

W.S. 1,020

ORIGINAL

BUREAU OF MILITARY HISTORY 1913-21
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No. W.S. 1020

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BUREAU OF MILITARY HISTORY, 1913-21.

STATEMENT BY WITNESS.

DOCUMENT NO. W.S. 1,020.....

Witness

Jeremiah Cronin,
32, The Glen,
Waterford.

Identity.

Member of Irish Volunteers, Fermoy,
Co. Cork, 1917 - ;

O/C. Waterford Flying Column;
Waterford Battalion Commandant.
Subject.

Waterford City Battalion, 1918-1921.

Conditions, if any, Stipulated by Witness.

Nil

File No. S.2337.....

Form B.S.M. 2

The Waterford Volunteers found themselves unable to cope with the hooliganism and rowdyism of the Redmondite gangs, the latter being composed mainly of ex-British soldiers and their wives plus the famous pig-buyers from Ballybricken, Waterford. It was impossible for the Sinn Féin election workers to do their job under the protection of the local Volunteers who were too few in number to protect them from assault by the followers of Redmond, so it was decided to call in the aid of Volunteers from other counties.

About twenty of us came to Waterford by train from Mitchelstown, Co. Cork, a day or so before polling day. Some of us were quartered in premises owned by Pierce Durand (himself a Volunteer) in Parnell St. and some in the Volunteer Hall situated in Thomas St., Waterford. We slept on stretchers and were provided with food by members of the Cumann na mBan. Our duties in Waterford consisted mainly of guarding the polling booths on the polling day for fear of any interference of the poll by the Redmondite gangs. We stayed in Waterford for two or three days, returning then by train to Fermoy.

In October 1918 I left Fermoy and came to Waterford City as an assistant in the drapery firm of Robertson, Ledlie, Ferguson & Co. I contacted an ex-British soldier known as "Bismark" Power who was acting as drill instructor to the Volunteers in Waterford, and through him I became a member of "A" Company Waterford City Battalion Irish Volunteers. This Company was composed almost entirely of drapers' and grocers' assistants. My Company Captain was Patrick Cleary and the Battalion Commandant was Jimmy Hetherington. I was appointed a Section Leader in the Company - which numbered about forty strong.

In our Company we had a few shotguns, .22 rifles and a couple of revolvers. These guns were kept in a dump situated on the premises of the local Catholic Young Men's Society in Parnell St., Waterford. The weapons were kept between the rafters and the ceiling and were so carefully hidden that they were never discovered by the British authorities. As a matter of fact, the place was never suspected as a hide-out for arms and was never raided.

During the period late 1918 to the end of 1919 our activities were confined principally to drilling and general training. We did raid a few private houses for arms. I myself took part in at least two of these raids, viz. on the house of Scully, an architect, in Parnell St. and on Bailey's in New St. In Scully's we got two shotguns and in Bailey's we got one. In these two instances I was in charge of a small party of two men and was myself armed with a .32 revolver. My comrades were not armed.

It may be of interest to record that every member of the Volunteers was expected to pay sixpence a week as a sort of membership fee. This money was handed over to the Adjutant.

On 1st January, 1920, I was appointed Lieutenant of "A" Company by the Battalion Officers Paddy Paul, Jimmy Hetherington and Tommy Wyley. We still had about 40 men on the Company rolls and had got in a few extra shotguns from raids on houses. At that time a man named Bobby Whelan was Brigade Intelligence Officer and Denis Madden, the present District Court Clerk in Waterford, was Battalion I/O.

In October 1920 I was appointed Captain of "A" Company

following the arrest of Capt. Patrick Cleary. During late 1920 parades were held every Sunday in a field at Williamstown about 2 miles east of the city and behind the Waterford Golf Links on the Ferrybank side of the river Suir. Raids for arms were stepped up a bit about this time, and particular attention was paid to houses of retired R.I.C. men as quite a few of these men had permits from the British to have weapons. A general sweep was made by all the City Companies in late 1920 on houses of individuals known to have arms and in this manner we were able to increase our own small supply of guns.

On January 6th 1921 I was notified by Brigade O/C, Paddy Paul, of a proposed ambush on British troops near the Metal Bridge which carries the railway line about a half mile north-east of Tramore on the main Waterford-Tramore road. Paul showed me a sketch of the proposed lay-out of the ambush and I selected four men of "A" Company to take part with myself.

On the night of January 7th 1921 about 6 p.m. I went with my three men, as previously arranged, to the grounds of the Waterford Mental Hospital. I was armed with a .45 revolver and about 20 rounds of ammunition, and my three men were issued with shotguns and ammunition from the dump there. There were about fifteen or sixteen other men of the Waterford City Battalion also assembled there and these also were given shotguns and, I believe, a few rifles. Vice Brigadier Willie Keane was in charge of the whole party which went on foot across country towards Tramore, guided through the darkness by Tom Brennan, a Lieut. in "D" Company and now Postmaster in Tramore. Tom had an intimate knowledge of that particular line of the country.

We arrived at the place appointed about 9 p.m. It was a dry night, dark and starry.

When we came near the Metal Bridge Paddy Paul, O/C of the East Waterford Brigade, came on the scene and allocated our positions to us. My position was about 10 yards up on the Ballynattin Road (now known as The Shrine Road) which runs uphill in an easterly direction and almost at right angles to the main Waterford-Tramore road. It is about 150 yards from the Metal Bridge. I remember seeing Keane (Vice Brig.), Whittle, Gallagher and Walsh of the Waterford City Battalion. These men were, so far as I can remember, armed with shotguns and rifles. Of the men on the Ballynattin Road I was nearest to the junction of that road with the main road and the old Tramore Road which also forms a junction with the two roads mentioned.

Paddy Paul explained the plan of attack to me as follows: A feint attack on the R.I.C. barracks in Tramore town about a mile westward would be made by a small party of rifle and shotgun men. It was expected that the garrison of the barracks would send up Verey lights to summon assistance and that, as a result, a convoy of British troops would come out from Waterford when they would be ambushed from our positions. I should state here that a party of men from the West Waterford Brigade Flying Column - about 20 I think - were in position on the Glen Road which is in high ground on the far side to us, i.e. the Tramore side of the Metal Bridge. There were also about ten men from the Dunhill, Co. Waterford, Company armed with shotguns under Jimmy Power, their Commandant, in position on the railway line about 40 yards back from the main road and facing our positions on the Ballynattin Road. About four men from the Waterford City Battalion

were placed behind a hedge at the junction of the main road, the old Tramore Road and the Ballynattin Road. These men were armed with rifles and facing westward towards the ambush position.

My instructions from Paddy Paul were to fire a shot from my revolver as a signal that the last British lorry had passed my position in the direction of the Metal Bridge, a short distance beyond which a road barricade had been erected. Not until my signal was given should fire be opened by our men on the British convoy.

I had been watching the Verey lights going up from Tramore R.I.C. Barracks at regular intervals for about half an hour or maybe an hour before I heard the noise of lorries approaching from Waterford along the main Tramore road. Three lorries passed my position proceeding in the direction of the Metal Bridge and towards the barricade. Their headlights were full on. I fired no warning shot as my instructions were not to do so until the fourth (and last) lorry passed my position. However, when the first lorry was fairly close to the Metal Bridge fire was opened on it by the West Waterford men under Pax Whelan who were on the Glen Road overlooking the bridge and about 200 yards from it. When this happened fire was opened by all our men from their various positions east and west of the Metal Bridge. The fourth military lorry when reaching the junction of the main road - Ballynattin - old Tramore Road, - wheeled to the left back up the hill on the old Tramore Road in the direction of Waterford. This lorry stopped some distance up the old Tramore Road. The British military got out and advanced from that road up the hill on the north east side of the Ballynattin Road.

In the meantime the British had dismounted from the lorries which had passed the junction and gone on towards the Metal Bridge direction. They proceeded to advance through marshy ground upwards towards the Ballynattin Road on the south (Tramore) side of that road, forming a sort of pincer movement with the troops advancing up the north east side of the Ballynattin Road.

After about fifteen minutes or so since the action commenced and on orders from, I think, Willie Keane, the Brigade Vice Commandant, I retreated up the Ballynattin Road and crossed the ditch on the north east side near where the shrine now stands. I met Mick Wyley, who was wounded in the legs, and with the help of Willie Keane and William Gallagher carried him across fields uphill under fire from the British on the old Tramore Road.

I met Brigade O/C Paul up on the hill and he told me he was going back on to the Ballynattin Road to see if any of our men were still down there. He did not, however, return to the Ballynattin Road but he went on ahead of Keane and myself who were helping Wyley across country, and when we reached the house of a man named Cheasty of Moonamintra, where we put Wyley for safety, Brigadier Paul had got there before us. Myself and William Gallagher remained with Keane, Wyley, Paul and another of our men named Con Dargan until 6 a.m. on 8th January, 1921, when we left Cheasty's and returned across country to the Mental Hospital Waterford - 8 miles away - where we dumped our guns and I came in to the city to my place of business.

On the Sunday following the Tramore ambush, after having my Company out for drilling at Williamstown I had returned to my 'digs' at 9 Parnell St. when the place

was raided by a party of the Devonshire Regiment under Lieutenants Yeo and Valentine. I had just time to take a despatch out of my pocket and throw it on a table when the door was burst in. I was closely questioned about the Tramore ambush and told to open up a trunk I had in the room. I did so, took a bundle of private letters and threw them on top of the table, covering up the despatch which wasn't noticed by the British officers. Yeo and Valentine said I was in the Tramore ambush, to which I replied "that's ridiculous". After a thorough search, during which they found nothing relating to the Volunteers, they went out saying they "might call again".

That same night I attended a Battalion meeting in the old courthouse, Catherine St., and when I returned at 11.30 p.m. I found my 'digs' in Parnell St. surrounded by British military. I did not go near the house of course. Early the following morning (about 2 a.m.) they raided the 'digs' again for me but I wasn't there. Next day I went to the manager of the firm where I worked and told him I was leaving. I did so and went for safety to stay at the house of Mrs. Power of Callyhane, about 2 miles east of the city on the road to Dunmore East, where I remained for about six weeks. During my stay there I learned that the military had been raiding my former 'digs' every night for one whole week.

Sometime during the month of February 1921 I was asked by Brigadier O/C Paul to attack the occupied R.I.C. barracks at Dunmore East. It appeared that this attack was merely intended as a decoy to draw the British forces in the direction of Dunmore and away from the Kilmacthomas district - about sixteen miles west - where the West Waterford Brigade had arranged an attack on a train containing

British troops and ammunition coming from Fermoy via Kilmacthomas to Waterford.

To attack Dunmore Barracks I selected six men, and, armed with rifles, we set off across country from Callyhane to Dunmore, a distance of about 10 miles. The time was midnight. The roads from Waterford to Dunmore were blocked (by Waterford City men) by fallen trees, and the Volunteers in Passage and Cheekpoint blocked the roads at their side (the east side) of Dunmore.

On reaching the barracks, which was built of stone and had steel-shuttered windows, I took up a position with my men inside a ditch offering excellent cover about 50 yards from the rear of the barracks and opened fire. Immediately Verrey lights were sent up by the garrison (which consisted of eight or nine R.I.C. men) and heavy machine gun and rifle fire was directed on our position. After about a half an hour of firing we withdrew according to instructions without suffering any casualties. I do not know whether we inflicted any loss on the garrison, but, as I have already stated, our attack was intended as a diversionary one only. We failed to draw any British forces out from Waterford that night. It is my opinion that although the British must have seen the Verrey lights going up from Dunmore, they were extra cautious in case a trap was being laid for them as in the case of the Tramore ambush a month previously.

After the Dunmore attack I withdrew with my men to the district of Ballinkine, about $\frac{1}{2}$ mile from Callyhane on the main Waterford-Dunmore East road, where the party divided and slept in sheds. Paddy Kennedy, the Intelligence Officer of the 6th Battalion (Dunmore) East

Waterford Brigade, kept watch during the night in case of a surprise attack by the enemy.

I would like to place on record the excellent intelligence work carried out by this man Kennedy. The poor fellow was a hunchback and of rather delicate physique. He worked as a farm labourer and gave his services day and night in the fight for freedom. He was a most valuable intelligence officer.

I returned again to Mrs. Power's house at Callyhane, the rendezvous of many an I.R.A. man on the run or wounded. Whilst there I slept in a small room specially built to hide I.R.A. men. It had a secret door covered on the outside with wallpaper to coincide with the paper on the room, through which entrance to the small secret room was made. Although the house was raided many times the secret room was never discovered.

In March 1921 the East Waterford Brigade Officers decided to form a Flying Column to operate in conjunction with the West Waterford Column under Pax Whelan. Our strength was approximately 15 men, all of whom were armed with rifles and revolvers. There was a fairly good supply of ammunition. I was appointed O/C of the Column, amongst whose members were: Mick Wyley, Jim Heylin, Tom Brennan, Willie Gallagher, Mick Cahill, Willie O'Donoghue and Jimmy O'Connor.

In the same month I went to Dublin by car with a man from the West Waterford Brigade whose name I cannot now recall. Our purpose was to interview some of the men at General Headquarters with a view to obtaining some arms and ammunition. We went to Vaughan's Hotel, Parnell Square,

Dublin, and there saw Mick Collins and Cathal Brugha. We told them we had come specially from Waterford to see if we could be supplied with rifles and ammunition which were badly needed in our area. Collins expressed concern at the comparative inactivity of the I.R.A. in Waterford. He wanted more action in the county to help to ease the enemy pressure in Cork and South Tipperary. We pointed out to him that our main trouble was lack of sufficient arms and ammunition. We said we had the men - if we could get the guns to give them. Both Collins and Brugha told us that they had no 'stuff' to give us, so we had to return to our units empty-handed.

I joined up with the Column on my return from Dublin and we moved westward over to the Nire valley at the foot of the Comeragh Mountains near Cappoquin. The local Company Captain arranged for the billeting of the Column while in that and all other areas.

We linked up with the West Waterford Column in the Nire district, our combined strength being about 35 men. George Lennon, Vice Brigadier West Waterford Brigade, was O/C of the combined Column.

The Column paraded each morning at 8 a.m. and the day was spent in general training, including target practice. We paraded altogether again each night and dismissed to billets at 10 p.m., with instructions to report on parade at a specific place the following morning. Armed sentries were always in position night and day in case of surprise attack by the enemy.

About the end of April or early in May 1921 information reached the Column of a train conveying British

troops from Fermoy to Waterford and it was decided to ambush that train at a small railway station named Cappagh, about 3 miles east of Cappoquin.

Ambush positions were taken up about half an hour before the train was due to reach Cappagh. The terrain in the immediate vicinity of the railway station was hilly, with plenty of cover provided by rocks and scrub. The East Waterford Column was in position on the right bank of the railway. The West Waterford men were on the left bank.

The train came along at the appointed time and fire was opened by all our men as the train came to a halt in Cappagh Station. The firing continued on our side for a few minutes with no reply coming from the occupants of the troop train. Some of the West Waterford men went down on to the line to investigate and then discovered that the train carried no troops at all. It was learned subsequently that not long after the Column moved away the troop train did pass through Cappagh en route to Waterford. It was obvious that the intelligence service was badly at fault on this occasion.

Sometime in the month of May 1921 the East and West Waterford Brigades were amalgamated under the command of Pax Whelan. The decision to amalgamate was taken at a meeting of Divisional Officers held at Ballylaneen, Kill, Co. Waterford, presided over by Liam Lynch. George Lennon was appointed Vice O/C, Denis Madden Brigade I/O and Tommy Wyley Brigade Q/M. A month later I was appointed Commandant of the 4th Waterford City Battalion.

To return to the Flying Column: In May 1921 word reached us that British troops in convoy were approaching

the Waterford-Tipperary border from their camp at Kilworth, Co. Cork. At the time the Column was billeted in the Mount Melleray district. We decided to attack and moved to meet the British, who we learned had camped in a field near Ballinamult in west Waterford. At about 2 p.m. on a bright spring day we approached to within 50 yards of the British encampment under cover of well-wooded country. We had an excellent firing position. We were close enough to take them completely by surprise and we had first class country into which we could retreat when the action was over. We were in position and awaiting the order to fire when a scout came to our lines with the news that a second British convoy was approaching our position from a westerly direction. Faced with a strong possibility of an outflanking movement by a vastly superior force, orders were given to retire. We had no sooner pulled away a safe distance when word reached us that a third British convoy was approaching from a north-westerly direction. We had no option, therefore, but to retreat hastily out of the grip of the pincer movement which the British were carrying out. We did so successfully and again fell back to the Mount Melleray country, in which area we remained until word of the signing of the truce was sent to us by Pax Whelan in July 1921. On learning of the truce the East Waterford Column returned to billets in Dunhill, a village 11 miles west of Waterford City.

In September, or perhaps early October 1921, word was received that a vessel from Germany carrying arms and ammunition was expected at Helvic in West Waterford. I went down there with Jim Heylin and Mickey Wyley but saw no sign of the vessel. About a week later the boat, manned by a German crew and captained by - McGuinness, put

in at Cheekpoint, a small harbour on the east Waterford coast at the entrance to Waterford harbour and about ten miles from the city.

The cargo, which consisted of rifles, machine guns, revolvers and ammunition, was loaded into seven lorries and was conveyed for safe keeping to a dump in the Comeragh Mountains. Pax Whelan and Paddy took over the 'stuff' from us there.

All that remains for me to say is that I resumed business again in September 1921.

Signed:

Jeremiah Cronin

Date:

11/10/54

(Jeremiah Cronin)

11/10/54.

Witness:

T. O'Gorman

(T. O'Gorman)

