

ORIGINAL

BUREAU OF MILITARY HISTORY 1913-21
BURO STAIRÉ MILEATA 1913-21
No. W.S. 1287

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BUREAU OF MILITARY HISTORY, 1913-21.

STATEMENT BY WITNESS.

DOCUMENT NO. W.S. 1,287

Witness

Joseph Noonan,
Tuamgraney,
Co. Clare.

Identity.

Member of Irish Volunteers, Tuamgraney,
Co. Clare, 1914 - .

Subject.

Tuamgraney Company Irish Volunteers,
Co. Clare, 1914-1921.

Conditions, if any, Stipulated by Witness.

Nil

File No. S. 2589

Form B.S.M. 2

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STATEMENT BY JOSEPH NOONAN,

Tuamgraney, Co. Clare,

Formerly a member of East Clare Flying Column and of "B"(Scariff),
Company, 4th Battalion, East Clare Brigade.

I was born on 20th August, 1895, in Tuamgraney. My father was a National Teacher and he had a family of ten children. I never was too fond of the books and on reaching the Sixth Standard my father gave me up as a bad pupil and got me a job as a postman in the local Post Office in which I remained for three years until I went to work on the McLysaght Estate in Raheen. I was employed in Raheen until I was obliged to "go on the run" during the "Black and Tan" war.

A Company of Irish Volunteers was first formed in Tuamgraney early in 1914. There were about thirty members all of whom were fellow workers of mine in Raheen. My brother, Pat, was the Company Captain and our drill instructor was a man named John Hogan, an ex-British soldier and a Boer War veteran. We met for drill about twice a week in the ball alley in Tuamgraney and in one of O'Brien's fields in Drewsboro. A number of timber guns was obtained and with these the unit made good progress in learning all the rudiments of drill except that we got no training in the mechanism of a rifle nor had we any target practice. After the Redmondite "Split" the Company broke up.

The Volunteer Movement was not revived in our part of Clare until the East Clare Election in July 1917. The presence in the constituency of most of the men who took a prominent part in the Rising and the victory of the Sinn Féin candidate in the election made a big impression on the young men in our district and when a new Company of Irish Volunteers was started in Scariff in July or August 1917, upwards of fifty or sixty men joined up. I am not clear now as to the names

of the officers of the Company. The training and drilling which went on was on the lines of the old Tuamgraney Company.

There was a lot of land trouble in our part of Clare in which the Irish Volunteers became involved towards the end of 1917 and early in 1918. For generations there had been a demand in the district for the division of a number of big ranches owned by members of the Ascendancy class who detested everything that the Volunteers stood for. It was only natural that the Volunteers were only too anxious to back up the popular agitation and, with the approval of their own Brigade Officers, took the leading part in it. Cattle were driven off these ranches and in some instances the lands were forcibly taken over and ploughed for tillage by small holders and landless men. The British Government, whose supporters were being attacked, took stern action to deal with this agitation. Clare was declared a Special Military Area and military law was imposed. Thousands of soldiers were drafted into the county and detachments were quartered in each town and village. Curfew hours were introduced under which it became an offence to be out of doors after eight or nine o'clock at night.

In March, 1918, Michael Brady, Michael Hogan, Willie Moroney and myself, all Volunteers and residents of Tuamgraney, were arrested one night in Drewsboro for failing to observe the Curfew regulations. We were brought before the O/C. of the Military in Scariff, a Captain Rigby. None of us was in an apologetic mood and a heated interview took place between ourselves and the Captain. He ordered us to be handed over to the R.I.C. in Scariff. Next morning Hogan and Moroney were released and Brady and myself were transferred to Ennis. There we were brought before a Military Court which ordered us to be discharged but, as

we were leaving the barracks we were again arrested by the Military and taken to Limerick Jail where there were about half a dozen other Irish Volunteer prisoners. Following an attempt to get us to wear prison clothes and to treat us as criminals we went on hunger strike. After a few days we were all transferred to Dundalk Jail.

In Dundalk Jail there were a lot of prisoners from all parts of Ireland including Dick McKee of Dublin, Michael Brennan and Ernest Blythe of Meelick. Like them, all of the men who had been brought up from Limerick, were given treatment as political prisoners and, after three months detention, Michael Brady and myself were released. I reported to the Company Captain on my return home from prison and resumed my association with the Scariff Company which still was carrying on drilling about twice a week. I have an idea that it was not until 1919 or maybe 1920 that the Company was given instructions on a rifle and even then this was confined to lectures on the care and mechanism of this type of weapon. A few police carbines had been captured in the Brigade area and these were passed around from Company to Company for demonstration and lectures.

I was not involved in an armed attack on the British Forces until September 1920. On the 18th of that month I got orders from Tom Wall, Vice O/C. of our Battalion, to report that evening at Long's barn in Coolawn between Tuamgraney and Bodyke. On going there I found about fifty men assembled. They came from over all East Clare and were under the control of Michael Brennan, Brigade O/C. I was given a Martini-Henry rifle and a quantity of ammunition. Most of the men present were armed with rifles and shotguns.

The party was divided into three or four sections and about 8 o'clock in the evening we set out for Scariff. I was in the last section. On our way a local taxi-driver came along in his car behind us and was travelling at a very slow speed when the car began to back fire. No sooner did this happen than a youthful Volunteer discharged a shot accidentally. The section stampeded and scattered into the adjoining fields. Myself and Denis Nihil, Tuamgraney, were aware of what had happened and went after the others to rally them and bring them back. This took perhaps fifteen or twenty minutes and in the meantime the other sections continued their march. Scariff was about a mile away and by the time my section reached the bridge on the outskirts of that town the shooting had started, the local R.I.C. barracks was being attacked.

At the bridge we met a small armed party who had been told off to guard the road from Tulla, the British Military Headquarters for the county about ten miles away. As we arrived Austin Brennan, who was second in charge of the attack, came down from the village and enquired for me. He directed me to go over to the National Bank where his brother, Michael, was waiting for me. I did as I was told and on meeting Michael Brennan he directed me to lead him into Moloney's yard through the back of the village. Moloney's house was next door to the R.I.C. barracks on the chapel side.

When we arrived in Maloney's there was a group of Volunteers there before us. Among them whom I remember were Joe Clancy, Martin McNamara, both ex-British soldiers, and Michael McMahon (Brod) later killed by enemy forces on Killaloe Bridge. In the house they had a quantity of petrol and paraffin oil. Brennan gave orders to these men to get on the roof and to break a hole on

the roof of the barracks and then took me with him to two other positions, Rogers and Conways, on the Square overlooking the barracks and about 150 yards distant. In these two houses our men were firing on the barracks from the windows. Tom Wall, Scariff, was in charge of one house and of the men I can only recall Peter Flannery who was at a window firing with a Lee Enfield rifle. I asked him to let me have a few shots. (I had left my Martini-Henry with Austin Brennan at the bridge). I fired about half a dozen rounds at the barracks and then left the house to go out the back. The "Cease Fire" order was given about this time, roughly half-past ten, and the attacking party began retiring.

I joined up with some of the Tuamgraney men, Denis Nihil, Joe Malone and Michael Brady and stayed the night in my uncle's house in Caherhurley. Next day I returned home and learned in the village that Michael Brennan and his brother Paddy were still in the vicinity. They had received word that the R.I.C. and Black and Tans intended to destroy the Town Hall in Scariff that night and had made up their minds to deliver an attack as soon as the incendiaries would begin their work. At nightfall with about eight or ten men armed with rifles and revolvers, Brennan had positions occupied at the entrance to the Dock Road in Scariff. This position is about fifteen yards on the Ennis side of Scariff Bridge under which flows the River Graney. On the opposite bank begins the town of Scariff and the Town Hall is on the high ground fifty yards from the river. From the Dock Road we had a splendid view of the Town Hall and could see, when it was lighted up, what was going on inside. The range was about 100 yards. In the group waiting with me that night were Michael and Paddy Brennan, Sean O'Halloran, O/C., 4th (Scariff) Battalion, Paddy McDonnell and Michael Brady of Tuamgraney, Arthur O'Connor of Scariff, and a few

others about whom I'm not too sure. About 9 o'clock scouts reported that the "Tans" were coming down from the Police Barracks. Fifteen or sixteen of them came along and entered the Town Hall. They must have brought oil with them as they at once began pouring it on the floor and other parts of the Hall. Not much time was allowed them for this work when we opened fire on them. In less time than it takes to tell they had beaten a hasty retreat. As they were running back to the barracks an armoured car came down the street to meet them and covered their retreat. This did not prevent Arthur O'Connor, who had gone into the town, from emptying his revolver into the fleeing policeman. The "Tans" did not venture out for the rest of the night and there were no other attempts at reprisals.

Between the two engagements - the attack on the R.I.C. barracks and the incident at the Town Hall - the I.R.A. suffered no casualties. There were some casualties among the enemy but I cannot say what they were. After the engagements I was advised by my superior officer to "go on the run" as the British Authorities were contemplating a round-up of a number of I.R.A. men and I was one of them. The R.I.C., however, vacated their barracks in Scariff a short while later.

Just a week after the Scariff happenings the following members of the 4th Battalion, under the Commandant Sean O'Halloran, mobilised in Malone's yard in Tuamgraney and marched to Callaghan's, Soft Bog, near Bodyke :- Tom Wall, Vice Commandant, Alfred Rodgers, Michael McMahon (Brod), Peter Flannery, Joe Malone - all of Scariff; Denis Garvey, Caherhurley, Jim Tuohy, Tuamgraney and myself of Tuamgraney.

At Callaghan's we met Michael Brennan who had with him, Jim Hogan of Galway, James and Michael Hogan, Coolreagh, and six or seven others from the Bodyke and Caherhurley Companies. The total strength of the party was almost twenty men. We set out for Broadford about ten miles away, and arrived at the outskirts of that village around half past eight that night. At Broadford we had a bit of a delay as Tom Wall got a fainting fit and had to be left behind under the control of "Brod" McMahon. We then worked our way along by the back of Broadford village and entered the Main Street where it joins the Killbane road. At this point, Martin Vaughan, who had been sent into the village earlier to ascertain if any R.I.C. or "Black and Tans" were out of barracks, reported to Michael Brennan that some R.I.C. were drinking in "Will" O'Brien's "pub" and that two "Black and Tans" were out with girls.

We waited for a short time after hearing Vaughan's report and about 9 p.m. we saw the R.I.C. leaving O'Brien's and coming towards us. We moved to meet them, walking lightly down one side of the street. When the police were within a few yards Michael Brennan advanced on to the middle of the road and opened fire. To the best of my belief he shot dead the R.I.C. man who was in the middle of the trio. More shots were fired but the other two police escaped, though one of them was wounded in the hand. The attack took place opposite a forge into which we thought the two police might have escaped. A thorough search of the forge and of the ground at the rear was made but there was no trace of them. Our party then moved out of Broadford.

A few days after, the Brigade O/C., Michael Brennan, was put out of action when he was badly wounded in the hand during the course of an attack on R.I.C. at O'Brien's Bridge. I was not with him that

day but spent a good deal of time with him while he was recovering from his wound. He had come into the Bodyke district to rest and as he was then the most sought-after man by the British in County Clare as well as probably the most prominent I.R.A. officer in the county he was provided with an armed guard during his period of incapacity. His injury did not prevent him from presiding over meetings of the Clare County Council of which he was the Chairman. Many of the members were also "on the run" at this time and in consequence the meetings which took place about once a month had to be held in places that were considered safe from raids by the enemy forces. The work of protecting these meetings became the task of about twenty men all of whom, like myself, were "on the run" too. Our instructions at the time were that we were to regard ourselves as a "Flying Column" to be ready for action at all times for any kind of a job which the Brigade O/C. ordered us to do. We also were told to stay within convenient reach of one another, and when not carrying arms we were never very far from where they were concealed. Each man more or less selected for himself the houses where he could be sure of a meal or a bed though there were many occasions when it was safe only to sleep in the open or in our clothes in some hay barn.

Between October, 1920 and the end of that year, members of this "Flying Column", reinforced by the local Companies, waited in ambush in a number of places between Killaloe, Scariff and Tulla for an R.I.C. District Inspector named Gwynn who was regarded by the I.R.A. as a proper scoundrel. He was in charge of the Killaloe sub-district and used to make periodic visits of inspection to the R.I.C. stations in Scariff and Tulla in a private car accompanied by a Crossley tender full of armed police. I can remember having been in position at three different places for this job, Flynn's Mill, Raheen, Högans Cross between Tuamgraney and Bodyke and "The Sweep", a

quarter of a mile outside Tuamgraney on the Killaloe road. Each time the enemy party travelled by another route. As far as I'm aware this officer survived the trouble and left the area when the British evacuated.

In November, 1920, I was staying in the Cratloe district in a vacant building called Ballymaurice House. Around the 20th of that month the Acting Brigade O/C., Austin Brennan, crossed into Limerick with a force of I.R.A. men from the East and Mid-Clare Brigades to intercept R.I.C. Commissioner Smyth who was expected to be travelling by train from Dublin to Limerick. This operation was ordered by G.H.Q. in Dublin and the train was to be held up at Killonan Station, four miles outside Limerick. Every man in the party which Austin Brennan took with him was armed with a revolver and, if my memory is correct, the detachment was to operate in conjunction with the Mid-Limerick Brigade under Dick O'Connell.

I was one of the few "wanted" men left after this party went to Limerick. I had in my charge six rifles and a good quantity of .303 ammunition, all of which was kept in one of the upstairs rooms of Ballymaurice House. I think it was about the third day after the crowd had left for Limerick that a British Military plane made a forced landing in the Cratloe district. It came down in a field owned by Mr. Punch. In the same field and about two hundred yards away from where the plane came to a halt was a quarry, the top of which was twenty or thirty feet above the level of the field.

I did not actually witness the landing of the plane which took place about mid-day, but soon afterwards I went to Hogan's house near at hand and got full details there of what had happened.

One of the workmen, Ned O'Brien, was in the I.R.A. and he told me that the pilot of the plane was unhurt because soon after landing he left the machine and went to the main road where he was able to send word of his position by some passer-by to the military in Limerick. I got the loan of a bike and with a young lad went off to investigate how matters stood as the idea was forming in my head that there might be a machine gun in the plane which might be captured. We turned back as soon as we saw lorries coming from Limerick.

On returning to Hogan's I discussed with Ned O'Brien the possibility of attacking the plane and the guard which we now knew would be placed over it for the night, and agreed that it was an opportunity which should not be missed. O'Brien went off to get the assistance of the local Volunteers. In a short while Jack McNamara, Moyhill, accompanied by Bill Lynch, two O'Halloran brothers and about six others arrived at Hogan's. Two men were sent off to make observations as to what was happening at the plane while Ned O'Brien, Jack McNamara, the two O'Hallorans, myself and another man, whose name I do not know, went to Ballymaurice House and got the rifles. The scouts we had sent out came with the news that the military who had come out to guard the plane had built a fire in the field with a load of turf which they had commandeered from a man who was passing along the road and that they were amusing themselves around the fire at a game called "Share the ring", and were obviously not expecting an attack.

O'Brien and myself took the party of riflemen through the fields on to the top of the quarry. It was then about 5.30 p.m. and quite dark. The fire lighted by the military gave us a splendid view of each soldier. We opened fire on them and kept up a hot fusilade for about twenty minutes or so. The military

retaliated with heavy machine gun fire under which we retired to a wood at the rere of the quarry and from there returned with our guns to Ballymaurice House.

I never learned what casualties were inflicted in that engagement on the British forces, but after the first volley I'm positive two soldiers fell into the turf fire. I was always of the opinion that there must have been heavy casualties because of the reaction of the enemy to the encounter. The round-up and raids which followed were on a vast scale. Hundreds of soldiers, including a detachment of cavalry, scoured the countryside for days afterwards and every man of military age that fell into their hands was arrested. Among them were a number of Volunteers who foolishly gathered next day at a farm near the scene of the attack for the purpose of working at a threshing machine. Most of them were sentenced to terms of imprisonment by Military Courts.

By an unfortunate coincidence on the same night on which the attack on the plane occurred the men who went to Limerick with Austin Brennan landed back in the Cratloe district later that night. They knew nothing about what had happened as otherwise they would have taken another route. An advance party of three or four men ran into a military post which had been set up near the scene of the attack. In an exchange of shots one of these men, Seán O'Halloran, was seriously wounded. However, he managed to crawl to a neighbouring house where the people were sympathetic. These people got in touch with some of the local Volunteers who brought O'Halloran to the home of an ex-R.I.C. man named Kerins or Kerin. This house proved a safe refuge and in the course of a fortnight the patient had sufficiently recovered to be conveyed in a pony trap to Limerick Hospital for continued treatment.

With O'Halloran in the trap were two members of the Cumann na mBan, Nan Hogan of Cratloe and Sheila Coughlan of Castleconnell. On the way into Limerick the trap was held up by a party of military. O'Halloran pretended to be the worse of a heavy bout of drinking and as he was being questioned Nan Hogan came to the rescue saying, "He is my brother. Don't wake him. He's soused". The sympathetic soldiers left them pass and the patient reached his destination without further incident.

I remained around the Cratloe district after the attack on the plane with a number of other members of the "Flying Column". We had to do guard over O'Halloran while he was lying in Kerin's place. There were a few raids made on the mails during the latter end of November and in December 1920. Though I took part in these raids I do not remember anything about them except that while examining parcels on one occasion I found a pair of military breeches and leggings addressed to an Auxiliary in Limerick, which was duly confiscated by us.

A week or so before Christmas 1920, Michael Brennan, the Brigade O/C., asked myself and another member of the "Flying Column", Mick Hehir, to go with himself and his brother Austin to their cousins in Drumline, County Limerick, for Christmas. The Brennan home in Meelick had been destroyed some time previously in the course of reprisals carried out by the British Forces, and Mrs. Brennan and her daughter, Ciss, were living with their relations in Drumline. As I was courting my present wife at the time I had other intentions for Christmas, but I went with the Brennans and had a very peaceful and pleasant time. We returned to Clare after a few days and I lost no time until I was back to my native district where my wife also comes from. This was 29th December, 1920.

On the following night I went to a Wake in the town of Scariff where I spent a few hours. On leaving Scariff I went to my cousin's home in Caherhurley, about four miles from Scariff, arriving there around mid-night. Next morning at 9 o'clock the house was surrounded by a mixed force of R.I.C., "Black and Tans" and Auxiliaries. I was still in bed when they came into my room. My clothes were searched and in one of the pockets two .45 revolver bullets were found.

Giving me little time to dress I was ordered to march backwards out of the house when I was again searched. In their hurry or excitement the raiders had failed to notice my revolver and holster under a table in the bedroom where I was captured.

There was a big round-up that morning. Another Volunteer named Peter Steward was also arrested. We were taken prisoners to Killaloe where I was recognised by an R.I.C. Sergeant called Brennan. I was brought to the Auxiliaries' post in the Lakeside Hotel and there interviewed by the O/C., a Colonel Anderson who stuck the barrel of a parabellum automatic down my throat and threatened to shoot me. However, the R.I.C. claimed me as their prisoner and I was handed over to them. In the R.I.C. post I was thrown into a cell and later questioned at length about the I.R.A. and particularly its leaders the Brennans, Sean O'Halloran and Tommy Wall. Needless to say I gave nothing away. While in the custody of the police I was maltreated, one R.I.C. man also named Brennan giving me a lot of punishment.

After being in Killaloe for a few days I was transferred to Limerick Jail where I was tried before a military Court. In the first charge sheet I was accused of having been in the Feakle ambush and with having shot Sergeant Doherty, R.I.C., in that engagement. That charge fell through for the want of evidence.

A second charge sheet was then submitted to the Court in which the charge was, "Being found in possession of ammunition with intent to take human life". On this I was found guilty and sentenced to ten years penal servitude, later reduced to five years.

From Limerick I was transferred to Mountjoy Prison and then to Wormwood Scrubbs and Lincoln Jails in England. I was released from the last mentioned prison just before Christmas 1921.

Signed:

Joseph Noonan
(Joseph Noonan)

Date:

11th November 1955

11th November 1955.

Witness:

D. Griffin

(D. Griffin)

