

ORIGINAL

BUREAU OF MILITARY HISTORY 1913-21
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BUREAU OF MILITARY HISTORY, 1913-21

STATEMENT BY WITNESS.

DOCUMENT NO. W.S. 999

Witness

James Fitzgerald,
Lispole,
Co. Kerry.

Identity.

O/C. Lispole Company Irish Vol's. Co. Kerry,
1913 - ;
Vice O/C. 5th Batt'n. Kerry I Brigade later.

Subject.

Lispole Company Irish Volunteers, Co. Kerry,
1913-1921.

Conditions, if any, Stipulated by Witness.

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STATEMENT BY JAMES FITZGERALD

Lispole, Co. Kerry

A branch of the Gaelic League was formed in Lispole by the late Thomas Ashe (of Ashbourne) in the early days of the League, and a dramatic society was also formed. The dramatic society performed a play written by the late Thomas Ashe at Dingle and later at Tralee Feis. The name of the play was An Fúncán. Thomas Ashe also formed a Gaelic football club. He was chairman, I was secretary and James Brosnan was treasurer and captain of the team.

Thomas Ashe was appointed as a teacher in Lusk, Co. Dublin, and while he was home on holidays at Christmas 1912, he formed a circle of the I.R.B. I was sworn in as a member of the I.R.B. by Thomas Ashe.

In 1913, Ernest Blythe came to the area and stayed with Thomas Ashe's father. Ernest Blythe formed a dramatic society, the previous society having been disbanded, and he had two plays performed in the Christian Brothers' School at Dingle. The Volunteers had been formed in Dublin and Ernest Blythe and I formed a company of national volunteers in Lispole. Companies were formed in Dingle and Ballyferriter by Desmond Fitzgerald and Michael Moriarty. The three companies were drilled by Mr. D. Dowling of Tralee, who was an ex-British soldier, and later by a man named Cotter from G.H.Q.

All classes in the town and country were joining up and we continued until the Redmondite split, when recruiting for the British army started. Lispole and Ballyferriter were two of the first companies to pledge allegiance to the newly-formed Irish Volunteers. In Dingle the Volunteers were very much divided and a majority were in favour of Redmond's (National) Volunteers.

A number of Martini rifles had been supplied to the Dingle Company before the split and when the split came some men from the Lispole Company raided for these rifles and got 4 or 5 with some ammunition. Ernest Blythe remained with the Lispole Company until he was deported in 1914.

In the meantime Thomas Ashe had put me in touch with Austin Stack who used to pass through Lispole on his way from Tralee to Dingle about once each month. Austin Stack was employed as a solicitor's clerk with Dr. O'Connell, Solicitor, Tralee.

During this period I marched Lispole Company to Annascaul which is on the road to Tralee from Lispole and formed a company of Irish Volunteers there. Thomas Walsh was placed in charge; his brother, Paddy Walsh, Denis Brosnan (Baker), and Pat Kennedy, who was later killed by the Tans, helped in the formation of the company.

Early in 1915, Austin Stack held a review of the Irish Volunteers in Dingle at which the Lispole Company attended. A company from Cahirciveen also attended. The Lispole Company together with companies from Ballyferriter and Dingle were also in attendance at a review held in Killarney by Eoin MacNeill early in 1915.

About January 1916, Austin Stack gave me orders to have a watch placed on the coast in my company area and to have a small boat or canoe ready with a crew. I was to report to him any strange vessel observed in the bay - I don't know for what purpose. Thomas Ashe had been home on holidays at Christmas 1915, and when he returned to Dublin he sent me twelve shotguns with 25 rounds for each. They were sent from Dublin to Tralee by rail and Thomas Ashe advised me of their coming by sending me a letter, on a billhead belonging to Messrs. Brooks Thomas, Dublin, telling me to expect twelve panel doors and brass knockers. Thomas Ashe told me to do the best I could to have

every man armed with some weapon. We got a local smith to make some Croppy pikes.

Just before Easter 1916, we got orders to proceed to Tralee on Easter Saturday night. We were to carry any arms we had along with three days' rations. We left Lispolle on Easter Saturday night and arrived in Tralee early on Easter Sunday morning. I was in charge of thirty two of the Lispolle Company. The company carried 12 shotguns, 4 Martini rifles, 3 revolvers, one .38 and one .22 pinfire. Daniel Griffin was my 1st Lieut. and James Kavanagh 2nd Lieut. On our way to Tralee we were joined by a section of the Annascaul Company and Tim P. Kennedy of Annascaul, who was an officer on the Volunteer staff in Tralee, also accompanied us. Tim P. Kennedy had brought the orders from Tralee to Dingle for the march to Tralee.

When we arrived in Tralee we went to the Rink where we remained until Easter Monday morning when we were ordered to return to our own area. The order was issued by P.J. Cahill who appeared to be in charge. We were to hold ourselves ready for any further call. No further call came.

About a week after Easter I was raided for by British military, but I evaded them. I was arrested in the month of June 1916, and detained in Annascaul R.I.C. Barracks. I was taken to the railway station at Annascaul, but was released when about to be put on the train for Tralee Prison.

During 1917 the Volunteers had been reorganised and I approached the local parish priest for the use of the old school as a Volunteer hall. This priest had been actively engaged in recruiting men for the British army. He refused us the use of the school, so we broke the lock and took forcible possession. The school was used as a drill hall by the Volunteers and we also used the school for meetings of a branch of the Ancient Order of Hibernians (Irish American Alliance) which we had

formed to keep the lads together. The drill hall was burned out by the Black and Tans after the Lispole ambush.

At this time I was O/C. of Lispole Company.

In 1918, all the men of the local company joined the Sinn Fein Club and later - in 1919 I think - Sinn Fein Courts were held in the area. Each section commander of the company was responsible for the police duties connected with the Sinn Fein Courts. The company also collected subscriptions for the Defence Fund, the Conscription Fund and, later, the Dáil Loan. Some of the people in the area continued to use the British Courts after our own Courts had been established and we had a section of our company ready to remove them from either cars or trains and unless they gave an undertaking to take their cases to the Republican Courts we had an unknown destination ready for them. Only one person refused to give the undertaking, but, after being blindfolded, decided to give the undertaking and was let go.

We had no election in our area in 1918 as all Republican candidates were returned unopposed.

Preparations were being made for a Volunteer parade on St. Patrick's Day 1918, and we were anxious to learn what the R.I.C. plans were for that day. At the time, an R.I.C. patrol from Dingle used to travel out from the town and meet a patrol from Annascaul which used move out in the direction of Dingle until they met the patrol from there. Two of our scouts - Thomas Fitzgerald and James McKenna - were placed in position where the patrols met. They learned that the R.I.C. at Dingle wanted all available men from Annascaul R.I.C. Barracks sent to Dingle on St. Patrick's Day. We decided to march to Annascaul on that day and when we marched into the village the R.I.C. Sergeant at Annascaul sent out an S.O.S. to Dingle for reinforcements. Our parade to Annascaul completely upset their plans.

After St. Patrick's Day parade at Annascaul two of our men had trouble with the R.I.C. Sergeant and they were summoned to Annascaul Court. The case was dismissed, but one of the Justices - a local farmer - passed some remarks that the men should be imprisoned. A few nights afterwards I went with five or six men of the Lispole Company to the home of the Justice and compelled him to sign an undertaking that he would never again sit in a British Court. We also took a shotgun and cartridges from him. We seized a common cart which was used for supplying turf to the local R.I.C. Barracks and buried it in Kinnard Strand.

An order came from G.H.Q. that all men of military age were to be prevented from emigrating and men in our area who attempted to emigrate were removed from cars and trains. I took it on myself to send warnings to each of the three shipping agents in Dingle against sending out advertisements or taking any money from men of military age and this had the desired effect. I learned from some of the men we stopped that the shipping agents were promising them a safe getaway, but the agents dropped this after my warning.

In 1920 a few of the 1st Kerry Brigade officers were on the run in my area and they were very useful to us in helping to train the local Volunteers in signals, first-aid, engineering and drill.

The area was also used as a place of detention for persons found guilty by the Republican Courts. A regular police force was formed from each section of the Lispole Company. The prisoners were held in farmers' houses for short periods.

We established a system of signalling through the company area by means of lamps and this was very effective in preventing the arrest of our men. If a British lorry left Dingle a signal was passed to the Lispole area and passed on from Lispole to Annascaul so that our men had warning that raids were likely. It also served as a protection to our men who might be engaged in cutting trenches on the roads. Thomas Fitzgerald of Lispole

was in charge of signals in the Lispole area.

On one occasion during the period the Tans came out from Dingle after commandeering civilians who were at a fair in Dingle. They made the civilians close the trenches so that lorries could pass. They closed all the trenches we had opened between Dingle and Lispole Church and raided houses around Lispole. We got to work the following night and, after placing our scouts and signallers, we opened the trenches much wider than they had been before. The Tans came out from Dingle by lorry several times during the night, but as we were warned of their coming by our signallers, the work went on without interference. With the trenching of the roads we had few visits from the Tans except on rare occasions. They were kept confined to Dingle town.

In February 1920, I was appointed quartermaster of the 5th Battalion, Kerry No. 1 Brigade, and I commenced the organisation of an active service unit in the Lispole company area. I was later appointed Vice-Commandant. I took charge of the unit and the members were Dan Griffin, James Kavanagh, Thomas Ashe, Gregory Ashe, Jack Brosnan, John Lovett, Pat Cahillane, Timothy Brosnan, Michael Trant, Stephen Griffin, James McKenna, Jeremiah Griffin, Patrick Daye and Michael Cahill.

The men selected for the unit were expected to be ready at any time day or night. Maurice Fitzgerald and Timothy Frendiville joined the unit later.

On the 19th February 1920, selected men from the Kerry No. 1 Brigade carried out an attack on Camp R.I.C. Barracks. I was not on the actual attack but, acting on orders from the Brigade, the Lispole unit, with Annascaul Unit, blocked the road at the village of Inch which is on the road between Castlemaine and Annascaul to prevent British reinforcements coming from Killorglin or Killarney. It was thought that reinforcements might try to reach Camp from the west or come

from Tralee through Castlemaine. Trenches were cut on the roads, but no reinforcements came our way.

In August 1920, we were ordered to Annascaul for an ambush, but on our way to Annascaul the lorry which was attacked there passed us on the road and we were forced to take cover. We were late for the ambush. On the night following the ambush we went into Annascaul to await any British party which might come out for reprisals. No reprisals took place that night and we returned to our own area.

Some short time before November night 1920, I got orders from the Seabhaic (Padraig Sugrue) who was then O/C. 5th Battn. 1st Kerry Brigade, to come to Mike Griffin's shed in Dingle on November night and be there between 8 and 9 p.m. Before proceeding to Dingle, I was to await at Lispole ^{FOR} men from the Annascaul Company and then cross by boat to Doonohean where we would be met by a guide from the Dingle Company who would guide us into Dingle. I gave orders to Maurice Griffin, the company quartermaster of Lispole Company, to have a boat ready (as he knew well how to manage a boat) and bring a few men from the Lispole Company to stand by with him at the boat when he had taken us across in case we might have to retreat from Dingle and the boat would be required to take us back to ^{LISPOLE} ~~Dingle~~.

We proceeded across to Dingle as ordered and met the guide who took us out around the town. The night was very showery and we had to take shelter near some fences a few times. We met some members of the 4th Battalion on the way and, with two of them who accompanied us, I got entangled in a barbed wire fence and, as a result, I received a few bad gashes in my left leg which bled quite a lot.

I was aware of the location of a shed in Dingle which was known as Griffin's shed, but I was unaware that he had another cattle-shed outside and to the west of the town. We went to Griffin's shed in the town, but there was no one there. While

waiting at the shed we heard a few shots and we tried to get to the place where the firing was on. We were at the back of the Temperance Hall when machine gun fire was opened on it. The shots we had heard were directed at two Tans who ran for the barracks and, when they reached it, the garrison came out firing in all directions. My leg, which I had torn on the barbed wire earlier, was now giving me a lot of trouble and we got to a farmhouse where I was able to clean and dress it. We could do nothing further in Dingle that night and we retreated as we had arranged earlier. It was two days before I was able to use my leg.

The following members of the Lispole Company were with me in Dingle: Daniel Griffin, Jerry Griffin, Gregory Ashe, Tim Brosnan, Michael Trant, Tom Ashe (later died from wound received at Lispole ambush), James Kavanagh, Jack Brosnan.

We were very anxious to have the unit armed and we formed a section of engineers to cut down black alder and make charcoal of which we had a big supply. We made a lot of gunpowder and we had a small munitions factory of our own in the Lispole area.

I was a carpenter and builder and we made some land mines.

About the end of 1920 or early 1921, I made arrangements with Maurice Cleary to procure some small arms in London. I got three Smith & Wesson .45 revolvers and 50 rounds for each. They were landed at Cahirciveen, and Michael Milner, who was the only motor driver in Dingle, brought them to me safely. He used be called on by the Tans to repair their cars and often got me information about the movements of the Tans. The arms were purchased out of battalion funds.

The Tans had an armoured car in Dingle and one of the shafts went out of order. Michael Milner informed me that the shaft was being sent to Tralee by train for repairs. We took the shaft off the train at Garrynadur and dumped it. The loss of the shaft put the vehicle out of order.

During early 1921 the Tans from Dingle used come out from Dingle to Annascaul closing trenches on the road as they proceeded. They usually travelled on a Sunday and passed Lispole at about 2 p.m. This went on for a few weeks. The Brigade O/C., P.J. Cahill, inspected a position at Lispole and it was decided to attack the Tans at a point on the Dingle to Annascaul road near Lispole Church, between the church and Lispole railway station.

I decided to allow the Tans to have the trenches closed as they could proceed from Dingle and with members of the 4th Battalion and the Brigade Column positions were taken round the ambush position. The position finally decided on was on a bend in the road opposite "the old schoolhouse" about 300 yards due east of the village of Lispole. There was also a small bridge at the spot which would cause the Tans to drive slowly. An old road to the south of the position and about 20 yards from the main road extended for 400 or 500 yards by the side and overlooking the main road. Two houses, one on each side of the main road, which could be used to cover the main road were occupied and a section of riflemen on the north side were posted to cover the north side of the road. "The old schoolhouse" which stood back about 50 yards from the main road was occupied by a party armed with eight and four bore shotguns. An old punt gun was placed in position immediately to the west of "the old schoolhouse" between the school and a small deep sunk stream which ran at right angles to the main road. The punt gun was loaded with "a cap full of slugs" and it was aimed at an elderberry tree on the north side of the road and it was thought that the first charge of the gun would put the first lorry out of action.

The positions were commanded as follows:

- (1) Party (7) to the north of ambush position near railway viaduct. Paddy Paul Fitzgerald, Tralee.

- (2) Party (6 or 7) on road Lispole-Annascaul, east of position and 400 yards away. Dan Rohan, Castlegregory.
- (3) Party (8) occupying house to north of main road (Tailor Kane's). Michael Duhig.
- (4) Party (12) occupying old schoolhouse. Daniel Mulvihill.
- (5) Main party (about 25) on old road overlooking main road and covering punt gun and rear of schoolhouse. P.J. Cahill, C/C. Kerry No. 1 Brigade.

The parties were armed as follows:

- No. 1 Party armed with rifles.
- " 2 " " rifles
- " 3 " one rifle and seven shotguns
- " 4 " mostly 4-bore and 8-bore shotguns
- " 5 (Main) party - rifles and shotguns.

The parties took up positions at about midday on Sunday, 20th March 1921, and scouts were placed on the rising ground surrounding the position to give warning of the approach. The parties remained in position until dark and we withdrew leaving a guard on the punt gun. We resumed our position on the morning of 21st March 1921 and remained in position all that day. The same thing happened on the night of the 21st and we took up positions on the morning of the 22nd. While waiting on the 22nd Maurice Fitzgerald was accidentally and fatally wounded. He was attended by Dr. Pat Casey of Lispole but the case was hopeless.

About 1 p.m. on that day scouts reported that an enemy lorry and a small car were on the road from Dingle. They proceeded as far as a dip in the main road about half a mile from the ambush position. The lorry and car stopped in the dip and the occupants alighted and moved in off the road on both sides. One party of the British forces (Tans) moved in towards the railway on the north of the ambush position and the other party went up on the rising ground and, skirting the village of Lispole, attained high ground overlooking the ambush position to the rear and partly west of the position held by our main party. The Tans had been observed alighting from their transport and it was assumed that they were raiding houses nearby, this being quite a normal procedure. In fact,

they were making to surround the whole ambush position. After reporting the presence of the Tans, our scouts had withdrawn and the first we knew of the presence of the enemy so near our positions was a blast of machine-gun fire from the railway which lay to the north of our ambush position.

The British (Tans) were in position as follows:- One party with machine gun near railway, another machine gun on high road overlooking our position. The party of Volunteers on the north of the position retreated north and during this early period Lieut. Thomas Ashe of the Lispole Company was badly wounded. Word came to P.J. Cahill by Jack Griffin that a party of Tans were trying to cut off our retreat. P.J. Cahill gave the order to retreat back from our position. I was with the main party. Some of our men (entered) went along the bed of the sunken stream which runs back from the Old Road on which the main party had taken up position earlier. After travelling some distance up the stream our men had to leave the stream where it was piped at the entrance to the field. The Tans had got to the field and as the members of our party entered the field they were being taken prisoner. Tadhg Brosnan, O/C. 4th Battalion, sent me forward to stop our men leaving the stream and we remained under cover in the stream and, although the Tans were right above us, they could not see us.

We had got Lieut. Thomas Ashe - cousin of the first-named Thomas Ashe - who had been wounded into the bed of the stream (glen) and Alfred J. Fullerton and I tried to bandage his wounds. We heard voices above us, and acting by agreement and led by Michael Harrington, O/C. of Dingle Company, who had served in the American Army in the 1914-18 war, we all shouted at the Tans to drop their arms while Michael Harrington was shouting military orders. It appears that the Tans had been moving across the field which ran partly east of our position taking some of our men as prisoners with them along with one

of our men named Thomas Hawley, who had been wounded in the head. The prisoners were carrying Hawley along. When the Tans heard our shouts they dropped their rifles and held up their hands and stepped backwards. They got away leaving their rifles and prisoners behind. The woodwork of one of the Tans rifles was marked with pellet holes from our fire.

Before we got out of the stream (glen) and the prisoners found they were free they left Hawley down and passed behind us and away to freedom again. As far as I can remember, the following were with me in the sunken stream (glen):

Tom (Bawn) Kennedy, Gregory Ashe, Alfred Fullerton, Michael Harrington, Thomas Ashe (wounded), and Jack Griffin (Hutch).

We brought the wounded men - Hawley and Ashe - with us to the next farmer's house where we got a horse and cart and had them removed to Annascaul Company area to a place named Acres. I sent for a priest and doctor to Annascaul and the present parish priest of Dingle (Canon Lyne), who was then stationed at Annascaul, came to us willingly. Tom Ashe died about 1 a.m. next morning and Hawley lived for a few months before he died. Dr. Pat Casey of Lispole also attended Ashe and Hawley.

When removing Ashe and Hawley, Michael Harrington and Alfred Fullerton were placed behind us with rifles to act as guard.

I heard later that four Tans were wounded and that one was killed and taken by boat from Dingle.

It was also reported later that Tans had been seen out from Dingle looking in the direction of Lispole through field glasses on the Monday and Tuesday before the fight.

We captured three rifles, 1 Webley .45 and a bomb which Jack Griffin saw one of the Tans throw away when running for cover. The pin was partly pulled when he found it.

The fight lasted from 1 o'clock to 6 o'clock. There were about 24 Tans on the lorry and 5 or 6 in a small scout car. They were armed with rifles and revolvers, two machine guns, one Hotchkiss gun and bombs. We found a number of clips of .303 lying about after the fight.

We were only a few minutes cleared off when a company of reinforcements arrived from Dingle. They were Marines and tried to set fire to a farmer's house, but the local Cumann na mBan extinguished the fire before it did much damage.

With men of the Annascaul Company we buried Tom Ashe in a disused grave at Ballinacourty Churchyard where he remained until the 1st January 1922, when he was re-interred in the family burial ground at Kinard.

On the day following the Lispole fight we were again mobilised, as Tadhg Brosnan, O/C. 4th Battalion, expected reprisals. We were placed in position at Ballinclare and we received a report that 18 lorries of military were on the way. We had to withdraw because our forces were too weak for the enemy.

After the Lispole fight we learned that on the Sunday on which we were waiting at Lispole the lorry which we were expecting went west from Dingle to Ballydavid. The Ballydavid Company had captured some foodstuffs intended for the Marines stationed there. We had no information about the Ballydavid raid and, consequently, did not anticipate that the Tans would go west on Sunday 20th March 1921, instead of coming east to Annascaul as was usual.

Shortly after the Lispole fight the Tans closed part of a trench on the road near Dingle. While they were closing the trench a member of the Fianna named Thomas Daye passed the spot and saw a box near the opening. I suspected they were setting a trap, and when we went to re-open the trench, I had a smaller trench dug nearby. I warned the men to be careful

and remain on the alert and be prepared to take cover in the small trench when I gave the word. I listened carefully as the men worked re-opening the trench. I heard a hissing noise and immediately ordered the men to take cover. They were just in cover when an explosion occurred. The Tans had laid a trap with a box of bombs. None of our men was injured.

During 1921 a Christian Brother named Leonard, who was stationed in Dingle, sent me word a few times about night raids which the Tans intended carrying out.

During 1921, we were up against a scarcity of food round the Dingle-Lispole-Annascaul area and we could not get supplies from Tralee. Flour was in short supply and we got one boat-load from Cahirciveen. I went with Jerry Griffin to Castlemaine to arrange the supply of foodstuffs from that area. We stayed there overnight and while we were there we were surrounded but escaped although we were questioned by one of the Tans we got through by posing as locals and the Tans did not know us.

Food was our chief trouble prior to the Truce, but we managed to beat the blockade.

Almost all the civil population were favourable to us. One farmer, Timothy O'Connor, Graigue, Lispole, took the wounded to Acres on his cart after the Lispole ambush although the British reinforcements (Marines) were on our heels.

While we were waiting before the Lispole ambush we were fed and kept in the Lispole Company area by the local people.

The only reprisal carried out in the area after the Lispole ambush was carried out at my home at Lispole village. Tans and R.I.C. entered my home. They bound my mother's and sister's hands with rope, forced them into a room and tied the door. They told them they were setting fire to the whole place unless they told where the two sons were. My mother

and sister refused to tell and the Tans brought some tins of petrol outside the window where my mother could see them. They returned later and released my mother and sister. When the Tans retired, some fresh eggs, money and other articles were missing.

In finishing I must say that the two shops and the people of Lispole who kept and fed the men of the ambush party for three days and nights were very good to us, as also were the Cumann na mBan, Fianna and Fr. John O'Connor (American Mission). Messrs. C. Hickson and Thady O'Connor^{who} helped in the removal of the wounded from Lispole and Mr. O'Sullivan of Acres gave his house and beds for the wounded men.

Signed: James Fitzgerald

Date: Aug. 30th 1954

(James Fitzgerald)

Aug. 30th 1954.

Witness: James J. O'Connor

(James J. O'Connor)

