

ORIGINAL

BUREAU OF MILITARY HISTORY 1913-21
BURO STAIRE MILEATA 1913-21
No. W.S. 1291

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BUREAU OF MILITARY HISTORY, 1913-21.

STATEMENT BY WITNESS.

DOCUMENT NO. W.S. 1,291

Witness

John (Jack) O'Keefe,
Boolamore,
Rathcoole,
Banteer,
Co. Cork.

Identity.

Member of Rathcoole Company I.R.A.
Co. Cork, 1919 - ;

Member of Millstreet Battalion Column
Cork II Brigade.

Subject.

Rathcoole Company I.R.A. Millstreet
Batt'n. Column Cork II Brigade.

Conditions, if any, Stipulated by Witness.

Nil

File No. S.2602

Form B.S.M. 2

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STATEMENT BY JACK O'KEEFFE,

Boolamore, Rathcoole, Banteer, Co. Cork.

I was born at Boolamore, Rathcoole, in July, 1891. I attended Rathcoole National School until I reached the age of 14 years, when I left school to go to work with farmers in the district. I later worked on the railway as a linesman and platelayer.

Early in 1915 I went to Wales, where I worked until August of that year. I then joined the British Army. My regiment was the Royal Irish Rifles. I joined up for the duration of the war and was demobilised early in 1919. During my time in the Royal Irish Rifles I served in France, Greece and the Dardenelles.

Following my demobilisation I returned home and immediately joined the I.R.A. (Rathcoole Company). The officers at the time were:

O/C - Jerh. Long.

1st Lt.- John Lehane

2nd Lt.- Jerh. Philpott.

There were about 35 members in the company when I joined.

The usual close order foot drill was the only training being carried on, but my arrival led to greater interest in other aspects of military training, so we had classes in scouting, the use of cover and extended order drill. Although we had no rifles, all members were proficient in the use of the shotgun.

Normal training went on during 1920, and early in

that year Rathcoole R.I.C. barracks, which had been evacuated by the enemy, was destroyed by the I.R.A. I was not present on the occasion of this operation.

Towards the end of 1920 and into the spring of 1921 all members of the company were engaged in blocking roads, cutting telegraph wires and raiding local mails, but there were no military activities of a more serious nature. However, February, 1921, was the beginning of a more active period.

About a week prior to February 11th, 1921, I was instructed by Comdt. Con J. Meaney (Sonny) to go to Banteer on a train leaving Rathcoole about 3 p.m. I was to return to Rathcoole by the evening train, due to reach Millstreet about 8 p.m. My duty was to ascertain whether there were any British military on the latter train. These journeys were continued each evening until February 11th 1921, up to which time no military travelled. However, on the evening of February 11th I observed that there was a party of 14 British troops on the train at Banteer. They were all in one carriage. I travelled as usual to Rathcoole station, where I met another member of the Rathcoole Company (Dan Coakley), who carried two revolvers. I left the train at Rathcoole and joined Dan Coakley on the platform. As the train was moving out for Millstreet about 7.15 p.m., we both boarded the engine and allowed the train to proceed towards Millstreet. We then told the driver that he was to "pull up" when we told him. I should have mentioned that the Battalion Column - armed with shotguns - were lying in ambush on the railway embankment about $3\frac{1}{2}$ miles from Rathcoole station. They had followed this procedure each evening during the previous week,

but as there were no military on the train they withdrew to billets each night. We already had instructions to signal to the column by blowing two short blasts on the whistle at the Glebe (about 1/4 mile from ambush site) if there were troops on the train.

When we reached the bridge at the Glebe we ordered the driver to blow the whistle, as arranged, and he did so. Almost immediately we saw a lighting torch being thrown down the embankment on to the rails. This was to indicate the point at which the engine was to be halted. The train stopped at this point and a volley of shots rang out. All were fired at the one carriage in which the party of military was accommodated. The military returned the fire and after about 15 minutes there was a lull, during which time the enemy were called on to surrender, and they did so. With Dan Coakley I had remained on the engine during the engagement. When the enemy party left the train they were disarmed. Fourteen rifles and about 600 rounds of ammunition were captured. Web equipment and water bottles were also taken. During the course of the scrap, the officer in charge of the British party left the train, leaving his arms and equipment behind. The enemy lost 1 killed and several wounded. When the column had withdrawn I returned to my home area with Dan Coakley. We joined the column, which was billeted in Lackadota area, early next day. Amongst those who were in the ambush party on this occasion were: Mick O'Riordan, Wm. O'Riordan, Jimmie Hickey, "Miah" Galvin, Jerh. Crowley, John Lehane, Wm. Kelleher ("Kaiser"), Dan Murphy, Denis Hickey, Neilus Healy, and Con J. Meaney, O/C. There were also two or three others.

Between February 11th, 1921, and early March the column lay in ambush on a number of occasions, but the enemy failed to turn up. In addition, during this period we were actively engaged throughout the area in doing guard and outpost duty for members of the local companies engaged in road blocking and such activities.

We were billeted in Musherá area on the night of March 5th, 1921, when orders were received from the Bde. H.Q. that we were to report at Clonbanin Crossroads early on the morning of ~~February 15th~~ ^{MARCH 6th}, 1921. We travelled by horse and car to Keale Bridge - leaving our billets some time after midnight - and travelled the remainder of the journey on foot. We arrived about 9 a.m. and met members of the Charleville and Newmarket Battalion Columns, as well as a column from Kerry 11 Brigade. They were all moving into positions when we arrived. Our column was now armed with the rifles taken in the ambush of the train at Millstreet. The combined columns were divided into a number of sections, which were extended over a distance of about $\frac{3}{4}$ mile on each side of the road. The Kerry 11 Brigade and Millstreet Columns were south of the road. The Newmarket and Charleville Columns were north of the road. The combined force was in charge of Seán Moylan, assisted by Paddy O'Brien and Tom McEllistrim.

It was one of a party of about twelve who took up positions south of the road at the eastern end. We were behind a sod fence in Shaughnessy's haggard about 200 yards from the road. It was now about 10.15 a.m., and we had only taken up our position when a convoy of two lorries of military passed through from the east (Mallow). They were to have been attacked but the signal to fire was not

given, so they went on their way. We remained in our position until about 2 p.m., when our scouts signalled the approach of an enemy convoy from the west. When the convoy came into view it consisted of a lorry, an armoured car, a private car and two other lorries. When the leading lorry reached the centre of the ambush position, the signal to open fire was given by, I think, the firing of a single rifle shot by Paddy O'Brien. Our party was directly opposite the centre of the convoy when firing opened. The leading lorry got through and some of the soldiers on it got into the fields south of the road and to the east of our position. This party forced my section to withdraw to a new position on a by-road leading east from the ambush position, but the enemy did not come within the line of fire from our new position. The armoured car ran into the ditch and the private car was disabled by the opening fire. General Cummings, who was a passenger in the car, was killed by the opening burst of fire. The crew of the armoured car were able to cover most of our positions with their machine-guns, while the men in the lorries at the rear of the convoy, who took cover behind the roadside fence, kept up heavy fire for some time. When the engagement had gone on for about 2 hours, the signal to withdraw was given. We withdrew with the men of Kerry 11 Brigade Column towards Keale Bridge, where we moved off towards Kilcorney and billets. The Kerry Column returned to their home area. In addition to General Cummings (killed), the British had several wounded. The I.R.A. had no casualties.

The column lay in ambush on a number of occasions during the next couple of months but failed to make contact with the enemy. However, at night, individual members

of the column who were not engaged in protection duties for road-blocking parties, would slip away to snipe the enemy posts in Millstreet and elsewhere in the area.

Towards the end of May, 1921, accompanied by John Lehane (Battalion Q/M), I was arrested in Tullig one morning about 3 a.m. by a party of military engaged in a round-up. However, when I came to a crossroads I dashed away and escaped into a small wood. I later rejoined the column, which managed to get outside the round-up area. It was about this time that the members of the Dooneen Company, under Seán Buckley, O/C, destroyed a large quantity of military stores which arrived at Millstreet railway station for the Auxiliaries stationed at Mount Leader House.

The column was now divided into units of two or three and billeted with the local companies throughout the battalion. The column members were engaged in training the members of the companies in whose area they were billeted. This procedure was followed until mid June, when the column was again mobilised for Rathcoole ambush on June 16th, 1921.

The column assembled at Rathcoole Wood during the early morning of June 16th, 1921. The columns from Kanturk, Newmarket, Charleville and Mallow Battalions were also assembled at the same time and place. The strength of the combined force was about 120. Eighty members of this party were armed with rifles. The remainder carried shotguns. Paddy O'Brien (Brigade Vice O/C) was in charge. The members of the Millstreet Column present were: Jimmie Hickey, Mick O'Riordan, Wm. O'Riordan,

Con J. Meaney (Sonny), "Neilus" Healy, "Miah" Galvin, Jerh. Crowley, Wm. Kelleher, Tom Crowley, John Carey, Dan Coakley, Eugene Sullivan, Jack Kelleher, Jack O'Keefe (witness). Rathcoole Wood is about $2\frac{1}{2}$ miles east of Millstreet on the Banteer road.

The site selected for the ambush was on high ground overlooking the road below the wood. In the early morning six mines were laid in the road. They were spread over a distance of about 1,200 yards at intervals approximating to the distance between lorries travelling in convoy. The mines were iron casing, sealed at both ends by steel plates, held in position by a long $\frac{1}{2}$ " bolt which passed through the casing. The mines were charged with war flour (an explosive substance) manufactured by the column. The assembled column was divided into a number of sections - one to cover each mine, two to act as flanking parties and another to take up a position on the opposite side of the road to the main body. The main body of eight sections were in position on high ground south of the road. All these preparations were complete before 8 a.m. and all sections had received their instructions. The whole force then withdrew into the cover of the wood to await further orders. Scouts were posted for protection purposes.

Shortly after 10 a.m. four lorries were reported by the scouts as having passed through to Banteer. This party returned later, sometime after noon, and were allowed to pass on to Millstreet. There was no further movement until about 3 p.m., when four lorries again passed through in the Banteer direction. When they had passed, all sections were ordered to take up their positions.

I was one of a party of six which took up a position at the north side of the road about the centre of the ambush site. We were all armed with rifles taken in the train ambush on February 11th, 1921. We took up our positions behind a sod fence about 300 yards from the road.

We were charged with the responsibility of ensuring that any of the enemy who might take cover behind the roadside fence on our side of the road during the scrap, would be attacked from the rear. When the fight began about 4 p.m. we took a few snap shots at some of the enemy party on the road, but none of them crossed the fence at our side. From our position we could not see what was actually happening on the road, but we remained in our position until the signal to withdraw was given after close on an hour's fighting. The party with me on the north side of the road were: Dan Coakley, John Carey, Eugene Sullivan, Jack Kelleher and Jack O'Keefe. I was in charge of this section. After the signal to withdraw, our party moved to the east for some distance and then crossed the road to the south side, where we joined the other members of the column at the rear of Rathcoole Wood. We then withdrew to our billets in Kilcorney area, while the members of the other Battalion Columns moved into their home areas.

There was no other worthwhile activity to the Truce on July 11th, 1921. Rank at the Truce - Volunteer member of Millstreet Battalion Column and drill instructor Rathcoole Company. The strength of the company was about 45.

During the Truce I continued to serve in the I.R.A. I acted as drill instructor at a training camp in Rathcoole and also for the various companies throughout the battalion. On the outbreak of the Civil War

I went to Buttevant, where I joined the I.R.A. columns which went into Limerick. I took part in all engagements against Free State forces in Limerick area and later moved on to Waterford. I returned to Millstreet area in late August, 1922, and continued to move round the area until the cease fire in May, 1923.

Signed: John O'Keeffe
(John O'Keeffe)

Date: 23 November 1955
23 November 1955

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

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