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ORIGINAL

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

STATEMENT BY WITNESS.

DOCUMENT NO. W.S. 1,282

Witness

Michael Cummins,
1 Connolly Row,
Dungarvan,
Co. Waterford.

Identity.

Adjutant Stradbally Company
Fourth Battalion, West Waterford Brigade.

Subject.

Fourth Battalion, West Waterford Brigade,
1913-1923.

Conditions, if any, Stipulated by Witness.

Nil

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ORIGINAL

BUREAU OF MILITARY HISTORY 1913-21
BUREAU STAIRS MILITARY 1913-21
No. W.S. 1282

STATEMENT BY MICHAEL CUMMINS,

1, Connolly Row, Dungarvan, Co. Waterford.

I was born at Island, Stradbally, Co. Waterford, in the year 1894. My people were farmers and I was educated at the local national school. My earliest connection with any national movement was when I joined the National Volunteers in Stradbally in, I think, the year 1913. We had about forty men in the local company at the time and did our drilling with wooden guns made for us by the local carpenter, Reg Cunningham. When the split in the Volunteers came in 1915 the Stradbally Company may be said to have broken up and no attempt to get a Volunteer company going was made until about the latter end of 1917.

When the 1916 Insurrection started, it is safe to say that we had no organised Volunteer unit in Stradbally at all. We knew nothing of what was happening in Dublin until news of the Rising trickled through during Easter Week, 1916. No arrests were made in our district following the Rising.

On the organisation of an Irish Volunteer Company in Stradbally in late 1917, John Joe Cummins of Carrigahilla, Stradbally, was appointed Captain. I was appointed Adjutant. We had from twenty to twenty-five men on the company roll, but only two or three had any guns. These few had shotguns.

The year 1918 was taken up with the usual drilling and occasional parades. We had a marked increase in

numbers when conscription was threatened by the British Government in 1918, but when the threat was over our numbers decreased again to about the thirty mark.

The arms' position was still bad. I'm sure there were no more than half a dozen shotguns amongst the lot of us at that time, and a .22 rifle or two. Ammunition, also, was very scarce.

In common with other companies of Volunteers in West Waterford, I took part in canvassing and stewarding on behalf of Sinn Féin candidates in the parliamentary elections of 1918. There is nothing much else of interest to relate in connection with that year.

Early in 1919 I obtained employment in the Co-operative Society in Durrrow, where I met Pat Keating of Comeragh who was Captain and afterwards Commandant of the Kilrossanty Battalion, West Waterford Brigade. Pat was later killed in action at the Burgery ambush, Dungarvan, Co. Waterford, on March 19th, 1921. He was a very fine soldier and an able leader.

Nothing much occurred around the Stradbally area during 1919-1920. We tried to ease the arms' position by raiding houses of the gentry in the district. A few guns were picked up as a result of these raids, which were carried out at night by a few of us. We never met with any opposition on these raids. To help out our intelligence service we carried out repeated raids on mails. Postmen were held up and the post bag taken. Any letters which were addressed to people known to be, or suspected of being, hostile to us, were passed on to Brigade H.Q. for examination. The Brigade O/C was Pax

Whelan, Dungarvan. Whether any useful information was ever found in the captured correspondence I cannot say, as I was not on the Battalion or Brigade Staff at the time.

My first recollection of being called to action was sometime early in 1920; I do not remember the month of the year, but I do remember being mobilised for armed guard on one of the roads leading to Stradbally when an attack on the barracks was planned. Others of the company were also on duty that same night, but nothing happened. The attack did not materialise. I remember hearing afterwards that a strong military force was out near our area that same night and, as a result of that, the proposed attack was abandoned.

As a result of our constant night raids on houses for arms we got together about a dozen or more shotguns and a few rifles. Dumps were constructed to safeguard the guns. These dumps were two in number; one was situated in the cliffs on the sea coast near Island, Stradbally, and the other in a ditch. The latter was made from boxes covered with felt to keep out dampness. When inserted into the ditch and covered with brambles, they were impossible to discover except by those few of us who knew exactly where the dump was. These dumps were regularly visited by us and the guns oiled and kept in good condition.

Engagement at Durrow, March, 1921:

My first major engagement with the enemy took place on the 3rd March, 1921, at Durrow, about four miles west of Stradbally, Co. Waterford. Along with about fifteen men of the West Waterford Active Service unit under the

command of George Lennon of Dungarvan, I lay in ambush at Ballyvoile, which is about a mile south west of Durrow on the coast road, at approximately eight o'clock in the morning. I was armed with a rifle on the occasion. The ambush position overlooked the railway line running from Cork via Dungarvan-Ballyvoile-Durrow-Kilmacthomas and on eastwards to Waterford City. At the time the British authorities were having great difficulty in getting jurors to attend the law courts and the train we were about to hold up was one specially chartered to convey jurors to Waterford City for court duty there. It was anticipated that when the news of the non-arrival of the jurors' train reached the British authorities, military would be sent out from Dungarvan (six miles to the west of Ballyvoile) along the coast road and we would be ready to ambush them at Ballyvoile. The position was ideal from our point of view. We were on high ground on the railway line overlooking the road, with good cover and an excellent field of fire. The British, on the other hand, would be forced by our fire off the road down towards the sea cliffs, where they could be picked off quite easily by us, who knew the locality well.

The train with the jurors came along from Dungarvan at the time appointed (about 8 a.m.). It was stopped by one of our lads waving a red flag on the railway line. The jurors were taken off and the train allowed to proceed to Durrow, where it was hoped word of what happened would be sent back to Dungarvan. Not very long after the jurors' train had gone on and while we lay along the railway line waiting for the coming of the military along the coast road from Dungarvan, another train came in sight from the direction of Dungarvan and we had

to get back quickly off the railway line and under what cover we could. As this second train passed we saw it contained military and we had a crack at them. They replied to our fire from the windows of the carriages and continued on out of our view going towards Durrow station a mile to the north west of our position. I cannot say definitely whether we inflicted any casualties on the British in the hurried exchange of shots, but none of our men was hit.

George Lennon then held a conference as to what was best to do in the circumstances, whether we would hold on and wait for the military we expected to come out along the coast road from Dungarvan or whether we would follow up the train we had just attacked and hope it would pull up at Durrow, when we might come into contact with the military who would, possibly, detrain at Durrow. The latter course was decided on. Our party split up into two groups and went cross country towards Durrow station, one group along the ground west of the railway station and the other east of the line. The latter group consisted of seven or eight men, comprising George Lennon, the O/C; Mick Mansfield, Vice O/C; Paddy Joe Power of Glen, Stradbally (another member of the Active Service Unit); myself, and four others whose names I cannot recall. Our party were within a quarter of a mile or so of Durrow railway station when we spotted about twenty to thirty soldiers near Walshe's publichouse, which is about a hundred yards or so from the station. We moved a bit closer and opened fire on the enemy at about two hundred yards range. All of us were armed with rifles but our supply of ammunition was not what one could call plentiful. I don't think I had more than about forty rounds, if I had

that. The British, of course, dived for cover and proceeded to reply vigorously to our fire.

Meanwhile, our second party had come into action on the west side of the station where further enemy troops were located. It transpired subsequently that the military who had detrained at Durrow were reinforced by a large party who had come out the coast road from Dungarvan and who were the very fellows we had hoped to ambush at Ballyvoile earlier in the day. When they did arrive at Ballyvoile we were gone in pursuit of the military on the train, which was decidedly bad luck for us.

Firing between us and the British went on intermittently until well into the afternoon, when another train pulled in to Durrow from Waterford City and over a hundred soldiers got out and joined in the attack. These latter brought a machine-gun into action out in the open, but the machine-gunner was soon knocked out by our fire and further attempts to man the gun were equally unsuccessful. Notwithstanding the terrific odds in their favour - at least ten to one - and their superior equipment, the soldiers were gradually forced by the fire of our two small parties to take up a position in the Co-operative store which adjoins Durrow railway station. From here they "flaked" away at us without doing any damage.

The question now arose as to whether the Co-operative store could be rushed and taken by assault. The enemy was securely entrenched there and it would seem difficult to dislodge them or force a surrender when we hadn't as much as one grenade to throw at them. In addition,

the terrain over which we would have to advance for a close-quarter attack was altogether unsuitable. It was flat ground offering little cover.

The main reason why a direct assault was decided against was the old, old story, too little ammunition. Indeed, some of us had scarcely a few rounds left, which can be readily understood as we had been in action off and on for over four hours. At any rate, George Lennon decided to pull out and break off the engagement. It was a sore blow to us as we knew the soldiers hadn't much stomach for continuing the fight, but we also knew that our lack of ammunition would undoubtedly tell heavily against us in the final assault.

On the orders of our O/C we therefore retired westwards towards the Comeragh Mountains, where we obtained some badly needed food and rest.

I regret I am not in a position to give any details of the casualties suffered by the British. We had one of our lads wounded in the leg, but not too seriously. His name was Andy Kirwan of Bonmahon, Co. Waterford.

Attack on military at Ballyvoile and Ballylinch:

My next serious engagement with British troops occurred on 29th April, 1921. I happened to be at home at the time, sick and in bed, when George Lennon sent a message to me to come quickly to Ballyvoile Cross, which is about five miles west of my home at Island, Stradbally. I got ready and, bringing my rifle and a revolver, met Lennon and another member of the Active Service Unit - Mickey Morrissey of Dungarvan - at the appointed venue. The time was about 11 a.m.

Lennon told me that he had got word that a train carrying military would be passing soon from Waterford to Dungarvan and that he proposed to have a crack at them at Ballyvoile. We got into position on high ground at Ballyvoile overlooking the railway line, and when the train came along we noticed military in some of the carriages and had a few shots at them. The train did not stop. We then made our way across the fields eastwards for about three miles until we reached a railway crossing at Ballylinch. By now our party had increased to nine. There was George Lennon, Mickey Morrissey, Paddy Joe Power of Glen, Stradbally, Billy Gough, Ned Power of Durrow, Jack Harris of Stradbally, the two Walsh brothers of Kilminion, Stradbally, and myself. Ned Power of Durrow was an ex British soldier. Most of the men had rifles, the remainder had shotguns. On second thoughts, I am now pretty certain that all of our party were armed with rifles. On reaching Ballylinch level crossing, George Lennon split the party in two on the east and west sides of the railway line. He placed myself and Billy Gough about 150 yards from the level crossing on the north side of the railway. We closed the gates at the level crossing and tied on a red flag to stop any train coming along and lay concealed in ambush.

It would be early in the afternoon when a train approached from the west going towards Waterford City. Although we didn't know it at the time, it appears that the military came out from Dungarvan, having had word of the attack we made earlier in the day at Ballyvoile. This party of soldiers crossed the country towards Durrow and boarded a train at Durrow, which was proceeding to Waterford and was the train now pulling to a stop at Ballylinch. Before the train had actually reached the

level crossing gates some of our lads fired on soldiers who were on the coal box at the engine. One of the Tommies was wounded, his rifle dropping from his grasp. The train came to a halt at the gates and fire was opened by our lads on the far side of the train to where I was. Most of the soldiers got out of the carriages and took cover under them on the side of the train nearest to me. I started sniping at these soldiers. The next thing I noticed was a door of a carriage opening and what appeared to be a soldier with a tin helmet and khaki coat at the open door. I fired at him but he didn't move. I chanced a second shot, but still no move. I ducked low and went about thirty yards nearer my target, when suddenly a burst of machine-gun fire splayed the corner I had just left. I saw the smoke of the machine-gun coming from a carriage window, took dead aim at it and fired. No more machine-gun fire came from that window.

Next thing I heard was the bursting of grenades near where I lay. These were probably rifle grenades being fired by the military. I kept looking for about ten minutes or so for a sight of a soldier and then spotted the heads of two soldiers between the fence and the railway. I gave them rapid fire and the heads disappeared. I remained alone in my position for another five minutes or more (it seems I had not heard the whistle blast given by George Lennon as the signal to retreat) and then saw a British officer walking up by the carriages using binoculars. I fired at him. He gave a kind of jump and then fell back.

By this time I had a feeling that our lads had pulled out as the shooting had stopped. In fact, they had done so some time previously but I didn't know it.

As I had only five rounds of ammunition left and seeing no sign of or hearing no sound from our fellows, I decided to retreat. I made across country to a friendly house of people by the name of O'Donnell of Leamybrien, where I had something to eat. I did not make contact with any of our boys until later that evening when I met up with them near Kilrossanty at the foot of the Comeragh Mountains and about seven miles west of Ballylinch.

As a result of the 'scrap' at Ballylinch we had one man - Paddy Joe Power - wounded in the neck but not too seriously. I am certain that the British suffered heavily in killed and wounded but I cannot now say to what extent.

Military cycling column ambushed at Ballyvoile:

On the 6th June, 1921, we heard that a cycling column of soldiers had come in to Stradbally and it was decided to ambush the column at a place called Kilminion, about three miles west of Stradbally on the main Dungarvan road. Thomas Keating of Comeragh, a brother of Pat Keating previously mentioned by me, was in charge of the ambushing party, which numbered about thirty men. The British column was about the same in number. Before the ambush came off I protested against it being held as our men were very badly armed, having only a few rusty old rifles and some shotguns with very little ammunition. I myself had a shotgun and five rounds of buckshot.

We lay in ambush for a few hours on either side of the main Dungarvan road at Kilminion, when word reached us from scouts that the British were taking the coast road, via Ballyvoile, back to Dungarvan. We hurriedly made across

country and had just reached Ballyvoile when I heard shots and saw some of our lads running to take up their positions. I then saw two soldiers going quickly up the road towards where our men were. (They had seen one of our chaps crossing the road and that's how they knew we were there). The two soldiers I have referred to fired on Jack Cummins of Ballyvoile as he was climbing over a wire fence on the railway embankment. I saw Cummins fall. He was shot dead, through the back. I fired on these soldiers, forcing them to take cover.

While this was going on, the main body of military had left the road and had taken to the high ground overlooking the railway line, from where they fired on our men who were clearly visible from the height.

The engagement lasted about half an hour. I retreated towards the cliff edge of the sea as my ammunition was all gone. In this ill-advised engagement we lost one killed and one wounded. I do not know whether the British suffered any casualties.

Immediately after the fight I returned home to Island, saddled a horse and rode through the nearby village of Stradbally, where I was seen by the local R.I.C. Sergeant. That same evening I went to devotions in chapel at Stradbally. As we left the chapel we were surrounded by Black and Tans. One of them identified me as having been in the ambush earlier that day, and being arrested until the R.I.C. Sergeant said he had me on horseback in the village at the time of the ambush. I was, thereupon, released. A lucky escape!

Later in the month of June, 1921, we had a

clash with enemy forces at Carroll's Cross, about three miles east of Kilmacthomas, Co. Waterford. About fifteen of us lay in ambush and 'had a go' at a convoy of military in three or four lorries travelling from Dungarvan to Waterford. I had a carbine rifle on the occasion.

The night was dark when the military came along. We gave them a burst of fire as they drove by our position. They replied to our fire with rifles and machine-gun, but the lorries accelerated and proceeded on their way to Waterford.

I omitted to refer earlier to another minor engagement with British forces which took place in January, 1921. The military had gone into occupation of Lady Dawnay's house, which is situated about a mile west of Kilmeaden, Co. Waterford, and is adjacent to the main Waterford-Dungarvan road. The ground surrounding the house was well wooded so it was decided to attack the garrison. Early one morning about fifteen of us, armed mostly with shotguns, approached Lady Dawnay's house under cover of the trees and 'had a go' at the military. The latter replied with rifles and we had a 'set-to' lasting about half an hour. This was more in the nature of a nuisance attack on our part to keep the garrison jittery. We pulled out towards Gardenmorris, Kill, about three miles south east, when I decided to go on in to the village of Kilmacthomas to get some provisions for our lads. I was then Battalion Quartermaster. Meanwhile, the boys had run into a much superior force of military at Gardenmorris and were heavily engaged. By great good luck they managed to escape without casualties.

During the months of May and June, 1921, I was busy collecting a levy imposed by order of the brigade on farmers and business people in my battalion area. This levy was intended for use in purchasing arms and ammunition. As a rule the people paid up, but there were a few farmers who objected and refused to pay. In such cases I took cattle in lieu of payment and used the cattle to feed the men. Upwards of £300 was collected by me and sent to the brigade.

During these months I was actively engaged with many men of the battalion blocking roads, cutting telephone wires and doing everything to hinder the enemy's movements. This continued right up to the Truce in July, 1921.

When the British forces began to evacuate the barracks in our area our lads took over the workhouse at Kilmacthomas, from where I operated as Battalion Quartermaster.

Sometime about January or February, 1922 (I am not clear on the date), about ten of us went to Waterford and lay in ambush at Dunkitt, about two miles north of the city, for a convoy of Black and Tans who, we learned, were leaving Waterford for Dublin to be demobilised. I had a rifle, a revolver and three grenades. Paddy Paul, O/C of the East Waterford Brigade, was in charge of the operation, which, of course, was unofficial as the Truce was on at the time. We waited on the roadside at Dunkitt from 4.30 a.m. until 10.30 a.m., when the Tans came along in nine Crossley tenders and an armoured car. Paul had given strict orders that we weren't to shoot unless compelled to do so.

The lorries came up to my position and pulled up at a road block we had erected. We jumped out from behind the ditch, shouting "stick them up". The Tans did so. They were then lined up on the roadside and searched for arms. Some of our lads got the tenders and armoured cars going and all drove off to the Kilrossanty area, where the captured arms and ammunition, of which we got a large quantity, were dumped.

On the outbreak of the Civil War in June, 1922, I took the Republican side, and after the capture of Waterford City by Free State troops I took to the hills and joined the Column. I was with the Column one night in the vicinity of Kilmacthomas and was in bed very ill from bronchial pneumonia when I was taken prisoner by Free State troops, who dragged me out of bed and brought me to Kilmacthomas and from there to Ballybricken Gaol, Waterford. After two days in Ballybricken a doctor was brought to me and I was quite well again in about five weeks.

Prisoners in Ballybricken had the use of a hallway for recreation which led to a prison gate. This gate had a plate lock and four bolts. There was a small garden between a sentry box and the gate. Michael Veale, a fellow prisoner, stole a file from a carpenter working in the gaol. With the file he made a spanner from a piece of scrap iron lying around, and with this spanner I took the bolts off the gate one night, thus enabling Paddy Joe Power, Michael Veale, myself and twelve others to escape. We got to a friendly house at Kill, and from there the party broke up and I made my way home to Stradbally.

Later on I linked up again with the Column in the

neighbourhood of Kilrossanty and had engagements subsequently with Free State troops at Garanbare, Kilmacthomas and other places in West Waterford.

I was in the Nire Valley with the Column when the order to dump arms was given. On the cease fire order being issued I left the country in 1924 and went to England, where I stayed for over ten years. I returned to Ireland in 1936, living first in Mallow, Co. Cork, and then in Dungarvan, Co. Waterford, where I reside at present.

Signed: Michael Cummins
(Michael Cummins)

Date: 10-11-55
10/11/55.

Witness: T. O'Gorman
(T. O'Gorman)

