

W. A. 1,080

ORIGINAL

BUREAU OF MILITARY HISTORY 1913-21

BUREAU STAIRS MILITARY 1913-21

NO. W.S. 1080

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BUREAU OF MILITARY HISTORY, 1913-21.

STATEMENT BY WITNESS.

DOCUMENT NO. W.S. 1,080.....

Witness

James Hackett,
McDonagh Terrace,
Fermoy,
Co. Cork.

Identity.

O/C. Fermoy Company I.R.A. Co. Cork,
1921.

Subject.

I.R.A. activities, Fermoy, Co. Cork,
1918-1921.

Conditions, if any, Stipulated by Witness.

Nil

File No. S.2393.....

Form B.S.M. 2

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STATEMENT BY JAMES HACKETT,
McDonagh Terrace, Fermoy, Co. Cork.

I was born in Fermoy on April 27th, 1900. My father was a national school teacher.

I do not recollect that my family had any connection with any of the national or political movements during my boyhood days.

There was a company of the Irish Volunteers in Fermoy prior to 1916, but I was not a member and did not have any interest in their activities. I joined the Volunteers in November, 1918. The membership of the company at that time was about 120. The officers were:-

O/C - John Fanning.
1st Lieut. - "Pa" Gallagher.
2nd Lieut. - Mick Sweeney.

During 1919 I took part in all normal training activities of the company. I did not take part in the raid on the military church party at the Wesleyan Church on September 7th, 1919, but, with numerous other Volunteers who were attending a feis in Fermoy on that Sunday evening, I took part in the counter attack on the parties of the Shropshire Light Infantry who endeavoured to break up the gathering. The Volunteers, as well as members of the general public, used every available weapon to deal with the military, while the students of St. Colman's College entered into the fray, using their hurleys as very effective weapons.

After this incident, drilling went on as usual in the fields in the vicinity of the town, and occasionally we held parades in the open. There was also some musketry practice

with .22 rifles. This was usually held on Sunday evenings. The next event of importance in the area, with which I was concerned, was the capture of General Lucas of Kilbarry on June 26th, 1920. This job was carried out by Brigade officers selected by the O/C (Liam Lynch). I was engaged on scouting duty on the Rathealy road but, during my period of duty there until 6 p.m., nothing unusual occurred and I returned home.

On the night following the capture of Lucas, the enemy forces stationed in Fermoy proceeded to smash up the shops in the town. Practically every shop window was broken and some looting took place. All available members of the Fermoy Company were on duty in the town throughout the night, keeping guard on the premises which had been wrecked and endeavouring to prevent looting. The presence of the Volunteers undoubtedly saved the shopkeepers of Fermoy from much greater losses.

The death, on hunger-strike in Cork Gaol, of Mick Fitzgerald (O/C, Fermoy Battalion) in mid October, 1920, seemed to awaken a big percentage of the people of Fermoy to the fact that they were Irish. There was a big concourse of the general public at his funeral to the church in Fermoy, while all shops in the town closed, both on the evening of the funeral from Cork and on the day of the burial. The members of the Fermoy Company, as well as those of other companies in the battalion and representatives from the neighbouring battalions and brigades, took part in the funeral procession on both occasions, but only a small number of people (about forty I think) were allowed to pass a military cordon on the town bridge across the Blackwater and proceed to the burial ground at Kilcrumper.

The Company O/C (John Fanning), who had been arrested on a number of occasions and imprisoned for short periods following the Wesleyan church raid in September, 1919, had been on the run for some time. He was, however, still carrying out his duties as Company O/C and devoting most of his time to training the members in the use of arms (rifle and revolver). He also visited some of the other companies in the battalion about this time, as he had spent some time in training with a brigade flying column which had been formed in September, 1920.

The first change of officers to occur, as far as I can recollect, took place when "Pa" Gallagher (1st Lieut.) and Paddy Ahearne (2nd Lieut.) were arrested about the end of November, 1920. They were replaced by Mick Bowler and Jack Herlihy, respectively. This was the officer position in the Company until January, 1921.

I think it was sometime about Christmas, 1920, when, with Charley Page, Dave Sinnott, Jack Daly and a number of others, I took part in a raid on the Fermoy Railway Station for Belfast goods. I remember that we seized a considerable quantity of goods which we destroyed, while we dumped several bales of cloth consigned to Daniels, Tailors, The Square, Fermoy. This firm usually made uniforms for the military officers and the cloth seized was intended for this purpose.

Early in January, 1921, the Company O/C, John Fanning, was arrested in a round-up in the Clondulane area. The Battalion Adjutant (Moss Twomey) was captured on the same occasion. This necessitated a change in officers who now were:-

O/C - Mick Bowler.
1st Lieut. - Jack Herlihy.
2nd Lieut. - James Hackett (witness).

The arrest of the new Company O/C on February 1st, 1921, resulted in further changes, the new company officers being:-

O/C - Jack Herlihy.
1st Lieut.- James Hackett (witness)
2nd Lieut.- Dave Sinnott.

The new O/C (Jack Herlihy) was arrested within a week of his appointment. I should have mentioned that all officers had been elected at regular parades of the available company members, but the strength of the unit was growing smaller daily, due to arrests by enemy forces. I think, at this stage, the number of members actually available for duty locally would be in the region of twenty or twenty-five.

Following the arrest of Jack Herlihy, the following officers were appointed at a meeting of the battalion council held in Castlelyons area:-

O/C - James Hackett (witness)
1st Lieut. - Bill Twomey.
2nd Lieut. - Dave Sinnott.

These officers continued to serve until the Truce on July 11th, 1921.

Sometime in March, 1921, information was received from Volunteer Patrick Sheehan, who lived in a house in Barrack Hill, Fermoy, that the owner of the house had eight service rifles and about five hundred rounds of ammunition for same. These were National Volunteer rifles. I immediately made arrangements to interview the owner of the house, as well as to arrange for the removal of the stuff.

This was not too easy, as there was usually a goodly number of British troops - both on and off duty - moving to and from their barracks on Barrack Hill, which was the main route into the centre of the town. However, with the assistance of Jimmy Howard - a friendly jarvey - I arranged to have the guns transported to a temporary dump at Fermoy hospital. With two other Volunteers, whose names I cannot now recollect, I called on the owner of the house about 9 p.m. on a Wednesday night in mid March. When I informed him of our mission, he at first refused but, when advised that we would take himself along, he agreed to surrender the stuff. We packed the rifles and ammunition into two bags, loaded them into the "well" of the sidecar and drove through the town to our pre-arranged dump. This material was, later in the week, moved to Clondulane and thence to Con Leddy at Araglin.

About this time instructions were received to shoot at sight, on a particular night, all British military, whether armed or unarmed. This action was to be taken as a reprisal for the execution in Cork of I.R.A. prisoners of war who had been captured after, I think, an ambush at Dripsey. With seven or eight members of the Fermoy Company and accompanied by Bill Kearney (Glanworth), Jimmy Walsh "Bosco" (Mitchelstown), "Star" Murphy (Doneraile), I took up a position on the Cork Road, south-west of the town. After waiting there for some time, we decided to move into the town, so we came along by the Christian Brothers' Schools to McCurtain Street, but we saw only one enemy soldier, at whom Bill Kearney fired. He ran off, but I

believe he was wounded. The battalion column, which included Con Leddy, "Bronco" Buckley, Mick Keane, Jimmie and Thomas Br^Eannock, Jim Mahoney, Mick Hynes, Owen McCarthy and some others, were in position at the south-eastern end of the town on this occasion, and they opened fire on the only member of the enemy forces they saw. He was wounded. After these incidents, the column and the men from Glanworth, Mitchelstown and Doneraile withdrew from the urban area while the locals returned home.

During the period to the Truce, the enemy posts at Moorpark, Kilworth and The Aerodrome were sniped on numerous occasions while, in addition, the télégraph wires between Kilworth and the Aerodrome were cut, at least, two or three times each week. This sniping and cutting of communications was the main occupation of the members of the Fermoy Company at this time. Amongst those who took part in these activities were:- Paddy Buckley(Araglin), George Page, Jim Sheehan, William Desmond, Jack Casey, Maurice Kenny(Fermoy), Sean Lenihan, James O'Donnell (Kilworth).

About this period, the enemy intelligence machine in the area was not working smoothly, and they apparently decided to send some of their serving soldiers and officers into the country districts, in civilian dress, to act as spies. One of these agents - Lieut. Vincent - was arrested by members of the Watergrasshill Company. On the evening of his arrest, the Battalion I.O. (Jim Coss, Fermoy) received a despatch from George Power (Brigade O/C), who was in Castlelyons area at the time, intimating that there was a bag, the property of the prisoner (Lieut.

Vincent) at Fermoy railway station. This bag was to be seized and the contents passed to Brigade O/C, but it was stated in the despatch that the Company O/C, Fermoy, (witness) should not take part in the attempt to obtain it. The Battalion I.O. (Jim Coss) advised me of the position, but I refused to obey the order to arrange for the capture of Lieut. Vincent's kit unless I took part myself. I felt, at the time, that it would be wrong for me to ask somebody else to do what I was not prepared to do myself, more especially as there was always a strong military guard at the station.

On the morning following the receipt of the information, I made an attempt to get the bag but my plan failed as, on the occasion of my visit, the military guard were on duty. However, next morning, assisted by Jack Daly and John Joe Bulman, I succeeded. In the meantime, I had ascertained from a Volunteer (John Joe Barry), employed in the booking office, that the armed guard usually left the railway station each morning at 7.30 a.m. and returned by a short-cut across a field to their billets in the barracks which were, in fact, at the rear of the railway station. It was only when the old guard reported that the new guard turned out in the barracks, with the result that there was an interval of about ten minutes during which the station was without a guard. I availed of this period to get the prisoner's bag. With Jack Daly and John Joe Bulman, I approached the railway station just as the military guard, going off duty, were crossing the field on their way to the barracks. Bulman, who was unarmed, was left at the entrance gate while, with

Daly, I proceeded to hold up the porters and the booking clerk who were on duty. The latter opened the office in which the bag was - it was, in fact, a camp bed folded up. Daly continued to hold up the staff while I searched the "bag" in which I found a revolver, a Sam Browne belt, a camera, some documents relating to evidence given at a court martial and a note book containing a list of names of contacts which Lieut. Vincent could approach with safety. These were mainly members of the R.I.C., but there was also a fair number of civilians' names listed. Immediately we had seized the contents of the camp bed, we withdrew. I passed the documents and note book to Jim Coss (Battalion I.O.) for transmission to Brigade Headquarters, while I dumped the revolver and Sam Browne belt. We had left the station before the new guard had left the barracks. However, immediately they came on duty, raiding parties left the barracks and my home was raided about 8 a.m., to find that I had gone to work. They then raided my place of employment but there was nothing to indicate that I had been involved in the raid and they withdrew. It was now, I think, about mid May, 1921.

About this time the British were burning the houses of our supporters as reprisals for I.R.A. activities, so it was decided to reciprocate. Instructions were received from the Battalion O/C to burn, as a reprisal for enemy activities, the house of Miss Henly at Mount Rivers. The Company officers, assisted by a number of other members, carried out this job in, I think, early June. The destruction was not a complete success, but the greater portion of the house was destroyed. Amongst those who took part

were:- William Desmond, John Casey, Maurice Kenny, witness (James Hackett) as well as Billy Twomey and a number from Clondulane.

Early in July, 1921, I got a message asking me to pick up some members of the battalion column (Con Leddy, "Bronco" Buckley, Dick Willis and Jackie Bolster) at the Viaduct on the Rathealy road. Having arranged for Paddy Donoghue to patrol the opposite bank of the river Blackwater, I moved out the Rathealy road to the meeting place where I met the above-mentioned members of the column. I was then informed by the Battalion O/C (Con Leddy) that they proposed to ambush a party of British officers who were supposed to be going to visit Brownings - a house on the Rathealy road. The information re this visit had, it appears, been obtained from a letter which had been captured in a raid on the mails. It immediately struck me that this letter was a decoy, as it was most unlikely that the officers concerned would be available to come out for afternoon tea at this time. I mentioned this to the O/C and, after a discussion with the other members of the party, they decided to take no chances. "Bronco", Dick Willis and Jackie Bolster then moved off in the Clondulane direction, while Con Leddy and witness crossed the river by the Viaduct and returned towards Fermoy on the opposite side of the Blackwater. When we looked towards Rathealy road, we saw several lorries of troops moving in the direction of Brownings, while it was later ascertained that more troops from the old barracks had reached the rear of the house via the railway line. The area in which it was proposed to lay the ambush was then surrounded but, luckily, our

party had moved out in time.

During the week prior to the Truce, all available members of the Company were engaged, with members of the battalion column and representatives from Castlelyons, Clondulane and Conna companies, on the destruction of the railway line between Clondulane and Ballyduff. There must have been close on one hundred men engaged on this job which was carried on throughout the night. Practically every chair, fishplate and rail on this seven-mile stretch of railway was smashed.

In the few remaining days to the Truce, there was very little activity in the urban area, but large enemy forces attempted a round-up in the Ballynoe-Castlelyons area. As far as I can recollect, they did not make any captures.

My rank at the Truce was:- O/C, Fermoy Company.

The strength of the company (including prisoners and men on the run) was, approximately, 120.

SIGNED:

James Hackett
(James Hackett)

DATE:

3rd February 1955

WITNESS:

P. O'Donnell

(P. O'Donnell)

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