

W. S. 1.131

ORIGINAL

BUREAU OF MILITARY HISTORY 1913-21
BUREAU STAIRS MILITARY 1913-21
No. W.S. 1.131

ROINN  COSANTA.

BUREAU OF MILITARY HISTORY, 1913-21.

STATEMENT BY WITNESS.

DOCUMENT NO. W.S. 1,131

Witness

Patrick Burke,
3 Mall Lane,
Waterford.

Identity.

Company Q.M.
and later Battalion Q.M. 2nd Battalion West-Waterford
Brigade.

Subject.

National activities
Magdalstown and West Waterford 1912-1921.

Conditions, if any, Stipulated by Witness.

Nil

File No. S.2423

ORIGINAL

STATEMENT OF PATRICK BURKE,

4 Mall Lane, Waterford.

BUREAU OF MILITARY HISTORY 1913-21

BUREAU STAIRS MILEATA 1913-21

No. W.S. 1, 131

I was born in Durrow, Stradbally, Co. Waterford, in the year 1891. My people were small farmers, and I went to school at St. Augustine's Seminary, Dungarvan, Co. Waterford, where I was a member of the school hurling team.

On leaving school at the age of sixteen, I came to Waterford city to serve my time as a coachbuilder with the firm of Durand & Company. The principal of the firm, Pierce Durand, was a man of strong national views. He was afterwards prominent in the I.R.A. in Co. Waterford.

On arriving in Durand's, I formed a friendship with a man on the job, named Paddy Murphy, a native of Shankill, Co. Dublin. This chap and the apprentices in his father's business had organised a branch of the Gaelic League in Waterford, of which I became a member.

Six months later, a cousin of Paddy Murphy, named Peadar Woods, came on the staff at Durand's. He also was a Gaelic Leaguer and a hurler, and both of us joined the John Mitchel hurling club in Waterford. Peadar Woods was afterwards Commandant of the Waterford City Battalion, I.R.A.

In addition to joining the Gaelic League, I was also a member of the Fianna in Waterford city. I remember Liam Mellows coming down from Dublin on a Fianna organising mission sometime about the year 1912. At the time of his coming, I was a senior officer in the Fianna.

We had about forty young lads as members, all of whom were trained with the one idea of being prepared to take up arms in the fight for freedom when the time came. A very large number of these boys afterwards joined the local Irish Volunteer companies on their formation after the Rising of 1916.

On the formation of the National Volunteers in Waterford in 1913, I joined up and took part in the usual drilling and rifle practice. At the time of the Volunteer split in 1915, I left the National Volunteers, in common with others of my friends in the Gaelic League and the John Mitchel hurling club, and joined the Irish Volunteers. The first Commandant I served under in the Irish Volunteers was my friend, Peadar Woods.

My reason for leaving the National Volunteers was because I had no confidence whatsoever in the Irish Parliamentary Party whose leader was John Redmond, M.P. for Waterford and the acknowledged head of the National Volunteers.

Shortly after joining the Irish Volunteers in 1915, I transferred to Bagenalstown, Co. Carlow, where I continued to follow my trade as a coachbuilder with Paddy Murphy, previously mentioned, and immediately joined the local hurling club.

There was no company of Volunteers in Bagenalstown at that time, but myself, Murphy and a few others managed to organise a company at the Royal Oak, about one and a half miles from Bagenalstown. As there was no Brigade Headquarters in Carlow, we affiliated with the Kilkenny Brigade, the O/C of which was Peter de Loughrey, Kilkenny city, and the Battalion Commandant, a

man named Martin Kealy from the Gowran district.

We had about forty men in the Bagenalstown Company, comprising men from Paulstown, Royal Oak and Wells. Our drill instructor was an ex R.I.C. man named Murphy. We drilled openly and often had skirmishing exercises with the Kilkenny Brigade.

We had a few Snider rifles. I personally owned a serviceable one which I purchased from an old Fenian who lived at the Royal Oak. This rifle was complete with bayonet and in very good condition. The old man gave me thirty rounds of ammunition with it. That same rifle gave good service in West Waterford afterwards. We also had a few shotguns which were fitted with bayonets by de Loughrey's of Kilkenny who were motor engineers. We had in the Company two or three .22 revolvers which we had bought from the Kilkenny lads, together with a small quantity of ammunition.

I was Captain of the Bagenalstown Company. Peter Jones (an I.R.B. man, I think) was a Lieutenant. Seán Byrne of Inchicore, Dublin, also an I.R.B. man, was a prominent member too.

A few months before the 1916 Rising, we had a visit from a "Captain Kelly" from Dublin. This man came to have a look at the Volunteer organisation in general. He gave some instruction in bayonet practice, and I remember him asking us if we could suggest an improvement on the pike used in the '98 Rising. There was no mention of the coming Rising by this man, Kelly.

About three weeks prior to Easter, 1916, Liam Mellows came down to the Brigade to adjudicate on

skirmishing exercises between the Volunteers from Kilkenny and Bagenalstown. This was a fairly large-scale affair and took place at Goresbridge, Co. Kilkenny. It appeared to us then as if things were beginning to stir, but we still had no information of what was to happen a few weeks later in Dublin.

On the Saturday of Easter Week, 1916, I was on my way home to Durrrow, Co. Waterford, for my usual Easter visit to my people when two members of the Bagenalstown Company met me on the station platform and informed me that a Rising was coming off on the following day, Easter Sunday. Our allotted part was the capture of the R.I.C. barracks in Borris, Co. Carlow. In order to throw the District Inspector and local Sergeant of the R.I.C. off the scent (they were both on the platform at the time), I decided to take the train, for which I was waiting, to Kilkenny only, contact the Brigade officers there and return to Bagenalstown by a goods train late that night.

I went to Kilkenny; saw some of the Volunteers there who told me to carry out the orders already given me; so I returned to Bagenalstown again later that night. Immediately on arrival, I issued an order to all members of the Company to be present at 3 p.m. the following day, Easter Sunday, 1916, to take part in special manoeuvres, each man to bring full equipment.

On Easter Sunday, 1916, the men, to the number of thirty or so, turned up as instructed. I told them that we had a clash with the R.I.C. ahead of us and that we were to proceed to Borris, about seven miles distant, in small groups. This was done, mainly by

towpath on the Grand Canal, to avoid notice. A chap named Finn, in charge of a donkey and cart, took the arms by road. We had a mixed collection of rifles and shotguns, with a few .22 revolvers but comparatively little ammunition.

I had despatched the whole Company to Borris with the exception of three men. My object in this was to keep an eye on our ex R.I.C. drill instructor (one of the three), as I was a bit doubtful about his trustworthiness in such a crisis.

We had covered about two-thirds of the journey to Borris when one of the Volunteers, who had gone on ahead of us, returned and said the manoeuvres were off. He was after being told by some Dublin men who had come down by car from Dublin with the countermanding order from Eoin MacNeill. On hearing this, I assumed that the Rising was called off, so I disbanded the men and dumped the arms and ammunition. I never found out who these Dublin men were who brought the countermanding order on that Easter Sunday, 1916.

Thinking the Rising was not taking place, I left Bagenalstown for my home in Durrow on Easter Monday morning, but broke my journey in Kilkenny to make enquiries there as to what was happening in Dublin. The Kilkenny men had no news of the Rising when I reached the city at about 10 a.m. on Easter Monday, 1916, so I proceeded home by train to Co. Waterford that same day.

I first heard news of the Rising having taken place on Easter Tuesday, 1916, when an R.I.C. man called to my home in Durrow, asking if I was there.

On the following day I went in to Waterford city to meet my friend, Peadar Woods, to discuss the situation with him. Having regard to our lack of arms, we didn't think there was anything we could possibly do, and we got no 'lead' from the Volunteer 'heads' in Waterford.

Later in that week, I received a message from my employer in Bagenalstown, telling me that there was a shortage of work and not to return for the present. I learned afterwards that the real purpose of the message was to avoid my being taken prisoner by the local R.I.C. who suspected I was connected with the movement.

I remained at home for some months and, later in the year, took a job in Clonmel where I contacted many men who had been arrested and released from Frongoch.

I finished in Clonmel in December, 1916, and, at the request of my previous employer in Bagenalstown, Co. Carlow, returned there early in the year 1917.

About the summer of 1917 we commenced reorganising the Volunteers again in Bagenalstown. I was the first man to parade the Company on the streets and issue orders after the Rising of 1916. The Company Captain was a man named Devereux, an assistant in a local hardware store. I acted as 1st Lieutenant. The Company strength was about thirty men. We had very little arms, just a few shotguns and small-calibre revolvers. I remember our first raid for arms by a half a dozen of us (disguised) on the house of a farmer named Carton where we got his shotgun. I cannot remember if any of us carried arms on that raid, but possibly a revolver or two may have been carried. This

raid took place very late at night.

I remember about that time that a man named Jim O'Rourke, a painter by trade who worked with my firm, discovered, in a book he was reading, a formula for making explosives. With the idea of putting this formula into practical use, I consulted Brother Francis of the De La Salle Christian Brothers in Bagenalstown. I knew perfectly well that he was very sympathetic towards the cause and that, if he could be of any assistance, he would gladly help us out.

Bro. Francis secured the help of his school science instructor and, with the aid of a mixing drum which I made, the ingredients for making the powder were put together according to the formula. One of the ingredients was potassium chlorate; another was charcoal which we made from burning wood; and the third was, I think, sulphur. This made a highly explosive powder. We made about a stone of the stuff which we carefully stored away for future use.

Sometime late in the year 1917, a man named Eamonn Price came down to us from Dublin on a Volunteer organising campaign. When he heard about the powder we had made, he told us of chaps in Athy who could cast bombs similar to the Mills bombs, but cruder, and worked with a fuse, in which this explosive powder of ours could be used. I told him we might be able to do some casting of the bombs in Bagenalstown if I could see how the lads in Athy did the job.

I went to Athy where, in a disused building, some men were engaged making bomb-casings on the

pattern of the Mills bomb. With a lathe, I made in wood a copy of the Mills bomb-casing and sent it to the men in Athy to make a casting in metal from the Mills bomb type. I cannot remember if any of our home-made gun-powder was sent to Athy subsequently, but I do know that we tried out the stuff on some rocks in the vicinity of Bagenalstown and found it very effective indeed.

In 1918, at the threat of conscription by the British Government, we had a large influx of recruits to our Company and, to supply them with some sort of weapon, we decided to manufacture a quantity of pikes.

The pike-heads were made from hexagon steel (used in making chisels and drills) bought by me from my employer in Bagenalstown. The handles were converted spade handles, cut to about five feet which, plus the head, made the pike about six feet long.

To make the pike-heads I chucked my job and got permission from a local farmer, who had a smithy, to use his forge and, with the help of a blacksmith, I worked during the day making pike-heads. About fifty of these pikes were made and put away in a safe place.

I returned to my job as coachbuilder when the pikes were finished but, later in the year 1918, I got a bad attack of 'flu and returned home to Durrow, Co. Waterford, to convalesce, bringing with me a .22 revolver and the Sneider rifle, with thirty rounds of ammunition, to which I have made reference already.

After my convalescence, a co-operative stores was started in Durrow, and the first assistant employed there was a man named Pat Keating of Comeragh, Co. Waterford, whom I had previously marked out as being

a kindred spirit, having noticed the interest he took in the 1918 elections in Dungarvan, Co. Waterford.

After exchanging views on the political situation, I invited him to see my little store of arms, on seeing which, he remarked, "We will be needing them soon". I became a close friend and comrade of Pat Keating subsequently, and am proud to have been associated with one of the finest fighters for freedom we had. It was fitting, but tragic for us, that he should die in action against the British enemy in The Burgery ambush near Dungarvan on the 19th March, 1921.

Our next job was the organising of a Company of Volunteers in the district. The Company comprised men from Stradbally, Durrow, Bonmahon, The Glen, Ballylaneen, Kilmacthomas, Comeragh and Kilrossanty. Our numbers were few at first; we had only about twenty men all told. Later on in the struggle, the strength increased to permit the formation of separate Companies in Stradbally and Kilrossanty. Pat Keating of Comeragh was Captain of the newly formed Company, with Ned Power of Glen as 1st Lieutenant, and myself as Quartermaster. George Kiely of Ballynabanogue was Adjutant, and Eddie Power of Kilmacthomas, Intelligence Officer. The latter was subsequently Lieutenant of the Kilmacthomas unit attached to the Kilrossanty Company. There were about eight or ten shotguns in the Company and a few .22 revolvers, together with my Snider rifle, in the early stages.

During the year 1919, most of the time was spent organising and raiding for arms. We succeeded in bringing the strength of the Company up to about sixty

men, or perhaps seventy. I think it was about the end of 1919 when separate Companies were formed in Kilrossanty and Stradbally.

With regard to the raids for arms, we got valuable information from our Intelligence Officer, Eddie Power, who worked in the grocery and spirit business of Percy Kirwan (a well-known athlete) in Kilmacthomas. Eddie gave us the names of five men who were said to have guns.

Led by Pat Keating, we raided Flavin's, a miller in Kilmacthomas, one night. He (Flavin) was reluctant to let us in, so we had to force in the door of his house where we collected a rifle and shotgun. We then raided the house of Eddie Power's own boss and got a .22 rifle. The house of a man named Donohue of Kilmacthomas was also raided where we got a revolver. Then we went on to the house of an ex-soldier in the village where we picked up a Winchester rifle. We also got a Winchester rifle from a friend of my father's. These guns were distributed amongst men of the Company, each of whom was responsible for the safe keeping and care of his own weapon.

The first action by our Company in which I took part was in early 1920 when about ten of us under Pat Keating, all armed, burned the evacuated R.I.C. barracks at Bonmahon. A quantity of paraffin wax, which had floated in on the tide, was left in the barracks by the R.I.C. We used this with petrol to set the building on fire.

Shortly afterwards, a party of about thirty of us, with Pat Keating in charge, held up the Rosslare-Cork express train at Darrow and took off the mails.

There were many soldiers on that train but all were unarmed. About half our number carried arms - shotguns, rifles - on that occasion.

Again in early 1920, it was decided to raid a train at Carroll's Cross, about twelve miles west of Waterford city, on the main Waterford-Cork line.

A motor was commandeered, and Pat Keating, myself, Ned Power of Glen and George Kiely drove to Carroll's Cross where we met up with about four or five others. Pat Keating dismantled the phone in the stationmaster's office and, when the train pulled in, we went to the guard's van and pulled out the mailbags which were then taken away for examination. All our party were armed.

In May, 1920, it was decided to attack Stradbally R.I.C. barracks. This barracks was a two-story stone and slated building, the roof of which was much steeper than a normal roof on such a house. The barracks was occupied by five R.I.C. men and a Sergeant. It had steel-shuttered windows and the walls had loopholes for defence.

A short while before the attack, a plan of the village, showing the roads leading to the barracks, points of cover, heights and suchlike, was prepared by me and submitted to George Lennon, the West Waterford Brigade Vice O/C. We were told to be ready at a certain time on the night fixed for the attack and to bring all available arms.

On the night appointed for the attack, I was in position with about six others behind a fence, approximately thirty-five yards in front of the barracks. We were armed with rifles.

The attack opened with gunfire from all the I.R.A. surrounding the building. About twenty-five men, in all, took part, Pat Keating being in charge. Pat was O/C, Kilrossanty Company, at the time.

The garrison immediately sent up Verey lights to summon assistance and replied to our attack with intensive rifle fire. An attempt was made by some of our men at the rear of the barracks to throw "mud" bombs on to the roof which, when they exploded, would blow holes in the roof through which petrol would be thrown to set the building alight, and force the garrison out into the open.

These "mud" bombs were composed of a piece of gelignite with a fuse attached. The gelignite was imbedded in soft sticky clay and the fuse ignited before the bomb was thrown.

Unfortunately, due, I believe, to the peculiar steep slope on the roof of the barracks, the mud bombs did not stick as expected, but fell back instead into the yard of the barracks where they exploded without doing any damage to the building. In view of the failure of the bombs to open up the roof, it was decided to abandon the attack after intermittent firing, lasting about half an hour.

Shortly after this attack, the barracks in question was evacuated and the garrison transferred to Dungarvan. The building was subsequently demolished by us by fire.

Early in the month of August, 1920, Pax Whelan, Dungarvan, the Brigade O/C, came out to Durrow to see Pat Keating and discuss with him the possibility of holding up and disarming a party of R.I.C. who used

accompany mails being taken from the Post Office, Dungarvan, to Dungarvan railway station. These mails were frequently raided en route to the station by the Dungannon I.R.A., hence the R.I.C. escort.

Pat agreed that the job should be done. So, on the morning appointed (the date was, I think, August 8th, 1920), Pat Keating, George Kiely, Adjutant of the Stradbally Company, Ned Power of Glen, the 1st Lieutenant, and myself set out on bikes for Dungarvan, about eight miles distant. We went direct to the railway station where we were joined by four men from the Dungarvan Company. There were, I believe, about six other I.R.A. in the immediate vicinity of the station, but I can only recollect meeting only four on the platform. The time was 8 a.m.

The first of the R.I.C. to arrive on the scene was a Sergeant who came alone on to the platform opposite us. Pat Keating, our Captain, who was dressed in a wireless officer's uniform to allay suspicion, crossed over the railway bridge to the opposite platform and approached the Sergeant who saluted him. Pat returned the salute and then gave the Sergeant the order, "hands up". The latter quickly put his hands up whereupon he was disarmed and marched across the bridge to our side of the platform. He was then locked up in one of the outhouses.

The main party of R.I.C., comprising four men under Sergeant Hickey, came on the scene shortly afterwards and approached the platform where we were, by a gate from the main road. We rushed to disarm them. I held up one constable who was trying to make his way back out the gate and, with the assistance of one of our men, disarmed him. Sergeant Hickey, however, showed fight

by making an attempt to draw his revolver, and it wasn't until one of our lads fired a shot over his head that he threw his revolver on the ground. This same man was captured by I.R.A. and shot after The Burgery (Dungarvan) ambush on March 18th, 1921.

The captured guns, as well as our own guns, were taken away by a car waiting nearby. These were taken care of by the Dungarvan Company. George Kiely and myself went off towards Coolnasmear in the Comeragh mountains where we had breakfast in the house of a friend named James Walsh. I returned home to Durrow late that night.

At mid-day, early in October, 1920, Pat Keating, who worked in the Co-operative Stores in Durrow, came running to me to say he had seen an R.I.C. man cycling towards Lemybrien (two miles north of Durrow) wearing a haversack. We went and got our revolvers and chased the R.I.C. man on bikes. We caught up on him near Lemybrien, held him up and were very disappointed to find he had no gun on him.

On various occasions during the winter of 1920 and early 1921, we lay in ambush at night in the hopes of engaging the enemy, but we were unsuccessful. I recollect one winter's night in 1920 when the Stradbally Company, under Ned Power of Glen, lay in ambush at Carraig an Aifrim, about one and a half miles east of Durrow, with about thirty boys armed with shotguns and rifles. We waited until well after midnight in the hopes of contacting lorry-loads of military who, we learned, were out raiding in the neighbourhood, but we had no luck; no British troops put in an appearance.

Early in February, 1921, I had been in the Lemybrien district with some of the boys and had returned home about 1 a.m. to Durrow. I was in bed when, about 3 a.m., I heard the door of the house being battered in, and the next thing I saw was the room full of soldiers. Captain Thomas of the English regiment known as "The Buffs" was in charge. This man was the officer captured by our boys in the following month at The Burgery ambush, Dungarvan.

I was ordered to get dressed while the military searched the house. They found no arms or documents relating to I.R.A. matters. I was then taken prisoner to Dungarvan barracks where Captain Thomas questioned me about my activities and asked if I hadn't taken part in the Easter Rising of 1916. I said, of course, that I hadn't.

I was put in a cell with five or six others and kept there for about ten days. Our friends outside were allowed to send in food, but the cell was in a filthy state, as no lavatory convenience was provided for the prisoners. Twenty minutes exercise was allowed each day.

We were then brought by lorry with an armed military escort in three lorries to Fermoy military barracks where we were put, four in a cell, and kept for a fortnight. The food was very bad there. We were then sent on to Kilworth military camp, Co. Cork, where we were billeted in wooden huts. There were about one hundred and fifty prisoners in Kilworth, fifty being placed in each of the five huts. After some time there, I was appointed a hut leader.

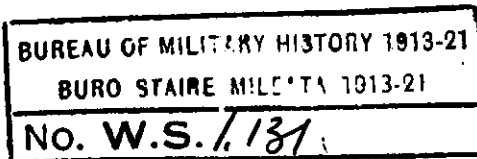
From Kilworth I was taken to Spike Island, Cork, where I was again nominated a hut leader. After two months in Spike, I was transferred by a British destroyer to Beare Island, Co. Cork, where there was a big internment camp.

When in Beare Island, I helped in various attempts to construct tunnels, to enable prisoners to escape. Our contact with friends on the mainland was made through the boy who accompanied the priest saying Mass in the internment camp.

I was detained a prisoner in Beare Island until the general release of prisoners on 1st December, 1921.

SIGNED: Patrick Burke
(Patrick Burke)

DATE: 18 March 1955



WITNESS: T. Gorman
(T.)'Gorman)