

ORIGINAL

BUREAU OF MILITARY HISTORY 1913-21

BURO STAIRE MILITAIR 1913-21

No. W.S. 1,122

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BUREAU OF MILITARY HISTORY, 1913-21.

STATEMENT BY WITNESS.

DOCUMENT NO. W.S. 1,122

**Witness**

Thomas Howley,  
Balla,  
Co. Mayo.

**Identity.**

I.O. Balla Coy. Irish volunteers,  
Co. Mayo, 1918 - ;  
Battalion I.O. 1920.

**Subject.**

Balla Company Irish Volunteers, Co. Mayo,  
1914-1921.

**Conditions, if any, Stipulated by Witness.**

Nil

File No. S. 2438

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# ORIGINAL

BUREAU OF MILITARY HISTORY 1913-21
BURO STAIRÉ MILEATA 1913-21
No. W.S. 1122

STATEMENT BY : THOMAS HOWLEY,

Balla, County Mayo.

I joined the Irish National Volunteers in April, 1914, in Balla. The Balla Company then numbered over a hundred strong. When the Redmond group tried to get control the Company broke up early in 1915.

Subsequently I joined the Volunteer auxiliary group (Irish Volunteers) formed at Balla. This consisted of the following :-  
Richard Walsh (organiser), Patrick Fallon, James Reilly, Patrick and John Keville, John E. McEllin, Thomas Murphy, J.J. Moran, J.J. Comber, Michael Golding, Thomas Forde, Thomas Howley, D. K. Roughneen,  
- Gilmartin, Matt Bagenal. About fifteen men in all.

Our group was mobilised in Easter 1916 with all available arms and equipment. There was a project to attack the local R.I.C. barrack, but action was suspended pending reliable news from Dublin. We worked in conjunction with the Castlebar Company, keeping in constant touch during Easter Week 1916.

On Wednesday Easter Week, we heard that hostilities had broken out at Castlebar. On inquiries being made we found that the Castlebar Company was 'standing to' but that no fighting had taken place. The men were awaiting orders from Dublin as the demobilisation order sent out by McNeill had reached Castlebar. During Easter Week the R.I.C. at Balla remained locked up in the barracks and hardly ventured out at all, as far as I remember. Thus we remained 'at the ready' for the remainder of the week.

1916 - On Saturday night following Easter Sunday the R.I.C. authorities in the County acting in conjunction with the High Sheriff (Deputy Lieutenant of the County) called in the greater part of the police from barracks around Castlebar and proceeded to put the town barracks in a state of defence. It was proposed also to organise a group of ....

loyalist civilians into a unit of special constables. These gentry were mostly of the Redmondite faction. This group had a number of rifles (Martini Enfield with some ammunition, about 300 rounds). This was dumped in the town of Kiltimagh. They proposed to get these arms and fetch them to Castlebar to arm the special constables. Four of these men left Castlebar by motor car on Sunday morning of 30th April for Kiltimagh. It was proposed to hold them up at Balla and capture the arms on the return journey. This operation was duly carried out successfully. Dick Walsh was in charge. The men who took part in this were - Patrick Fallon, Patrick Keville, Tom Murphy, James Reilly and Michael Goulding. A large number of men who were around at the time came forward to offer assistance. This was on the 1st May, 1916. The men implicated were subsequently arrested and placed in jail for a period. When this happened there was no information locally as to how matters stood in Dublin except that fighting was still going on.

1916-1917. About October, 1916 I was a member of the Balla unit of the reorganised Volunteers, attended meetings, drills etc., took part in all the activities of the Unit. Was entrusted with the custody of drill books, documents and so forth. From the very beginning to the end of the struggle my house was used as a general dump for all kinds of stuff belonging to the organisation. One great difficulty I had to contend with was that my house was very close to the R.I.C. barrack. During all this early period when Dick Walsh was travelling organiser, on his way down from Balla railway station he would hand in any stuff he had with him. In one way and another we always managed to avoid suspicion.

1917-1918. Full period. Attended drill instructions regularly. Participated in public parade Balla to Kiltimagh in obedience to public drill order issued by G.H.Q. in November 1918. This was in defiance of D.C.R. Act.

Rendered active assistance also in Sinn Fein election in East Mayo of this year. I formed one of an armed Company of Volunteers sent to keep order. This was necessary as some of the Sinn Fein speakers had been stoned at a meeting by Redmondite supporters, and the R.I.C. and Crown Forces were openly on the side of the Redmondites. Some of us carried revolvers and some batons. We carried haversacks with a supply of rations. We were absent from home for about two days. I took up duty in the town of Kilkelly and the people around gave us every co-operation and assistance. It may be of interest to note in passing that there was a large contingent of Volunteers from County Clare on duty in this area. Great strapping fellows. I was appointed Company Intelligence Officer about this time and instructed to furnish daily reports to Battalion I.O. about enemy movements and activities. Also was engaged in confidential dispatch work.

1918-1919. About April or May 1918 I received a quantity of ammunition from Patrick Fallon and Patrick Keville, local officers, with instructions to place in safe keeping. About this time during the conscription crisis I received an order per David Roughneen from Brigade Headquarters regarding a stunt that was to be carried out at Claremorris (then the centre of a big military camp) should the Crown forces attempt to enforce conscription. The proposed plan was this:- A large force of Volunteers armed with revolvers or other weapons would meet at a point outside the town. Then they would separate and enter Claremorris, singly, or in scattered groups. Then each man was to immediately open fire on the first member or members of the Crown forces to be met with. Having shot as many as possible each man would then make his way out of the town from whence the joint body would then retreat as quickly as circumstances permitted. As it turned out, conscription was not enforced and the necessity for this stunt did not arise. I remember passing on this order to Patrick Wade who was one of the men appointed to act with me in this matter.

1919-1920. I now carried out the work of Company Intelligence Officer. Was sworn in as a member of Balla I.R.B. Circle about this time. Did a lot of confidential dispatch work including transmission of reports to Battalion I.O. About this time on the occasion of a sudden raid on Walsh's house, by Crown forces, a bag containing a huge assortment of documents and other material was in the house. There was a lot of material dealing with the Executive Council and G.H.Q. with names, correspondence, orders and proceedings etc. Also a lot of Sinn Fein stuff in connection with the National Loan and so forth together with part of the funds in the form of Bank Notes, ten shilling notes etc.

This bag had to be removed very hurriedly. It was brought to my house by a man named Francis Kearney who was a Lieutenant in "A" Company (Balla Company). Dick Walsh told me this stuff was of tremendous importance and to save and guard it at all costs. "If the enemy got hold of this bag" he said, "they would immediately know the names of all the principal key men in Ireland. Nearly all the secrets of the Movements would be open to them. If they got this it would be a tremendous scoop for the forces of the Crown and a very serious matter for us".

I received this bag about the middle of summer 1920. In November of that year we got information of further raids, so we thought it would be prudent to have it removed. In conjunction with a member of Balla Company I removed it out to a house in the country on a bright moonlight night. We met an armed patrol of R.I.C. on the way, but we contrived matters so that they did not suspect anything unusual. This bag was subsequently sent to Claremorris.

My house also generally contained bundles of An tOglach which were handed in for distribution by William Murphy, Battalion Quartermaster. After these raids myself and the Battalion Adjutant

constructed a secret chamber or receptacle in the house of Dick Walsh, so that on a sudden swoop by Crown forces nobody would be taken unawares.

This was used to hold all kinds of "seditious" material. In December, 1920 I formed one of a party engaged in the removal of arms and ammunition which we received from men of Belcarra ("D" Company). This was passed on to members of the East Mayo Brigade, and was intended to be used in a projected attack on Swinford R.I.C. barracks. There was a large quantity of rifles, bombs, mines, detonators etc.. I remember I carried three rifles on that occasion. We passed through Balla village without meeting with any enemy forces. Among the men present were - Patrick Fallon, Patrick Keville, David Roughneen, William Murphy, James Roughneen, Michael Roughneen, Patrick Wade, Patrick McHugh and others whose names I do not recollect.

About May 1920, I took part in a raid for petrol at Balla railway station. Some people on the platform had to be removed at the point of the gun and locked up while the raid was on. Lieutenant Francis Carney of Balla Company, had to use a ~~Law~~ Webley revolver for this purpose. Anthony Carney, before mentioned (now alas, deceased) assisted him energetically in this matter. Patrick Fallon was in charge of this operation and we all acted under his orders.

About December, 1920, a large quantity of Belfast goods was burned at Balla railway station in obedience to a Brigade order to that effect. About this time also I constructed a secret receptacle or dump in the house where material could be hidden in case of emergency.

One of the duties we had to carry out in those days was doing police work at Sinn Fein Courts. Generally I attended with David Roughneen, Battalion Adjutant. On some occasions we had to carry automatics or "forty fives" where there were people present who would be liable to give trouble.

During the first world war 1914-1918, there was a large force of military stationed at Balla for a period. We got an important item of information through contact with some of these. An officer of this force, while under the influence of drink, boasted about measures which the Crown forces were about to adopt to get even with the I.R.A. In short, it was advance information of the terror campaign which England put in force shortly afterwards. A man was sent to Dublin from the Balla Company to acquaint Michael Collins with this development. Collins did not believe it at first. What he said was: "The enemy would not have the guts to try it". He soon found, however, that the diabolical resources of old England were by no means exhausted. The man who was sent to see Collins about this matter was J. J. Moran, a Lieutenant of Balla Company. A large Union Jack which was proudly floating at the entrance to the demesne where the enemy force was camped, was suddenly taken down and removed, although there were sentries guarding it. It was subsequently burned at a bonfire in Balla on an occasion of national rejoicing when the prisoners were released.

From an early period the Crown forces had to give up sending messages through the post as we were able to secure copies of all correspondence in this area. A very near relative of mine was running the Post Office and she supplied us with copies of all communications. For this reason, all official messages were sent per military dispatch riders. In the garden of the R.I.C. barrack at Balla there was a ring of whitewashed stones to guide planes which sometimes dropped messages and parcels intended for the enemy. Railway officials and postal officials were, generally speaking, very co-operative and helped us in every way.

In or about the end of 1920 I was appointed Battalion I.O. to replace Dick Langan of Ballyglass, former Battalion I.O., who had been arrested by enemy forces. I immediately set about the reorganisation of the Intelligence system in the Battalion area. The system invogue was to have one I.O. attached to each Company, who would report to

Brigade Headquarters. I called a meeting of the Intelligence Officers and gave them instructions on their duties and the best method of obtaining contacts for the getting of all kinds of information. Among other things we had to have an accurate list of all the cars in the Battalion area with their numbers, names of owners and so on with a general description whether friendly or otherwise; a list of people whose homes could be regarded as 'safe' for men 'on the run'; a list of all those who possessed arms, whether shotguns or other stuff. About July, 1920, Crown Forces made a seizure of all arms and ammunition on sale in the shops. As we had advance information, however, we forestalled them in this Battalion area, having seized the stuff beforehand. The I.R.A. was a jump ahead. The I.R.A. Intelligence had contacts with all kinds and conditions of people and often received vital information from the most unexpected sources. One such source was an R.I.C. man named Daly. Daly was supposed to be a very hostile member of the Force, but behind the mask he was really in sympathy with us. The boxes of ammunition I received from P. Keville and P. Fallon (July 1920 were removed by me and Anthony Carney of Balla Company, and passed on to another destination in November, 1921.

In the early days it was part of the routine duty of Volunteers to protect Bank officials who were in the habit of conveying large sums of money. At this time there was no branch of the National Bank at Balla, so the Bank officials would come to Balla from Castlebar on fair days to transact Bank business in a house rented for the purpose. An escort of Volunteers would be provided on both journeys. I travelled to Castlebar on one occasion on this duty. Some of us were armed with automatics. We travelled on that occasion on a vehicle known as a "brake" owned by the late John E. McEllin. Brakes are now a thing of the past, like the 'long car' and the 'jaunting car'. Balla Company included a progressive Engineering class. This class was held about twice a week. We had instructions on demolition work, blowing up and destruction of bridges, taking up of railway rails, laying mines and so on.



We sometimes held a class on the railway line at some quiet spot so that the instructor could give a demonstration of practical methods on the spot. We had a large technical work-book on military engineering which Dick Walsh procured somewhere. Among the men whose names I remember clearly as members of this class was John Keville, Balla, William Murphy, David Roughneen, J.J.Moran. There was also a signalling class which I did not attend. There were two Company signallers - James Goulding and James Roughneen. There were two signallers to each Company in the Battalion who were all under the control of the Battalion Chief of Signalling. The following were members of the I.R.B. Circle in Balla - Thomas Howley, Francis Kearney, David Roughneen, Patrick Fallon, Patrick Keville, Dick Walsh, J.J.Moran. The I.R.B. Oath was personally administered to myself and Francis Kearney by Dick Walsh on a prayer book in his house about the middle of 1920, as far as I recollect.

April 1921 to 11th July, 1921: In May, 1921 it was decided to hold an ambush near Brize, between Balla and Claremorris. Tom Maguire paid a preliminary visit to the scene along with David Roughneen, the Battalion Adjutant, to make a survey of the terrain. Subsequently, owing to a leakage of information and other matters, the project was called off.

I had to do a lot of scouting and Intelligence work during the preparation for Partry (Port Royal) ambush. During this period I assisted at road-blocking and trench cutting operations which extended all over the area. About this time, in conjunction with John Brown of Balla Company I travelled over a wide area to collect money for the I.R.A. arms fund. This necessitated my absence from home for two nights in succession. I passed the money on to Battalion Adjutant who explained that some of it would be immediately needed to purchase supplies for the men taking part in the forthcoming ambush at Partry. Balance was later handed on to Brigade Quartermaster.

Raids on Post Offices were ordered about this time. I took charge of a party in a raid on Balla Post Office. James Reilly, Brigade Adjutant, was in command of this operation and we acted under his orders. There were men from Balla Company and one man from Ballyglass Company.

From May, 1921, matters were getting very hot in the area. Dispatch work and other activities were becoming increasingly difficult as the roads were swarming with Crown forces, particularly after the fight at Tourmakeady. About this time there was a project for an attack on Balla police barracks. For this purpose I supplied a full intelligence report to Brigade I.O. regarding the strength of this place, state of defence, strength of garrison, amount of arms and so on, with a map and plan, showing type of cover in the neighbourhood. This was a strong post, well provided with steel shutters and barbed wire. The preparations were well under way when the Truce intervened, and that was that.

Among the men who were very helpful during the whole period, was a guard on the M.G.R. named Daly who assisted very much in the transport and delivery of arms and other material. It was part of my routine job to remove this stuff from the station in company with the Battalion Adjutant (David Roughneen), Dick Walsh or some other officer.

The last consignment we took away towards the end of the struggle was a large wooden box containing revolvers, mostly Webleys, with one Peter-the-Painter pistol; also gelignite etc. A railway worker who gave loyal and active assistance was William Flanagan who still lives at Balla. On one occasion he delivered an important intelligence dispatch from Dublin H.Q. As I was not at home at the time it was handed in at Dick Walsh's home. From thence it was sent to the shop of Miss McNicholas. Unfortunately this place was suddenly raided

because of a report sent in by a local police spy. When it was read at Military headquarters at Castlebar, the Crown forces made another raid on Balla, in great force, and practically ran amok through the village.

From that time onwards Miss McNicholas had to go 'on the run' until the Truce came on.

Signed:

*Thomas Howley*  
 (Thomas Howley)

Date:

*9<sup>th</sup> March 1955*

9th March 1955.

Witness:

*Matthew Barry*  
 (Matthew Barry)

