

ORIGINAL

BUREAU OF MILITARY HISTORY 1913-21
BURO STAIRE MILEATA 1913-21
No. W.S. 1185

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BUREAU OF MILITARY HISTORY, 1913-21
STATEMENT BY WITNESS.

DOCUMENT NO. W.S. 1,185

Witness

William Reardon,
Main Street,
Millstreet,
Co. Cork.

Identity.

Assistant Battalion Engineer, Millstreet
Battalion, Cork II Brigade.

Subject.

Millstreet Battalion,
Cork II Brigade, 1917-1923.

Conditions, if any. Stipulated by Witness.

Nil

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STATEMENT BY WILLIAM O'RIORDAN,
Main St., Millstreet, Co. Cork.

I was born in Millstreet on April 7th, 1900. I was educated at Millstreet National School till I reached the age of 16 years. My father, Jeremiah O'Riordan, and my brother, Mick, were arrested after Easter Week, 1916, and deported to Wakefield. I left school at this time. My brother was released after about six weeks and my father was released with the general release at the end of the year.

When the Irish Volunteers were reorganised in early 1917 I was engaged more or less whole-time as a dispatch rider keeping contact between the various units in the Millstreet area. The strength of the Millstreet unit at this time was about 12/15. Some members of the unit were: Tim Healy, Neilus Healy, Denis Healy, Jack Regan, Jimmie Hickey, Denis Hickey, Con Callaghan, Con (Sonny) Meaney, Mick O'Riordan, Jerh. Crowley and Wm. O'Riordan (witness). As far as I can remember the officers of the company were:

O/C - Con Meaney

1st Lt. - Mick O'Riordan (brother)

Adjt.- Jerh. Crowley.

Parades were held usually on two nights each week in the fields in the vicinity of the town. Occasionally parades under the guise of meetings were held in the Town Hall. The only type of drill carried out was ordinary foot-drill.

All Volunteers took part in organising Sinn Féin during 1917. The officers of the Sinn Féin club were, I think,

James Buckley, Chairman; Mick O'Riordan, Secretary.

The pioneer Volunteers mentioned above were all members of the club.

Towards the end of 1917 the Volunteer organisation had made good progress in the area and Millstreet Battalion was formed. The companies in the battalion were: Millstreet, Rathduane, Cullen, Derrynagree, Rathcoole, Kilcorney, Musherah, Drishane, Cloughoola and Dooneen. The first officers of the battalion were:

O/C - Con Meaney (Sonny)

Vice O/C - I cannot recollect

Adjt. - Jerh. Crowley

Q/M - John Lehane (I think)

I/O - Wm. O'Riordan (witness).

At this time the strength of Millstreet Company had increased to about 60.

When conscription was threatened in early 1918 there was a big increase in the number of Volunteers - the figure rose to 130. The company officers now were:

O/C - Mick O'Riordan

1st Lt. - Jimmie Hickey

2nd Lt. - Jack Regan.

During this period all arms in the area - mainly shotguns - were collected. There were, in addition, a couple of single shot rifles owned by, I think, Jimmie Hickey and Denis Kelliher. These had been purchased by the owners prior to 1916. About this time the company had about 35 shotguns, together with about 300 rounds of ammunition for same. The usual training went on at this time and the new recruits

were being knocked into shape. However, when the danger of conscription had passed a good many of the newcomers faded out and the strength of Millstreet fell to something about 100.

There was no great activity of a military nature during the year 1918, but the approach of the general election in December gave the Volunteers plenty to do on the political side (Sinn Féin). However, there was no contest in this area as the Sinn Féin candidate - Dan Corkery , I think - was returned unopposed.

Up to January, 1919, Millstreet Battalion was a unit of Cork Brigade, which was made up of about twenty battalions at this time. It was decided to divide the brigade into three parts and our battalion became a unit of the new Cork 11 Brigade. There were seven battalions in this brigade, viz, Millstreet, Mallow, Newmarket, Kanturk, Fermoy, Charleville and Castletownroche. There was no change in the officers of our battalion arising out of the reorganisation.

At this time the training was becoming more advanced and the battalion was holding field exercises in which the various companies took part. In this way we were being trained in scouting and the use of cover, while nearly every company had a miniature rifle which enabled the members to get some target practice. There were also signalling classes in each company where the members were instructed in semaphore and morse code signalling.

The general order for the destruction of evacuated enemy posts at Easter, 1920, led to little

activity in the area as the only such post involved was Rathcoole R.I.C. barracks. This was destroyed by members of the Rathcoole Company.

In August, 1920, the office of the Income Tax collector for Millstreet area was raided by members of the Millstreet, Derrynagree and Drishane Companies. The collector - Jack Driscoll - lived at Clonbannin where he had his office. In company with Neilus Healy, Denis Healy, Jack Regan and two or three more from Millstreet, I took part in this raid. We destroyed all papers in the office and seized a shotgun and revolver. John Lehane was in charge of the operation. I cannot remember the names of the men from Derrynagree and Drishane Companies.

When the Brigade Column was formed in September, 1920, three members of Millstreet Company were called up for training. They were: Seán Healy, Paddy Healy and Con Murphy. Seán and Paddy Healy were the drivers of two of the cars in which the military stores and arms captured at Mallow barracks on September 28th, 1920, were removed from the enemy post. They also took part in all engagements in which the column participated during the War of Independence.

On Saturday night (November 20th, 1920, I think) some members of the Black and Tan garrison who had recently arrived in Millstreet threw a bomb into my house and attempted to burn two other houses (Tim Murphy's and Mrs. Lenihan's). They also commandeered drink in several publichouses and held up members of the public, taking any money they had in their possession. This was an unprovoked attack. On the next day a

Brigade Council meeting was held at Con Meaney's, Gurraneduff, and when this matter was discussed it was decided to take reprisal action. I was not present at this meeting but I recollect hearing the matter discussed at the time.

The Brigade Column under Liam Lynch and Ernie O'Malley was in the area and it was decided to take up a number of positions about the town. The column members were operating with the members of the local company, who were mainly employed in a scouting capacity. Some, however, armed and operated with the column men. Positions were occupied in the Market Yard, Fair Field and in Mill Lane about, I'd say, 8 p.m. on the night of November 22nd, 1920. The intention was to shoot up any Black and Tans or enemy forces who might make their appearance.

I was with the party at Mill Lane. The other members were: Jimmie Hickey, Jerome O'Connor (both of local company) with Tom Coughlan and Paddy McCarthy of the Brigade Column. All were armed with rifles while the column men also had revolvers. When we had been in position for some time there was no sign of any activity but suddenly someone dashed past the end of Mill Lane, at the same time firing a shot. We rushed on to the Main St. at the junction with Mill Lane and opened fire on two Black and Tans who were running up the street towards their barracks. The enemy party escaped but when we returned to Mill Lane we found that Paddy McCarthy had been shot dead by the single shot.

We then removed his body to the Market Yard where H.Q. had been established. The body was later taken to Drumnabilla - about $\frac{1}{4}$ mile from Millstreet - where "Miah" Galvin went for Fr. Breen, C.C. When Fr. Breen arrived he administered the last rites. In the meantime I had been sent by Jerh. Crowley (Batt. Adjt.) to commandeer a motor car. I approached Wm. Kelliher, who was the owner of a car, and he volunteered to drive the car himself. We returned to Drumnabilla and put Paddy McCarthy's body in the car. With "Miah" Galvin I proceeded at a distance in front of the car until we reached the Station Road. The car, driven by Wm. Kelliher, and carrying the body of Paddy McCarthy - with Jerh. Crowley and Jerome O'Connor as escorts - then proceeded to Owen Sullivan's, Gurtnavahy, where the corpse was waked.

After about an hour the whole party, including the Brigade Column, withdrew from Millstreet to the neighbourhood of Clara where they billeted. Next night Paddy McCarthy's body was removed to Lismire where he was buried with full military honours. I was not present at the burial.

Following this incident I went "on the run", as did all the other locals who were engaged in the Millstreet attack. This party formed the nucleus of a Battalion Flying Column. They included Jimmie Hickey, "Miah" Galvin, Jerome O'Connor, Neilus Healy and Denis Hickey.

There was no special activity in the area beyond the blocking of roads, cutting of lines of communication and destruction of bridges until early in February, 1921.

Towards the end of the first week in February the Battalion O/C (Con Meaney) decided to ambush a train which usually carried a party of troops between Mallow and Tralee. The site selected for the attack was on the railway embankment about $1\frac{1}{2}$ miles on the Mallow side of Millstreet railway station. On or about February 4th, 1921, the Battalion Column, composed, of, as far as I can recollect, Con Meaney (Sonny), Con J. Meaney, Jerh. Crowley, Tom Crowley, "Neilus" Healy, Denis Hickey, Jimmie Hickey, Jerome Buckley, Wm. O'Riordan, John Lehane, Seán O'Riordan, Mick O'Riordan, "Miah" Galvin, Seán Reid, Jack O'Keefe and Dan Coakley, took up positions at the selected site about 7.30 p.m. The train from Mallow was due to pass through the position before 8 p.m., while the train from Tralee would pass shortly after 8 p.m. as both trains crossed at Millstreet station. In addition to the men at the ambush position, there were also two I.R.A. men at Millstreet station and two more at Rathcoole whose duty it was to board the engine if the military were on the train and to ensure that the driver stopped inside the ambush position. There were also two men with red lights - one outside the extreme end of the ambush site at each end - to indicate to the driver where to halt. If the troops were on the train the whistle was to be blown about a quarter of a mile on either side of the position and the man with the red lamp would then go on to the line and wave his lamp. Everything proceeded according to plan on the night of February 4th or so, but the enemy forces did not travel on either train so all parties withdrew to their homes or billets. The column and other operatives took

up positions at the same places each evening up to and including February 10th, 1921, without result.

We were all at our posts again on the evening of February 11th about 8 p.m. when the train from Rathcoole whistled at the railway arch as it approached our position. This indicated that the military party were on the train from Mallow. Tom Crowley, who was the man with the red lamp at the Millstreet end, immediately went on to the railway line and waved his red lamp as a signal to the driver to stop. The train stopped at the selected position and the British party were called on to surrender. There was no reply, so fire was opened by our party and replied to by the enemy. The exchange of fire lasted about 15 minutes and the enemy then surrendered. All members of the ambush party then came on to the railway line and ordered the British military party to assemble on one side of the train. It was then discovered that one of the British party had been killed while several had been wounded. Fourteen rifles and a supply of ammunition were captured. When the booty had been collected the ambush party withdrew to Kilcorney area.

The men who boarded the train at Rathcoole railway station were Dan Coakley and Jack O'Keefe, while the men who were on similar duty at Millstreet were John J. Hickey and Seán Buckley, I think. The men with the red lamps were Tom Crowley (Millstreet end) and Wm. Kelliher, "The Kaiser", (Rathcoole end). The remainder of the column were extended over a distance of about 50 yards on both sides of the railway and on the high ground of the embankment.

The next engagement in which the Battalion Column took part was at Clonbannin on March 5th, 1921. In the period between the Millstreet train scrap and this date the column had laid in ambush on several occasions without making contact with the enemy.

About 4 a.m. on the morning of 5th March, 1921, while billeted at Lackadofta the members of the Millstreet Column who had already taken part in the train fight on February 11th were ordered to proceed to Clonbannin on the main Mallow-Killarney road about 19 miles from Mallow. Here we met members of the Charleville, Newmarket and Kerry 11 Brigade Columns. They were moving into positions about $\frac{1}{2}$ mile west of Clonbannin Crossroads as we arrived. The Millstreet Column was divided into two sections. I was with a section of six under Con Meaney. We were positioned in Shaughnessy's haggard - south of the Killarney-Mallow road - with a machine gun party. We were behind a sod fence about 150 yards from the road. The members of the Kerry 11 Brigade Column and the other members of the Millstreet Column were on our left (west) and the whole party were extended over a distance of about 800 yards. It was about 8 a.m. when we took up our positions. The Charleville and Newmarket Columns were on the north side of the road. In addition to the main body on each side of the road there were flanking parties at each end of the position, as well as scouts posted at suitable points. A mine was laid in the road at the eastern end of the position right in front of the machine gun section (Liam Moylan and Denis Galvin).

It was about 10 a.m. when two lorries of military passed through the position from the east (Mallow).

They were allowed to go on their way and there was no further activity until about 2 p.m. when the approach of an enemy convoy from the west was signalled. This convoy consisted of two lorries, a touring car followed by an armoured car and a lorry. It drove into the ambush position and as the leading lorry reached our position the signal to open fire was given. This lorry managed to get through the position and got under cover of a farmhouse beyond the eastern end. The touring car was crippled by a burst of machine-gun fire and the armoured car, in an endeavour to avoid the touring car, got ditched. The crew were, however, in a position to continue to use their machine-guns effectively. The remainder of the enemy party left their transport at the opening blast and took cover behind the roadside fences. The fighting went on for about 2 hours, but as we were unable to silence the machine-guns in the armoured car the engagement had to be broken off. The members of the Milstreet Column withdrew with the Kerry 11 Brigade Column to Cullen area and the other columns withdrew towards their home areas. The I.R.A. had no casualties but the enemy lost General Cummings and a number of others as well as several wounded.

During April and May the enemy forces in the area were being continually harassed by sniping. Roads, bridges and railways were demolished, mainly by members of the local companies. The column, however, had in many cases to act as guards for these operations. I think it was about mid-May that a large supply of stores which arrived at Millstreet railway station for the Auxiliaries who were to occupy Mount Leader House

were destroyed by the members of Dooneen Company under Seán Buckley.

About this time the column was divided into small parties - helping to train the members of the local companies throughout the battalion. This work went on until about mid-June when the column was again mobilised for Rathcoole ambush. The columns from Mallow, Charleville, Newmarket and Kanturk were also engaged in this fight. The combined forces were in charge of Paddy O'Brien (Brigade Vice O/C). The combined columns numbered about 120. About 80 were armed with rifles while the remainder had shotguns. The columns assembled at Rathcoole Wood - about $2\frac{1}{2}$ miles east of Millstreet - during the night of June 15th, 1921.

The combined force, which was divided into several sections, took up positions on rising ground to the south of the Millstreet-Banteer road on the morning of June 16th, 1921. They were extended over a distance of about 1,000 yards, along which six mines had been laid at intervals in the road. I was a member of a flanking party of six at the western end of the position. We were about $\frac{1}{2}$ mile from the centre of the position. We were about 200 yards from the road behind a sod fence and were all armed with rifles. The members of the section were: Jimmie Hickey, "Neilus" Healy, "Miah" Galvin, Wm. Kelliher, Tom Crowley and Wm. O'Riordan (witness). As the enemy party, travelling from the east, did not reach our position, I am unable to give any description of what happened along the line. When firing ceased we withdrew to a prearranged spot at the rear of Rathcoole Wood, where we received

instructions to return to our billets.

Beyond sniping of enemy posts, which was a nightly occurrence, there was little other activity in the area up to the date of the Truce on July 11th, 1921.

I should have mentioned that when I went on the run following the Millstreet attack at the end of November, 1920, I was appointed Assistant Battalion Engineer.

Rank at the Truce - Assistant Battalion Engineer, Millstreet Battalion, Cork 11 Brigade. The strength of the battalion at Truce - about 600.

During the Truce I took part in Engineer Training Camps at Knocknagree (Brigade) and Graune (Battalion), where representatives of the various battalions and companies were instructed in the manufacture of gunpowder, construction of mines and the use of explosives. When the barracks was taken over at Millstreet I was one of the staff there and later transferred to Buttevant, where I served until the outbreak of the Civil War. After the evacuation of Buttevant I took the field with the Republican forces and remained active until the cease fire in May, 1923.

Signed: William Reardon
(William Reardon)

Date: 8th June 1955

Witness: P. O'Donnell (P. O'Donnell)
(Investigator)

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