

W.S. 1,028
ORIGINAL

BUREAU OF MILITARY HISTORY 1913-21

BURO STAIRÉ MILEATA 1913-21

No. W.S. 1028

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BUREAU OF MILITARY HISTORY, 1913-21.

STATEMENT BY WITNESS.

DOCUMENT NO. W.S. 1,028.....

Witness

Sup't. James McKenna,
Garda Siochana Barracks,
Bandon,
Co. Cork.

Identity.

Captain Donagh Company I.R.A.
Co. Monaghan, 1918 - ;

O/C. North Monaghan Brigade 5th Northern Div'n.

Subject:

National and military activities,
Co. Monaghan, 1918-1922.

Conditions, if any, Stipulated by Witness.

Nil

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ORIGINAL

BUREAU OF MILITARY HISTORY 1018-21
BURO STAIRE MILEATA 1013-21
No. W.S. 1028

STATEMENT BY JAMES McKENNA,

Bandon, Co. Cork.

I am a native of Glasslough, Co. Monaghan. Donagh Company I.R.A. was organised about July 1918. I was appointed Captain, John McCabe Adjutant and Patrick McCloskey Quartermaster. Donagh is a Chapel District about a mile from Glasslough and in the Monaghan Battalion area. Our company had about eighteen members and carried out a programme of training.

About the end of December 1919 or January 1920 Ernie O'Malley came to Monaghan as a Volunteer organiser and training instructor. He did not visit Donagh Company but the Company Officers attended a few meetings at a hall in Market Street, Monaghan, where he instructed us on the use of firearms and hand grenades.

The attack on Ballytrain R.I.C. Barracks was being planned at the time of O'Malley's arrival in the county, and the attack came off while he was with us. Eight men from Donagh Company travelled by two cars to Ballytrain. We joined Volunteers of Monaghan Company at a bridge one mile on the Clones road from Monaghan, and they acted as our guides while we travelled about a further sixteen miles, avoiding villages and main roads. Eventually we arrived at a road block in the vicinity of Ballytrain, where we left our cars under guard and walked to the scene of the attack. The barrack was on our right, with a lock-up store at the gable end by which we approached. There was a residence with shop included, on our left directly opposite the barracks. This house was occupied by Mr. Mitchel and

family. I saw five or six Volunteers break the windows of Mitchel's house and take possession. Rifle fire was immediately opened on the barrack. A party of Volunteers entered the lock-up store about the same time to mine the barrack gable. I was detailed for a position at the rere of the barrack under Ernie O'Malley and Comdt. Chas. Emerson, Monaghan Battalion. The former gave us a demonstration of exploding hand grenades on a roof by letting go the spring and counting two before throwing it. He was successful in every effort.

In less than an hour from our arrival General O'Duffy, who was in command of this attack, ordered all Volunteers to move down the road in the Clones direction. A party of about twenty-five assembled on the road. Those in Mitchel's house opposite the barrack went to the rere with the Mitchel family. Eoin O'Duffy then called on the garrison to surrender, giving them three chances. Each call was answered by a rifle shot. The General then informed them he was about to explode a mine at the gable next the store and advised them to go to the opposite gable. He spoke in a loud distinct voice through a megaphone. The next order was "let off the mine", and there was a loud explosion. After a few moments the slates etc. could be heard falling. When all was silent General O'Duffy ordered us to charge the building. We rushed into where the store had been. The barrack gable was in a heap of rubble. The first floor upstairs was sloped down resting on the rubble. We scrambled up this floor and found the floor of the second room poorly supported by the second wall. On reaching the third room upstairs we found the police in a corner at the gable, and they all said: "Thank God we're safe". Only one member of the

garrison complained of an injury. He was Constable Gallaher, who had a slight abrasion on the side of his head. Dan Hogan gave him a first-aid outfit. There were two Sergeants and about six constables in the barrack. We had some difficulty in finding the firearms as most of them were covered with rubble.

General O'Duffy naturally contemplated widespread searching by the Crown Forces during the following day. In view of this he arranged that Ernie O'Malley should go home with me as I lived over twenty miles from the scene of the attack. We arrived home by the main road without incident.

One of the cars we used was the property of James Trodden of Armagh. It got the second puncture on the homeward journey when about three miles from Glasslough or fifteen from his destination (Armagh). The driver had no alternative but to continue on the rim. Hence, by the mark the rim left on the road surface, the car and driver were traced. On receipt of this information I accompanied Ernie O'Malley to the Br^agan Mountains, left him with friends and returned home. The following day the police from Glasslough and Monaghan made a thorough search of my father's premises. They enquired about my brother John and I, but we were absent. (John had been at the Ballytrain raid also). About a fortnight later I was arrested at about 4 a.m. in my father's home. Tom Clerkin (who also took part in the barrack attack) was arrested by another party of police at the same hour. We were lodged in Belfast Prison and there met four Volunteers from Newtownbutler who had also participated in the raid. One of these was the late Comdt. Matt Fitzpatrick, shot by an A Special Constable at Clones Railway Station.

We were later removed to Derry Prison where we joined several comrades, including Comdt. Dan Hogan, Phil Marron, Gen. Joe Sweeney and Seamus McGuill, Dundalk. After a few weeks the majority of the Derry prisoners were brought back to Belfast Prison which had in the meantime been converted into an Internment Camp. Approximately eight hundred prisoners, taken by destroyer from Spike Island, were already there.

The prisoners in Wormwood Scrubbs and Mountjoy went on hunger-strike about this time, and strong appeals were being made by some of the Belfast prisoners to join them. General O'Duffy was i/c of the prisoners. A general meeting was held and it was unanimously decided to go on hunger-strike. After a few days fast the late Frank Carney, T.D., and a few others who were not very robust were carried out on stretchers. This led to a general release on the sixth day and we were all conveyed to the various hospitals, from where we were discharged in about a week.

On arrival home we received a public welcome. During the following month companies of Volunteers were organised at every chapel district in Monaghan. About May 1920 Scotstown Battalion was formed with eight companies, and I was appointed Comdt. i/c, with Tom Brennan Vice Comdt., John McCabe Adjutant and Patrick McMeel Q/M. The battalion was very short of arms. Therefore we succeeded, through the influence of Gen. O'Duffy, to have Clogher Company, Co. Tyrone, (bordering Monaghan) transferred to Scotstown Battalion. During the Irish and Ulster Volunteer movements Rev. James O'Daly, P.P. Clogher, procured some single shot rifles for his parishioners. Eight of these were still available with some ammunition, and these were

distributed to our companies.

In the general raid for arms September 1920 we concentrated on the houses of Unionists, which were numerous in parts of my area. These people were hostile to us and some of them showed resistance. Capt. P. McClaskey of Donagh Company was wounded by pellets from a shotgun fired down the staircase in the house of a Unionist. Force had to be used to subdue others. About twelve shotguns and two or three revolvers were procured that night.

Sinn Féin Courts:

Sinn Féin Courts were organised and functioning all over Co. Monaghan from about May 1920. Volunteers assisted to bring offenders before the courts and enforce the orders of the courts. During this period the Volunteer Police made several good detections which gained the confidence of the public.

Belfast Boycott:

During 1920 the boycott on Belfast goods was organised and firmly enforced in north Monaghan. Delivery vans were burned in various parts of the battalion area. Eventually we arranged to hold up a goods' train which also carried mails at a level crossing at Faulkland, which is about two miles from Glasslough and three miles from Monaghan. By a coincidence, a Brigade Council meeting was held on the night of this hold-up. At the conclusion of the meeting a number of officers from other battalion areas accompanied us to see the train held up. These included the late Comdt. Byrne (killed at Dundalk in 1922), his Adjutant Brian McMahon, Comdt. Phil Marron (deceased) and Capt. John McGonnell, Newbliss.

The train was held up by removing two sections of the line and signalling with a red lamp. Tom Kavanagh, a maintenance railway worker who lived at the Faulkland crossing, assisted in removing the sections and supplied the lamp although not a Volunteer. When the train pulled up we removed the mails, and Comdt. Dan Hogan, who understood railway procedure, got particulars of the goods on rail from the guard. He discovered the train carried nothing but Belfast goods and one waggon carried a consignment of petrol in tins. A quantity of the petrol was removed for future use. The waggons were then sprinkled with petrol and set on fire. Comdt. D. Hogan put the engine in reverse and it moved off slowly towards Glasslough and burned out when half way to the railway station directly opposite my home at Aughaloughan, Glasslough. When our duty was over Comdt. Hogan advised the few of us who had to return to the Brogan Mountains to go with him to Clontibret, which was in the opposite direction and in Comdt. Phil Marron's area. This was fortunate as there was a round-up by the Crown Forces in the mountain area that morning at the break of day.

All the mails were censored at Clontibret, stamped with the inscription "Censored by the I.R.A." and left along the road where a favourable postman would find them.

This was the third consignment of mails we had taken from mail trains at or near Glasslough Railway Station by night, and we made a similar raid on a passenger train at Smithboro in the daytime.

Useful information was procured from the examination of these mails. Some members of the Ancient Order of Hibernians were very much opposed to the I.R.A. and would

not hesitate in giving information as to the houses frequented by us. We had a least six or seven instances of the R.I.C. rushing up in a truck, dismounting and running straight to the house where a Volunteer was staying. Two were captured in this way, which left no doubt whatever that they (the R.I.C.) were well informed. Some of the R.I.C. had been stationed in villages then vacated and had a good local knowledge. Therefore drastic action was necessary to check this emergency.

Dr. Con Ward was Brigade I/O and it was as a result of the information received by him that a direction was given by Gen. O'Duffy for the execution of spies. Two were executed in my area by this procedure, Arthur Treanor in Bragan Company area and Kitty Carroll, Knockatallon area. The proof against the latter was very strong. She was scarcely normal and was not sufficiently intelligent to cloak her activities. On the other hand, Arthur Treanor was intelligent and shrewd and more difficult to involve.

North Monaghan Flying Column:

In September 1920 I joined a Flying Column which was organised by Comdt. D. Hogan who was i/c of the unit. It consisted of about sixteen men. Tom Coffey, Clones, was one Section Leader and I was the other. The other members were: Matt Fitzpatrick, Frank Tummin, John Donohue, James Murphy, James Winters, Dr. P. McCarville, Phil Marron, Paddy McCarron, Tom Cosgrave, Billy McMahon, Paddy McGrory, Tom Clerkin and James Flynn.

As a column we lay in position awaiting patrols on the Clones/Newbliss road, around Scotstown and near Clogher, Co. Tyrone, but in vain. We took the mails off the Belfast

to Clones train at Smithboro and burned a military repair van at Bragan. The three members of the Column from Newtownbutler, Co. Fermanagh, Matt Fitzpatrick, Frank Tummin and John Donohue, also John McGonnell, expressed their desire to return to their respective units as they felt that while our living quarters were in the Knockatallon Mountains we could not contact the enemy except in units too strong for our strength and equipment. Dan Hogan consented to their request and they immediately left for their units. Early next morning we heard the sound of army lorries coming. Some of them rushed up a mountain road (leading to a shooting lodge of Lord Rossmore) in an effort to cut us off. We all escaped except Dr. McCarville. He and Billy McMahon had stayed the previous night in a house which was nearer the main road than the house we occupied. The Company Captain, John Brennan, who lived up the mountainside, rushed inland (on hearing the sound of the lorries) to guide the doctor and McMahon to safety. He took them by the course we had gone. As they approached a gap in a mountain ridge the military had advanced more than when we had passed, and fired an occasional shot at the three men. The doctor got nervous and took cover behind the bank of a mountain stream and was captured. Brennan and McMahon continued on and escaped safely.

We were also under long range fire when retreating. There was snow on the mountains, not sufficient to completely cover the heather, which made visibility poor and favoured us. We fired an occasional shot on the military to delay their advance as we expected the doctor and McMahon to follow us.

The military burned our living quarters and we all

returned to our units.

Unionist A & B Special Constabulary:

The Unionists of north Monaghan and borders of Fermanagh and Tyrone were bitterly opposed to the I.R.A., so that Volunteers in Unionist areas had to lie low by day. The village of Roslea, Co. Fermanagh, was vacated by the R.I.C. about the end of 1920. In January 1921 a Unionist named Lester held up and searched at least two young chaps whom he suspected of being dispatch carriers for the I.R.A. He had a business premises near the Market House. When Gen. O'Duffy heard of Lester's actions he ordered me to have him shot. Within a short period Lester was fired on from the Market House while he was removing the shutters from his windows at about 8.30 a.m. Lester fell wounded with a lucky shot but quickly crept into his house and recovered slowly.

About a week after this incident Roslea was sacked by Special Constabulary, A & B class. Eight houses were burned or badly damaged and two Catholic men wounded. Two large houses (attached) were commandeered by the A Specials as a barrack. It was occupied by over a hundred armed police under an ex-army Captain. While the attack was in progress a man who was then in the employment of a Unionist named McLean of Smithboro, Co. Monaghan, was shot dead while attempting to batter in the door of the Catholic Curate of Roslea. A couple of others were injured by falling debris or burns. This information was useful to the Captain of Roslea Company (J.T. Connolly) in forming an idea of the type of men mobilised for the attack. Gen. O'Duffy then arranged a meeting of the officers of the Clones, Monaghan Battalions to consider reprisals on the

Special Constabulary. Comdt. Dan Hogan had attended a meeting in Dublin under Gen. Collins and was due home the night our meeting was being held. While at the Dublin meeting he was to seek sanction of the reprisal. On my way to the Roslea meeting I met Comdt. Phil Marron at a crossroads in the Knockatallon Mountains. He was accompanied by Comdt. Frank Aiken, until then a stranger to me. It appears he got his notification of the Dublin meeting too late and was on his way to get some information from Gen. O'Duffy. While our meeting was in progress Comdt. Hogan returned from Dublin and related what had taken place. General O'Duffy had got a free hand in the reprisals. All arrangements had been made prior to Comdt. Hogan's return. We had agreed that four Sergeants of the B Specials should be shot and sixteen houses burned. Two Sergeants and eight houses were allotted to Clones Battalion; Scotstown Battalion-two Sergeants, seven houses and to see that the garrison of A Specials were kept indoors; Monaghan Battalion-one house. A party was to be detailed for each house and all were to start operations at 12 midnight. The men of Roslea Company were to have the area scouted and acquaint me if a patrol of the A Specials was out. The men of Scotstown Battalion were detailed for duty in Knockatallon Hall. I was informed no patrol was out of barracks so I detailed three good Volunteers to see that they would not come out, and they were the first to leave/^{for}their post. It was customary for young men from the poor mountain area to work as farm labourers with the Unionists around Roslea. Due to this fact we had a guide for each party. We all left the hall in time to be in position at about a quarter to twelve. Each party consisted of seven or eight men and each party was armed similarly. A few minutes past twelve the attack

was in full force. Shots could be heard all over the area. The attack was a great success. The seven units and the three men from the garrison post all met at a prearranged point at about 1.15 a.m. From where we stood on a hill we could count fourteen houses burning. One party of mine failed to burn the house in view. It stood on a bare lawn without any cover. The defence from inside was so strong the Volunteers could not venture near it. Comdt. Marron had a similar experience at McLean's of Smithboro.

There was a press report on the attack on the second day following. The headline was as follows: "Four Sergeants of the B Special Constabulary shot at Roslea. Fourteen Unionist houses burned".

This had the effect that Gen. O'Duffy desired. The Special Constabulary and Unionists were made aware that the I.R.A. was strong and efficient and reprisals did not pay.

The two most outstanding features of the attack were: the intelligence and scouting performed by the Roslea Company under Captain J.T. Connolly. They knew the Sergeants of the B Specials, the routine duties of the garrison of A Specials, and had the scene of operation well in hand on the night of the attack.

Secondly, the three members of Knockatallon Company who went into position to keep the strong garrison of A Specials indoors. Their equipment was single shot rifles of an antiquated type with about eight rounds each. They were: James Connolly (Swithcher), James McKenna (Padley) and Frank Caulfield.

Comdt. Matt Fitzpatrick was wounded while attacking the house of a man named Magwood (one of the four Sergeants who were shot, I believe). He was conveyed to a house at Newbliss, where he was attended by Dr. May Kierans. He was eventually captured by military and police and conveyed to Monaghan Infirmary, where he was placed under a guard of the King's Royal Rifles.

Comdt. D. Hogan and the battalion officers held a meeting and decided to rescue Matt. Dr. Con Ward took a leading part in the rescue. His duty as Dispensary Dr. brought him to the hospital daily. He influenced the matron and man in the gate lodge to assist by leaving doors unlocked and giving us the routine movements and duties of the guard.

On the night of the rescue all roads were to be blocked except the main road to Clogher which passed through Bragan Mountains, which was a popular resort for men on the run. For this reason I was to arrange for the safety of wanted men in the Scotstown Battalion area. Paddy McKenna, Capt. of Scotstown Company, was the only man from my area who took part in the actual rescue.

As expected, the Crown Forces on learning of the rescue rushed around the Bragan roads in the early hours of the morning and searched a few houses in isolated spots.

The rescue was a marked success and was very encouraging to the Volunteers.

On the Tyrone border, in the Fivemiletown area, B Specials commenced patrolling by night up roads leading to the mountains and acting rather aggressive to the young men of that area. Therefore I instructed a party from

Knockatallon Company, under Lt. Frank McKenna, to arrange to ambush a patrol. They did so, and shot two of a patrol of four and captured two service rifles and a quantity of ammunition.

Prior to the Truce Crown Forces concentrated on searching houses and rounding up all the men in the mountainous areas. Most of us were, therefore, compelled to sleep underground. In one of these raids Tom Brennan, Vice O/C Scotstown Battalion, and John McCabe, Adjutant, were arrested. Gen. O'Duffy and Dr. Ward were staying in a house at Bragan on the same night. I happened to be on guard that night with a Volunteer who was also McKenna by name. At the break of day we saw three men in uniform coming in our direction at a distance of about five hundred yards. We took cover and fired one round each from our rifles; and the police took cover. I remained on the look-out position and sent the Volunteer to take Gen. O'Duffy and Dr. Ward to safety. The police came out of cover after a few minutes and returned towards Carrickroe Church, which was the point to which all local men were taken.

Some time before the Truce the I.R.A. was formed into Divisions. Gen. D. Hogan was appointed O/C 5th Northern Division - which consisted of three brigades. First Brigade was North Monaghan, with portions of Tyrone and Fermanagh. I was appointed i/c this area. Second Brigade, South Monaghan, Comdt. T. Magee i/c; Third Brigade, North Cavan, Seamus McGauran i/c. First Brigade Staff were: O/C James McKenna (self), Vice O/C Jim Smith, Lisnaskea, Adj. James Winters, Clones, Q/M Patrick McMeel, Bragan.

Shortly after the Truce a Divisional Training Camp was formed in south Monaghan, where all officers of the division had a course of training. Week-end training was then organised for the Volunteers which continued during the summer of 1921.

The National Army was formed in late 1921 or 1922 and all Volunteer officers who joined retained their ranks. The workhouse at Clones was taken over as our first military post.

Shortly after this the Monaghan County Football Team arranged to play the Derry team. I travelled with the team on a Saturday evening, and on arrival at Dromore our cars were halted by Ulster Constabulary who had assembled to prevent a demonstration to welcome home political prisoners. We were accused of coming to join the demonstrators and detained for a few hours and then removed to Derry Prison. While there our comrades in Monaghan arrested loyalists in Fermanagh and Tyrone and held them as hostages until negotiations were made with the British government for our release as the Northern Ireland officials had refused to release us. After a few weeks a British Army Officer had us paraded, called the roll and then conveyed us to the Donegal border where he released us. Amongst those detained were Comdt. D. Hogan, Eamon O'Carroll, Phil Marron and Tom Mason.

While we were in prison Comdt. M. Fitzpatrick was killed at Clones Railway Station when he approached Ulster police who had travelled via Clones to Newtownbutler in error. Comdt. Fitzpatrick walked over to the carriage and asked a policeman for the person in charge. The

constable replied "In the next carriage", and as Fitzpatrick moved on the constable shot him through the back of the head. John McGonnell, who was on the platform with a Thompson gun behind his back, opened fire on the carriages occupied by police, killing or wounding them all.

I served in the army until February 1923 when I joined the Gárda Síochána.

Signed:

James McKenna

(James McKenna)

Date:

20th Oct. 1954.

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Witness:

James Downing

(James Downing)

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