. Brigade. The Battalion numbers quoted are those referring to Cork IV. Brigade.

The officers of the new Brigade were :-

O/C.,	Paddy O'Brien, Liscarrol
Vice O/C.	Edmond Murphy, Lombardstown
Adjutant	Eugene McCarthy, Charleville
Q. M.	Mick O'Connell, Lombardstown.

My rank at the Truce, 11th July, 1921, was Company O/C. The strength of my Company was about 40 and that of Kanturk Battalion about 600.

After the Truce I went to a Training Camp at Bawnmore where I underwent a course of training. Denis Murphy was in charge of the camp. The training consisted of foot-drill, extended order training, the use of ground and cover, musketry training and practice, map-reading and making. This camp lasted about three weeks. I was then appointed Training Officer to similar camps at Corlakereen and Droumtarriffe. At these camps members of the Companies in the areas underwent a course of wholetime training on somewhat similar lines to that given at Bawnmore. At a later stage a special training camp was established at Ballygiblin House, Cecilstown, Mallow. This camp catered for the officers of each

Company in the Battalion area. The trainees were billeted on the premises and underwent a strenuous course of training for about two weeks. Many of the new recruits who joined up after the Truce were trained at these camps.

The strength of the Kanturk Battalion on 1st July, 1922 was about 500 and I was Battalion O/C.

Before concluding I would like to pay tribute to the help and co-operation received at all times from the people of the district without whose help the fight for freedom could not have been pursued. I would like to refer particularly to the following whose homes and resources were always at the service of the Columns and Volunteers:-

Mrs. Fitzgerald, Ballyheen	Tim Sullivan, Curras
Mrs. McNamara, do.	Dan Sheahan, do.
Patrick McAuliffe, Kilbrin	Mrs. Cronin, ^{Ballynashion} Ballybriekan,
John Mullane, Curras	James O'Connell, Knockan ^{uss} ersa.
David Hannigan, do.	

The daughters of these families were all members of Cumann na mBan and carried out the duties allocated to them in carrying dispatches, providing food for the Columns, tending to wounded and similar activities without regard to the dangers or difficulties involved.

Signed:

James O'Connell

Date:

27-5-'54

(James O'Connell)

27.5.'54.

Witness:

Phil O'Donnell

(Phil O'Donnell)

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