

W. S. 1,165  
**ORIGINAL**

**BUREAU OF MILITARY HISTORY 1913-21**

**BURO STAIRA MILEATA 1913-21**

**No. W.S. 1,165**

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**BUREAU OF MILITARY HISTORY, 1913-21.**

**STATEMENT BY WITNESS**

**DOCUMENT NO. W.S. 1,165** .....

**Witness**

**Bernard J. Kilbride,  
Town Hall,  
Clonmel,  
Co; Tipperary.**

**Identity.**

**Brigade Engineer  
North Longford Brigade.**

**Subject.**

**North Longford Brigade  
1919-1921.**

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

**Nil**

**File No. S. 2442** .....

**Form B.S.M. 2**

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STATEMENT BY MR. BERNARD J. KILBRIDE,

Town Hall, Clonmel.

(Formerly Brigade Engineer, North Longford Brigade)

Early, very early, in the year 1919 I joined the Irish Volunteers in Granard, Co. Longford. At the time I was 29 years of age and had just taken up an appointment as Assistant County Surveyor of Longford Co. Council. I resided with my people about one mile from the town of Granard.

At the time I joined the Volunteers in Granard, a man by the name of O'Gara was the Company O/C. Sean Murphy was commandant of the battalion, and, as far as I can now recollect, the late Sean Connolly, who was killed in action in 1920, was the brigade commandant. The present Minister for Defence, General MacEoin, was brigade vice-commandant. In addition to being brigade vice-commandant, Sean MacEoin was also at that time a member of the Longford Co. Council, and, through our associations with the Co. Council, I came to know him intimately. Again, in the course of my duties, I frequently - say, twice a week or so, passed by his blacksmith's forge which was situated on the outskirts of the village of Ballinalee, and I always made it a point of calling in to see him when we discussed the Volunteer movement and its activities, particularly those which affected us locally. I think I can safely say that I had his complete confidence.

The year of 1919 was rather a quiet year so far as Volunteer activity in Granard area was concerned. We had weekly parades of the company, did some drill and training, and carried out the normal routine of Volunteer companies at the time.

In May or June of 1920, a successful operation was carried out when a party of Volunteers under the command of Sean MacEoin raided Longford Artillery Barracks and captured eleven rifles. As I was not present at this operation I cannot give

any first-hand information about it, but its success gave a great fillip to the morale of the Volunteers in Co. Longford.

Later on in the summer of 1920, Arvagh R.I.C. Barracks, on the border of Counties Longford and Cavan, was attacked and captured by a party of Volunteers from the North Longford Brigade. Sean MacEoin was also in charge of this operation. Here again, I am unable to give any first-hand information of the attack, as I was not present. It was, however, in or about this time that Sean Connolly, the brigade commandant, went to organise the Volunteers in Co. Leitrim, where he was killed, and Sean MacEoin became the brigade commandant. It was about this time, too, that I was appointed brigade engineer.

After my appointment as brigade engineer, I attended a course of lectures for brigade engineering officers which was held in Dublin. This course lasted for a few days. The lectures, which were given by George Plunkett and, I think, Rory O'Connor, were held in various places; for instance, one lecture was given in a room at the back of a dairy shop in Camden St., and the next in a house somewhere on the quays. The lectures covered such subjects as the handling and use of explosives, preparation of road-blocks<sup>etc.</sup> On one occasion we were addressed by Dick Mulcahy, Chief of Staff. On my return from Dublin I gave somewhat similar lectures to selected members of each battalion in the brigade area.

The first event of particular note in which I was concerned was the shooting of District Inspector Kelleher of the R.I.C. This particular officer was a bitter opponent of the Volunteer movement, but peculiarly enough, he resided for some time in the Greville Arms Hotel in Granard which was the property of the Kiernan family, whose members were some of our staunchest supporters and sympathisers. For some time before his death, Kelleher slept in the R.I.C. Barracks, but

he continued to visit the hotel regularly, almost nightly, for refreshments - a meal in the dining room, or a few drinks in the bar.

As far as I can now recollect, the information that orders had been given by the brigade staff for the shooting of Kelleher was first conveyed to me by O'Gara, the company O/C. O'Gara asked me if I was prepared to undertake the task. I agreed, and a Volunteer named Joseph Lynch, now resident in Canada or the United States, was detailed to accompany me. On the night of October 31st, 1920, at about 8 p.m., Lynch and I were waiting outside the Greville Arms Hotel. It was dark at the time. We were both armed with revolvers. A Volunteer who was doing scout duty inside the hotel under the guise of having a drink at the bar came out and told us that Kelleher was inside in the bar. We entered immediately and fired at him at point blank range. He collapsed and died almost at once. Needless to remark, Lynch and I lost no time in getting away from the hotel and its vicinity. Later that night, an R.I.C. man got out through a back window of the barracks and cycled to Longford to report the occurrence.

Next day, many of the residents of Granard, fearing reprisals by the British forces, left the town and went to stay with friends in the rural districts. Night came, however, and passed without any incident. On the following night again, that is the night of November 2nd 1920, at about midnight, a lorry load of British troops with an officer in charge drove into Granard, evidently with the intention of carrying out reprisals. We were expecting this. Sean MacEoin had come into the town and we had, under cover of darkness, placed a party of armed Volunteers in various positions. The troops dismounted from the lorry and immediately they proceeded to break in doors or windows of shops we opened fire on them. They were taken completely by surprise and retired to the

R.I.C. barracks where they remained until the following day. I cannot say what casualties, if any, the British suffered in this encounter. There were none on our side.

Up to this time we in Granard had seen nothing of the Black and Tans or of the Auxiliary Division of the R.I.C. At about 11 p.m. on the night of November 4th, 1920, i.e., two nights after the incident referred to in the preceding paragraph, 11 or 12 lorry loads of Black and Tans arrived in Granard from Athlone. They remained for about 3 or 4 hours during which time they terrified the residents by keeping up a continuous fusillade of fire. They also burned down Kiernan's grocery and provision shop and the homes of some Sinn Fein and Volunteer sympathisers. Kiernan's shop and the houses which were burned down were pointed out to them by members of the local R.I.C. force. They did not interfere with the Greville Arms Hotel where District Kelleher had been shot, presumably they thought that they might require this building themselves at a later stage. I understand that the commandant of the Granard Battalion had received instructions from the Brigade O/C., Sean MacEoin, to expect this visit of the Black and Tans and to have Volunteers in readiness to deal with them on the same lines as we dealt with the British troops two nights previously. Through some hitch or other these instructions were not carried out and the battalion commandant was, shortly afterwards, relieved of his post.

Having finished their night's work in Granard, the Black and Tans remounted their lorries and drove to the village of Ballinalee, about seven miles away. They did not get very far with their reprisals in Ballinalee, for they were engaged in the village by a party of Volunteers under the command of Sean MacEoin, but, again, as I was not present <sup>there</sup> that night, I cannot give a first-hand account of the encounter.

In November 1920, almost immediately after these incidents at Granard and Ballinalee, the first flying column of the North Longford Brigade was formed. I joined the flying column at its inception. The strength of the column was twelve men, and we were armed with rifles and revolvers. Sean MacEoin was the column leader. The first action of the column was the preparation of an ambush position at Ardagullin about midway on the road between Granard and Edgeworthstown. Here we placed a mine in the road. This mine was made up of a metal container in which we had placed two or three pounds of gelnite and packed it up with as much scrap iron as it would hold. We then covered the container with a good thick layer of concrete. The method of exploding it was by an electrical detonator worked, of course, from a battery.

We occupied the ambush position for three days, but no enemy forces arrived. This was rather unusual, for this road was frequently used by convoys of British troops or Black and Tans. As the engineering officer, the preparation and the laying of the mine was my responsibility.

While on the subject of mines, I might mention that I believe that the cause of the numerous failures experienced by the I.R.A. with mines and explosives was due to the lack of sufficient technical knowledge by those entrusted with the preparation, laying and exploding of the mines. I do not believe that the failures were, or could be, due to the type of materials used.

On the evening of the third day, it was decided to withdraw from the ambush position, so we took up the mine out of the road and moved off in the direction of Ballinalee. The R.I.C. Barracks in Ballinalee had been evacuated by the R.I.C. earlier in 1920, and after its evacuation it had been destroyed by the Volunteers. A party of Black and Tans had now (i.e., in November 1920) taken over the Post Office in Ballinalee

and had established themselves there. On the evening that we withdrew from the ambush position at Ardagullin, Sean MacEoin decided to take the column into Ballinalee that night and attack this party of Black and Tans.

Under cover of darkness we entered the village and took up our positions. MacEoin's plans were to launch the main attack against the gable wall of the building. This wall had two windows, one upstairs and one on the ground floor. His idea was to explode the mine, which we had brought with us from Ardagullin, against the gable wall and then under cover of our rifle fire to push straw, hay and inflammable material in through the lower window and to set fire to the building. A small rick of turf which had been built by the owners a few yards away from, and opposite to this gable wall, supplied what I might call almost ideal cover for this part of the operation.

When all was in readiness MacEoin carried the mine to the gable wall and placed it on the window sill of the lower window. This had to be done with the utmost caution so as to avoid attracting the attention of any of the occupants inside. When he got back to the cover of the turf rick, I exploded the mine. The explosion blew out the glass in the windows and, while it made a large crack in the wall, it did not knock the wall or any portion of it down. We now opened rifle fire on all the windows of the building except the lower window in the gable wall. Sean MacEoin had gone back to this wall and with great difficulty was getting the hay and straw in through the lower window. He also succeeded in pouring in some petrol, but, try as he might, he could not manage to get the stuff burning properly. He even flung in a hand grenade which exploded inside the window, but to no avail. The place simply refused to go on fire.

The exchange of fire between the garrison of Black and Tans and our party continued until about 3 a.m. The column leader then decided to call off the attack and withdrew the column to the house of a man named Pettit who lived near the village of Boulahy, about five miles from Ballinalee. I cannot say if the Black and Tans suffered any casualties. We had none.

While we failed to burn down or capture this post, the building itself was so badly damaged that the Black and Tans had to evacuate it next day. They then occupied for a few days an old schoolhouse just outside the village, before taking over a large shop in the village itself, where they maintained a garrison of 50 or 60 men until after the Truce in 1921.

December 1920 was, as far as I can remember, rather quiet. There were no activities of particular note that I can recall. I spent that Christmas in my home with my people near Granard. On St. Stephen's Day of 1920, I met the late Mr. James Victory, T.D. He was then President of the local Sinn Fein Court, and in this capacity he had been dealing with a dispute between two Protestant farmers, brothers who lived near Ballinalee, as to which of them owned a particular field or small piece of ground. The decision of the Court was that the case was one for arbitration and, for the purpose of the arbitration proceedings, Mr. Victory wished to have the disputed piece of ground surveyed and mapped. He asked me to accompany him that day on a visit to the farmers as he wanted me to prepare the map. When we got there we met one of the farmers and a son of the other farmer. This son said he would like to bring his father along and that it would not take him too long to get him. He left to do so. After waiting for some time and no sign of the father coming, or of the son returning, Mr. Victory and I were thinking of taking our departure, when a party of British troops came along and both Victory and myself were taken into custody. We were both unarmed at the time. I



believe that the son considered that his father had a poor chance of success in the arbitration proceedings and that, instead of going for his father, what he did was to send word of what was happening to the British forces in Ballinalee, and this was what led to the arrival of the troops and to our arrest.

I was taken to Longford Military Barracks where I was detained for about two weeks. My prison quarters here was a converted stable. While here, I considered plans for escaping and, with this object in view, I managed to secure a screwdriver. It was sent in to me in a cake of bread. With the screwdriver I managed to get the lock off the door, but when I moved outside the door I was spotted by a sentry who raised the alarm and my bid for freedom failed. Next day, I was brought under escort to Athlone military barracks and after about three weeks in Athlone I was sent to the Rath Camp in the Curragh for internment.

The most exciting incident which occurred during my time as a prisoner in the Rath Camp was the escape through a tunnel of over 20 prisoners from the Camp. This happened during the Truce period. The construction of this tunnel was mainly the work of a prisoner named Brady who was a coal miner from the Arigna district. He, of course, received assistance from a few of the other prisoners who disposed of the displaced clay and earth for him. Owing to the need for secrecy, only very few of the prisoners were allowed into the secret that the tunnel was being prepared. The tunnel itself began in one of the huts near the barbed wire fence which surrounded the camp. When completed, its exit was at a point about five yards outside the wire fence. Its overall length would, I should say have been about 20 yards. It took time, patience and hard work to complete it. Its dimensions only permitted of a single file of men to crawl through. This proved a big handicap and prevented the escape of a greater number of prisoners for, on the night on which the escape was taking place, one

prisoner, on reaching the exit, became frightened when he realised there was a British sentry about ten yards away. No amount of persuasion would get him to move out through the exit with the result that those in the tunnel behind him, including myself, had to crawl backwards again into the camp. Almost immediately afterwards the alarm was raised, the British discovered the tunnel and, as far as I know, no further attempts were made at escape from the camp.

I was released from the Rath Internment Camp at the time of the general release of prisoners, i.e., a day or two after the signing of the Treaty in London on December 6th 1921.

I returned to my home near Granard and, shortly afterwards, resumed my duties with the Longford County Council.

I had no further activity with the Volunteers and I took no part in the civil war.

Signed: B. J. Kilbride  
 (B.J. Kilbride)  
 Date: 17 May 1955  
 17 May 1955.

Witness: J. Grace  
 (J. Grace)

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