

W. S. 1,255

ORIGINAL

BUREAU OF MILITARY HISTORY
BURO STAIRÉ MILEATA 1913-21
No. W.S. 1255

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

DOCUMENT NO. W.S. 1,255.....

Witness

William McCarthy,
Donomore East,
Lislevane,
Timoleague,
Co. Cork.
Identity.

Member of Barryroe Company Irish Vol's.
Co. Cork, 1917 - ;
Member of Brigade Flying Column.

Subject.

- (a) Barryroe Company Irish Volunteers,
Co. Cork, 1917-1921.
- (b) Capture of Burgatia House, 1st February,
1921.
Conditions, if any, Stipulated by Witness.

Nil

File No. S. 2560.....

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STATEMENT BY WILLIAM McCARTHY,

Donomore East, Lislevane, Timoleague, Co. Cork.

I joined the Barryroe Company of the Irish Volunteers in 1917 and for the first couple of years of my membership was engaged in routine work as a Volunteer. As the struggle developed, my company collected arms and filled cartridges in preparation for the fight we thought was coming.

About the end of 1920 some of our company were called away to a training camp under Tom Barry. I remained with my company.

On the 18th January, 1921, I was ordered to proceed to Kilmeen to join the column. Ml. Sullivan came with me from Barryroe Company. We spent some days at Kilmeen being trained in rifle drill, loading and aiming. There were about 70 in the column. We moved out of Kilmeen, continuing our training as we travelled until we reached Mawbeg between Bandon and Ballineen. A spy was shot on the roadside and his body labelled. We went into ambush near where the body lay, but although many people saw the body and the British must have known it was there, they made no attempt to come near our position. In the afternoon we withdrew to billets. On the following day we lay in ambush about three miles from Bandon, which was heavily garrisoned. Another spy was shot and left on the road, but the British made no move. We moved again and went into billets that night and remained under cover next day. On that evening we again moved near Bandon. The O/C of the Column paraded us and told us of our next job, an attack on a curfew patrol in the town of Bandon.

The Column was divided. One section was to come into the outskirts of the town from the Dunmanway road to cover the military barracks and the Black and Tan post at the Devonshire Arms Hotel which was just across a square from the barracks. Another section was to enter the town from the other end and cover the R.I.C. barracks which was at the top of South Main St. Tom Barry was to lead a party into the town to attack the patrol, while the remainder of the Column occupied houses in South Main St. through which the remainder of the patrol was expected to pass. We evacuated the residents of some houses. I was with the party occupying the houses.

The Column O/C explained the plans to the whole column so that every man knew what was happening. We were all to be in position at exactly the same time. No one was to fire until the Column O/C commenced the attack on the patrol. Then the parties covering the different posts were to open up to ~~fire~~^{hit} down the enemy and keep reinforcements from reaching the patrol. We waited in position until the early hours of the morning but there was no sign of the patrol. The Column O/C fired some shots as a signal for the covering parties to open fire on the posts. The British troops and Tans opened heavy fire all round and we were withdrawn out of the town. We all joined up again later. One of the sections which had gone in by the Dunmanway road had lost one man (Dan O'Reilly), killed when the British troops opened fire from the barracks. His body was later found near the barracks.

On the following night we moved to Innishannon. Here again the Column O/C paraded us and outlined our work for the night. It was proposed to attack the R.I.C.

barracks at Innishannon. The barracks overlooked the bridge which crossed the Bandon river as one enters Innishannon from the Bandon side. It was a two-storey stone structure, well protected with steel shutters and barbed wire.

Innishannon is on the Cork - Bandon road, four miles from Bandon, and British reinforcements were, therefore, available nearby. It was proposed to mine the barracks and send in an assaulting party when the mine exploded. The roads leading into the village would have to be held by armed parties. One party which was holding the Brinny road was thought to be strong enough to attack reinforcements. The parties holding the other two roads were not so strong.

The attack was to commence by the mine exploding, but the mine failed to explode. I was with one of the covering parties and we took no part in any firing. Some of the parties in the village fired a few rounds and we all withdrew.

After Innishannon we moved to Newcestown, and on the night of the 28th we hit up the British posts in Bandon and withdrew without any casualties. We then moved to Ahiohill where we billeted.

On the 1st February, 1921, we moved towards Rosscarbery and during the night or the early hours of the next morning we moved into a British loyalist's house known as Burgatia House. The Column O/C told us that we were to attack Rosscarbery R.I.C. barracks and it was proposed to lie up in the house all day and move on to attack Rosscarbery that night. We brought a land mine with us. The inmates of

the house were made prisoners and the owners was tried for being a British agent. I was not at the trial but I know he was sentenced to leave the country, which he did. After taking over the house, sentries were posted and we had strict orders that we were not to show ourselves. Early in the morning three workmen arrived and were made prisoners. Later the postman arrived, and after a talk with the Column O/C he was allowed to ^{go} on his way. We were told that the postman had sworn on the bible not to reveal our presence to the garrison in Rosscarbery or to anyone at all.

During the afternoon scouts reported that everything was quiet in Rosscarbery, but about 4 o'clock our sentries reported the presence of Black and Tans near the house. The Column O/C called the Column together at the rear of the house between two outhouses. He explained our position: the Tans might have us hemmed in at three sides and the Atlantic was at our back. He ordered six, of which party I was one, to take up position at the upstairs front windows but not to show ourselves. The Tans opened fire on the house and commenced to advance up the front avenue. We held our fire and a further six riflemen were sent to join us. One of the sentries (Brennan) was wounded in the leg. When the Tans got near the house we got the word to fire. At this time every man had picked his target and there were few misses. The survivors of the Black and Tan party retreated down the avenue.

While this was going on the Column O/C had ordered small parties to be ready to move east and west when we opened fire. They moved under cover of our fire as the Tans retreated and took up position on rising ground away from

the house, from where they opened fire on the Tans. Under cover of the fire of our party outside we commenced to move out. I remember there were four of us in the party which was last to leave - Tom Barry, Whelton, Cullinane and myself. The four of us crept along a ditch and the firing was still heavy as we crossed a gap singly and at intervals to avoid the bullets. We moved quickly to Carrigrue near Clonakilty, where we rested, and on that night we moved to Kilbree. The British were searching the country for us.

I think at that time I was allowed to go home. I could always work at home although I did not sleep in my own house and I avoided being caught in any round-up. Although I was with the Column the British did not appear to know. They did not come seeking me.

We moved round the country avoiding British search parties and on the 9th February we were in the vicinity of Skibbereen. The Column O/C and a small party entered the town and shot up the garrison while we held the roads leading into the town. A couple of soldiers who were taken prisoners were later released but nothing happened with the outposts.

From Skibbereen we moved north towards Drimoleague, and on the 12th February, 1921, we were paraded and told that Drimoleague R.I.C. barracks was to be attacked. The plan was to use a land mine and then rush the breach. The mine was fixed on a frame which would stretch across a wall surrounding the barracks and lean against the barrack wall.

I was one of a party under Ted Sullivan, Vice O/C

of the 3rd Brigade. Our job was to block the main road on the Bantry side of Drimoleague and hold the road block against reinforcements which might be sent from Bantry. The attack opened in the town and the garrison sent up Verey lights for reinforcements. The mine used on the barracks was not a success. Firing was going on for some time when we saw the headlights of four lorries coming from Bantry. We had the road well blocked with harrows and other farm implements taken from the fields. We waited for the lorries to come to our position and as we waited the firing in the town died away. We held on until the lorries were at the road block firing Verey lights and then Ted Sullivan told us to retire quietly. We moved back without being seen and then ran at the double across country for about 7 miles. We then slowed down and proceeded to Castledonovan. Tom Barry and the remainder of the Column were in billets just beyond Castledonovan and we were to join him there.

We had just passed Castledonovan Crossroads when four lorries of British troops came up behind us. We moved along the sides of the road, keeping close in to the fences. The British did not fire or attempt to follow us up. I couldn't understand how we had not been seen. We joined Barry and the remainder of the Column, who were having tea when we arrived. When Tom Barry got the report of the British having been so near him, he barely gave us time to take one cup of tea before he called the whole Column to move off. We "fell in" and moved across country all day without a stop and it was well into the following night when we halted.

In the early days of February, 1921, the British

had murdered many of our men. All the killings had been carried out by the Essex Regiment under Major Percival.

On the 23rd February, 1921, a Column was assembled at Newcestown near Bandon. We were divided into sections and armed with revolvers as well as rifles. The Column O/C explained the job. We were to enter the town of Bandon and shoot every member of the Essex Regiment we met.

I was with a party of six under John Lordan. The six were: Mr. Kearney (R.I.P.), Dinny Brien, Jacky Neill, Jim Doyle of Kilpatrick, Con McCarthy (R.I.P.) and myself.

We entered the town by the Dunmanway road. The Column O/C was to lead the main party of about thirty in from the Cork road end of the town and tackle a patrol which it was reported would be round the town. We advanced towards the barracks and on the way we met a naval wireless man, who was taken prisoner by us. One of our party was sent back up the road with the prisoner. We came to the back of the barracks and we overheard a woman speaking to two soldiers (Essex). We took them up the road, ordering the woman inside the fence for her safety. We explained to the soldiers our orders about the Essex Regiment and then we shot them. One of the soldiers tried to resist; he struck a Column man in the mouth.

We retired up the Dunmanway road, taking the wireless operator with us, and made across country. I remember we halted in a farmyard. The wireless operator was assured of his safety and given a letter to take to Major Percival warning him that as he had murdered our men, the Essex would be shot at sight whether armed or unarmed. I cannot remember seeing Tom Barry before the wireless operator was released. We returned to Newcestown where the Column was demobbed.

I left for my own area with Ml. Deasy and Wm. Motherway. That night we stayed at Murphy's of Carhue, Timoleague. In the morning we made off to cross the Clonakilty road. I passed a brother of mine who was working in a field with his employer, a Protestant farmer. I proceeded along the road, which was bordered with high hedges. I noticed nothing. After the Truce the farmer told me that on the morning I passed him I had passed between two columns of Essex who were moving along through the fields. We could not see them and they could not see us.

After some weeks I was recalled for Column service. When the Column assembled it was the biggest Column we ever had. We went into ambush position at Shippool in the Kinsale area. The objective was a large convoy of British troops which was expected to leave Kinsale. We lay in ambush all day without a sight of the British. Towards evening a plane flew over searching for us. We lay very close to the ditches until it passed over. We moved out of Shippool and lay low all the following day. During the next night we moved in the direction of Ballyhandle. We moved in sections, and I think I should say here that when the 3rd Cork Brigade Column under Tom Barry moved, they moved in military order. There was always an advance guard, flankers and rear guard. We were never allowed to feel too safe. Any man who slipped up in scout or guard duty was put off the Column. We arrived at Ballyhandle during the night and were sent to billets. Sentries were posted and scouts sent out. The Column was on the alert.

In the early hours we were called out and ordered to proceed to the crossroads at Crossbarry. Arriving at the

cross we were assembled in a field and sections told off. I was in John Lordan's (No. 2 section). The Column O/C explained the position to us. The British were coming at us in strength from several directions. It was proposed to meet them on the Bandon side of Crossbarry Cross. Two farmers' houses close together overlooking the road would be occupied, and orders were given for the preparation of the houses for defence. Two land mines would be laid in the vicinity of the farmhouses, one to get the first lorry and the other to get the third or fourth. No. 2 section, of which I was a member, was to occupy the front yard of the first farmhouse coming from Bandon, with No. 1 section on our right and turned to our right flank. No. 3 section was on our left. Other sections were further out and on our flanks, with one section to our rear.

We went into position and, while waiting, filled sandbags to give us protection if we had to fight from the road. We had at this time no plan for retreat. Flor Begley, the Assistant Brigade Adjutant, who was a piper, was standing by in the yard behind us to commence playing when the fight started. For a long time we could hear the hum of lorries. We had strict orders to keep under cover as surprise was to carry the attack. The lorries approaching from Bandon were nearer to us than the Columns coming from other directions. The lorries came on slowly. The first lorry had just passed us; the second lorry was opposite us when the first lorry stopped. The lorries were not over the mines and there was shouting from the troops as they commenced to jump from the lorries. Some one of our men had shown himself.

We had orders not to fire until the Column O/C fired

his Peter the Painter, which we would recognise, but something had to be done. I didn't hear the Peter. John Jordan, our Section Leader, gave the order to fire. At the same time the sections on our right and left opened up. Some of the troops fired back. Many of them went down with our first shots and others tried to scramble over the fence opposite our position. We were making every shot tell. The firing died down and we were ordered out, to collect arms and ammunition and prepare the lorries for burning. Some of the troops who had got across the fence took cover behind a ditch further back and opened up. Liam Deasy went after them with a party and they were soon silenced. We had some of the lorries ready for burning when firing broke out on our left. We returned to our positions. As another British party came from the Kinsale direction (or station) they were beaten off. Next firing opened on our right away in the fields where a section had been protecting our flank. That, too, died away. Then firing started in our rear. This firing was very heavy and reinforcements were sent up the rising ground to our rear. Soon the firing faded out and we got orders to move back towards our rear. We reassembled to the rear of our ambush position, still keeping our flanks covered. We had captured a lot of rifles and a Lewis gun with a number of spare pans. The British abandoned about ten lorries.

The Column moved north, and shortly after we commenced to move the British were seen reassembling. The Column was ordered to line the ditch and give them three rounds rapid. Three of our men had been killed and several wounded. Another Volunteer and myself carried Dan Corcoran of Newcestown, who had been badly wounded in the

side, from Crossbarry to Kelleher's of Crosspound. We then moved on to Crookstown.

That night we heard that Charlie Hurley, our Brigade O/C, had been caught in a round-up near Crossbarry before the fight started and had been killed when attempting to fight his way through. On the following night we marched to Clogagh and gave Charlie a military funeral. Three revolver shots were fired over the grave.

The next operation on which I was engaged was an attack on Rosscarbery. We were assembled about three miles from the village. The Column O/C explained the job to us. The sections were picked. Four officers were to bring a land mine to the barrack door; all men would remove their boots to ensure silence. A group under the Column O/C, armed with revolvers, were to rush in immediately after the explosion. A further party of six or seven with fixed bayonets were to follow up. The roads leading into the village were to be blocked just before the attack. I was holding the road to the south of the village so I cannot speak of the actual attack. When the attack was over and the barracks burning we were all assembled. I did not see any prisoners.

We moved out of Rosscarbery for Rossmore where we rested next day, and that night we marched back to Newcestown. I then returned to my own area.

The British had been executing I.R.A. men taken under arms and, as a reply, we had been ordered to arrange to shoot up all British forces at 12 noon on the 14th May. I was picked for Courtmacsherry, and on the day before all arms needed for the job were brought to a spot near

Courtmacsherry. The plan for the day was that five would enter the village to shoot up any troops in sight, while six riflemen would open fire on the military post as cover. I was one of the six riflemen. Before noon we moved quietly down to the back of the post and waited. We heard firing in the village. We opened up on the post. The garrison replied but their fire was passing over us. The firing in the village ceased and some of the riflemen slipped away. A man named Crowley and I held on to give our men in the village a chance of getting away. When I thought they were clear we moved back, and when I looked at the spot where we had been in cover a cloud of black smoke rose from it. It appeared to have been a rifle grenade. We retreated across the hills overlooking Courtmacsherry, where we were joined by Jack Driscoll, Con Lehane and Minihane who had been in the village. Dan Santry (R.I.P.) and Michael Coleman, who had also been in the village, had retreated towards Butlerstown. We retired west from Courtmacsherry, crossed the Courtmacsherry-Timoleague road back to the top of Grange. We remained there for a while and then dispersed. One soldier was killed and two wounded in the village.

My next term of service with the Column was the last before the Truce and in a way the toughest. The days had got long and Percival, the O/C of the Essex, was moving his Column across country, sleeping in houses, barns or fields. We were mobilised for Clogagh to move from there to join the Column at Drinagh. Each company in our battalion was to send some men along. I started from my own area to travel to Clogagh alone. Another member of my company - Dan Santry - had gone on before me. I was armed with a revolver, which I carried in my hand. Percival's

men did not take many prisoners. When I reached Inchy Bridge I heard sounds of marching. I dived into a dyke. As I lay in the dyke Percival's Column came along from the Timoleague road. I lay in cover until they had passed the bridge. I then took to the fields but missed the path to Clogagh and wandered into big fields. I listened for a while for the bark of a dog and, following the sound, reached a house. I knocked up the people of the house, who told me I was 3 miles north west of Clogagh. I had been lost. I reached Donovan's of Clogagh to learn that the Column men from my battalion had left. I overtook them further up the road, where Seán Hales, our Battalion O/C, had six horse-drawn cars ready to drive us to Drinagh, 24 miles west. I told Seán Hales of my experience at Inchy Bridge and that I thought Percival was moving south. He just said Barryroe (my parish) would surely get a doing. We moved off towards Ahiohill and as we went towards the village we saw a light in a window. A woman came from the house and stopped the cars. She asked if we had seen the British; they had been in and out of her house all night and about 100 of them were sleeping in a field at the back. We turned the cars and went another road to Ballygurteen. We stopped for refreshments in Ballygurteen and then moved to Cliff House, and having passed the cross we saw four lorries of military travelling on the Rosscarbery-Dunmanway road towards the cross. The hedges were high and we proceeded on our way, looking back to make sure that the military did not turn at the cross and follow. Luckily they kept on for Rosscarbery. We reached the village of Drinagh as the people were going to first Mass. We went into billets about half a mile to the west of Drinagh, where we awaited the rest of the Brigade Column to assemble.

I cannot remember if Tom Barry was with us at Drinagh. I do remember that we were in ambush position when Tom Barry joined us and after holding our position for some time we were withdrawn to billets. While in billets we were warned that large British forces were moving against us. Guards were strengthened and extra precautions taken as we moved. We moved towards Glengarriff and then turned for Coomhola. We remained in billets all day and in the evening, led by the Column O/C and a local guide, we started climbing the mountain in single file. There were at least 100 in the column strung out up the face of the steep mountain. We climbed for about three hours and when we reached the top we moved across in file, each man tagged on to the man in front. Near dawn we started descending on the other side. The descent was worse than the climb. In places we had to swing from rock to rock. We descended into Gougane Barra, reaching Cronin's at about 7 a.m. We were fed at Cronin's. Tired as I was, I was posted as sentry on the road junction Macroom-Bantry-Gougane Barra for most of the day.

We left Gougane that night and came through Ballingeary. There was a story that Percival had gone to the west and another was that when Percival learned we were out of the net, he left his men to follow on and took the train back to Bandon.

There was little Column activity just before the Truce and we were sent back to our areas for some time to get Columns going in the battalions.

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Witness:

James Jobson
(Investigator)

Signed:

Date:

William McCarthy

22-9-55

(William McCarthy)

22.9.55