

U.S. 1,306
ORIGINAL

BUREAU OF MILITARY HISTORY 1913-21
BURÓ STAIRÉ MILEATA 1913-21
No. W.S. 1306

ROINN  COSANTA.

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

DOCUMENT NO. W.S. 1,306.....

Witness

Denis O'Brien,
Butlerstown,
Timoleague,
Co. Cork.

Identity.

Member of Cork III Brigade Column;
Second Lieut. Barryroe Company, Bandon
Battalion, Cork III Brigade.

Subject.

Barryroe Company Irish Volunteers,
Co. Cork, 1917-1921.

Conditions, if any, Stipulated by Witness.

Nil

File No. ...S. 2636.....

Form B.S.M. 2

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STATEMENT BY DENIS O'BRIEN

Butlerstown, Timoleague, Co. Cork.

I was born in Butlerstown, Timoleague, on 12th November 1893. My parents were shopkeepers.

I joined Butlerstown section of Barryroe Company, Irish Volunteers, in the spring of 1917. Some of the members at this time were:- Michael O'Sullivan, John McCarthy, John O'Regan, Mick Coleman, James Motherway, Denis O'Sullivan, Wm. Keohane, Patrick O'Sullivan, John Fleming, Denis O'Brien (witness). The other sections in the Barryroe Company were: Lislevane, Grange, Augha. The strength of the company would be about 60. The first officers were, I think:- O/C. Michael O'Sullivan; 1st Lieutenant Jim Moloney; 2nd Lieutenant Dan Santry.

The Barryroe Company was a unit in Bandon Battalion, Cork Brigade. Some of the other companies in the battalion were: Timoleague, Kilbrittain, Clogagh, Bandon, Newcestown, Ballinadee. The O/C. of Bandon Battalion was Tom Hales.

The only training carried on in the early stages was ordinary close order foot drill. This was carried out by each section under its own officers and all sections usually met on Sunday evenings to go on a route march.

There was a full muster of the company at a parade of the Bandon Battalion in Bandon on the occasion of a big Sinn Fein demonstration in December 1917. This meeting was addressed by de Valera and J.J. Walsh. Tom Hales was in charge of the parade.

The strength of the company increased by about 20/25 in

the spring of 1918 when conscription was threatened by the British. About this time a number of raids for arms were carried out throughout the area and all available arms - mainly shotguns - were collected. About six shotguns were taken in the Butlerstown area. They were all surrendered voluntarily. The members of the company were also engaged on making buckshot, refilling cartridges and making pikeheads. The latter were made in Con Lehane's forge in Timoleague. The strength of the company increased gradually after the conscription period until at the Truce (11th July 1921) it was in the neighbourhood of 120.

Beyond normal parades and training there was no further activity in 1918 except organising and assisting Sinn Fein in the preparations for the General Election which took place in December 1918. There was, however, no contest in this area as the Sinn Fein candidate was returned unopposed.

Early in 1919, Cork Brigade was divided into three brigades Cork I (city and surrounding areas); Cork II (North Cork); Cork III (West Cork). Bandon Battalion, to which we were attached, was now 1st Battalion, Cork III Brigade. The first O/C. of Cork III Brigade was Tom Hales.

When Tom Hales became Brigade O/C. of the new brigade, his brother, Sean Hales, became O/C. Bandon Battalion. The officers of the battalion were, as far as I can recollect:- O/C. Sean Hales; Vice O/C. - Charlie Hurley; Adjutant - Hugh Thornton; Q.M. - I cannot remember.

There was very little activity during 1919 beyond normal training. A training camp was, however, held at Glandore in August 1919. It was attended by selected men from Cork III Brigade. Some officers of the Barryroe Company took part in

this camp.

The first real activity of a military nature in which Barryroe Company was engaged was the attack on Timoleague R.I.C. Barracks some time about the end of February 1920. When this operation was in progress, I was in charge of a section of about eight men who were engaged in cutting a trench across the main Timoleague-Clonakilty road about $1\frac{1}{2}$ miles from Timoleague. We started the job about 10 p.m. and remained in position until the attack was called off about 3 a.m. The members of my party were:- John O'Regan, John McCarthy, Patk. Barry, John Whelton, Con Calnan, John Brickley, Patrick O'Sullivan, Denis O'Sullivan. I was armed with a shotgun. The remainder of the party were engaged in digging the trench. This was a battalion operation and Sean Hales was in charge. As far as I can remember, the following companies were also represented on this job:- Kilbriain, Barryroe, Timoleague, Clogagh and Clonakilty.

When Courtmacsherry R.I.C. Barracks (evacuated) was being demolished at Easter 1920 in accordance with G.H.Q. instructions I was in charge of an outpost of six men on the Courtmacsherry-Lislevane road about two miles from Courtmacsherry. The members of this party were:- Denis O'Sullivan, John Whelton, Con Calnan, John Brickley, Pat O'Sullivan and Pat Barry.

Early in May 1920, I collected a Lee Enfield service rifle from Pat O'Brien's publichouse, Ballincollig, and took it to Barryroe. This rifle was purchased from a soldier in Ballincollig barracks by Pat O'Brien who was reimbursed by the Q.M. Barryroe Company.

About this time there was some agrarian trouble in the area in connection with a small piece of grazing land. As a result, an R.I.C. patrol - usually armed with revolvers -

visited the area at fairly regular intervals. It was decided to ambush the patrol and word was sent to the Battalion Vice O/C. (Charlie Hurley) who was in the neighbouring area of Kilbriittain Company. Charlie arrived without delay and was accompanied by Jack Fitzgerald and Jim O'Mahoney of Kilbriittain Company. They were armed with rifles. This was the evening of 9th May 1920.

Next morning the following members of Barryroe Company :- Jim Moloney (O/C.), Mick Coleman (1st Lieut.), Dan Santry (2nd Lieut.), John Hayes, Tim Crowley, Batt Whelton, Denis O'Brien (witness) accompanied by the Battalion Vice O/C. (Charlie Hurley) and the men from Kilbriittain (Jack Fitzgerald and Jim O'Mahoney) took up positions at Ahawadda, about $2\frac{1}{2}$ miles from Timoleague on the Clonakilty road, about 5 a.m. We were behind the roadside fence. With the exception of Charlie Hurley, who was in charge, we were all south of the road. We were extended over a distance of about 50 yards. We remained in position until about 3 p.m. when the enemy patrol of 4 R.I.C. walked into the ambush site. When they had reached the centre of the position, the order to open fire was given by Charlie Hurley (Battalion Vice O/C). Two of the enemy party were killed by the opening burst of fire. The sergeant i/c. was wounded but continued to fight, while the other member of the enemy party escaped. He was a Black and Tan and was armed with a rifle. When the operation was finished, we moved on to the roadway and collected the revolvers and ammunition from the enemy patrol. The whole party then withdrew to Grange area where we remained until darkness set in. The Kilbriittain men and Charlie Hurley then moved off towards Timoleague while the locals returned to their home areas.

Some time in August 1920, an ambush was laid for a

military cycle patrol operating from Courtmacsherry on the Lislevane Road. The strength of this patrol varied from 15 to 20 and it was usually extended over a distance of about 150 yards. The members of Barryroe Company were mobilised on three successive nights with the intention of ambushing the patrol, but it did not put in an appearance. On each occasion there were about 25/30 members of the company (Barryroe) on the job. We were in position behind the roadside fence north of the road at Curraheen, about 2 miles from Courtmacsherry. We were extended over a distance of about 200 yards. About 15 members of the party were armed with shotguns - the remainder had various other weapons. It was planned to rush the patrol as the officers who led it were held up by some of the armed members of our party. Some of those who took part in this abortive operation were:- Jim Moloney (O/C.), Mick Coleman (1st Lieut.), John O'Regan, Mick Sullivan, Denis Sullivan, James Sullivan, Pat Sullivan, John Fleming, Wm. Fleming, Con Calnan, John Brickley, Denis Murphy, John O'Driscoll (2), John Hurley, Lawrence Sexton, Michael Sexton, Jerh. O'Hea, Michael O'Leary, James O'Hea.

When the Brigade Column was being formed in the autumn of 1920 I volunteered for service with it, but as I was the sole support of the household at home, I was not accepted at this stage.

On 3rd December 1920, the evacuated R.I.C. barracks at Timoleague was demolished as were Timoleague Castle and the house of Colonel Travers, a loyalist. These houses were destroyed as it was anticipated that they would be used to house enemy military forces. When this operation was in progress I was in charge of a party of four men engaged on scouting on the old road from Timoleague to Lislevane. I was armed with a shotgun. The destruction of these buildings was a combined operation by Timoleague and Barryroe companies.

On 20th December 1920, with several other members of the Timoleague and Barryroe Companies, I visited Timoleague. This was Fair Day in Timoleague and it was proposed to rush an enemy cycle patrol (military) which occasionally visited the area on Fair Day. The patrol did not turn up, but three soldiers who came into the village were held up and taken prisoner. They were detained until that night when they were released. They were unarmed.

The officers of Barryroe company about this time were:-
O/C. Mick Coleman; 1st Lieut. - Dan Santry; 2nd Lieut. - John Hayes.

Following the incident at Timoleague Fair on 20th December 1920, John Hayes (2nd Lieut.) was arrested about mid-January 1921, and I then replaced him as 2nd Lieutenant.

During the early part of 1921 all members of the Barryroe Company were engaged in blocking roads, digging trenches and Generally endeavouring to prevent the use of mechanical transport by the enemy. While work of this nature was in progress, the demolition squads were protected by armed scouts. With several members of the company I was engaged on guard duty for these operations during the spring of 1921.

Early in January 1921 I joined the brigade column at Newcestown. Others who joined at the same time were:- Mick Coleman, John O'Regan, Dan Santry, Mick Sullivan, Denis Sullivan, Tom Barry was column O/C. Within a couple of days I moved with the column to Mawbeg on the Bandon-Dunmanway road about four miles from Bandon. Here we took up positions behind a fence north of the road on high ground. There were about 65 in the party, all armed with rifles. We were extended over a distance of about 300 yards. It was then about 8 a.m. and, although we remained there until late evening, the expected

enemy convoy did not arrive. The column then withdrew to billets in the district. I should have mentioned that, on the morning on which we took up our position, a spy was shot - his body labelled and left on the roadside - in order to attract the enemy to the district.

On the morning following Mawbeg, the column moved to within about three miles of Bandon on the Dunmanway road and again took up a position. Another spy was shot on this occasion and his body left on the roadside, but there was no appearance by the enemy. The column again withdrew from the position on the approach of darkness. Later that night, we moved to Crossmahon where we billeted and were informed that it was proposed to attack an enemy curfew patrol in Bandon town. The column was then divided into a number of sections and allocated to various positions. With Con O'Donoghue and John O'Brien I was instructed to skirt the town and move along the Cork-Bandon railway line until we reached the Eagle Bridge from which we could cover the square beside the post office. We remained in position until the signal to withdraw was given after the sections at the military barracks and Black and Tan post in South Main St. had opened fire for a few minutes on the enemy posts which they were covering. My party, as far as I can recollect, then withdrew to the Kilbrittain area. I think that the date of this attack was 24th January 1921.

Within a week I was a member of a section of the column which again entered Bandon and opened fire on the enemy posts in the town. On this occasion I was a member of a section under Tom Kelleher which sniped the military barracks from the vicinity of the Convent grounds at a distance of about 200 yards. Intermittent shooting continued for about 20 minutes and we then withdrew in a northerly direction. Next morning, the

column was reduced in strength and with the other members of the Barryroe Company, who had joined up with me in the early part of January 1921, I was instructed to return to my home area.

During the month of February 1921, and until about the second week in March, I was engaged in the normal activities of the company. On, I think, 13th March 1921, I attended a parade at Tiernanean near Barryroe Church. Amongst those present were:- Mick Coleman, O/C., Denis Murphy, Con Calnan, John Brickley, Wm. McCarthy, John O'Regan, Michael O'Leary, Jerh. O'Hea, James O'Hea, Michael O'Sullivan and Denis O'Sullivan. The O/C. stated that he had been asked to send some men to the column. The following then volunteered:- Mick Coleman, Wm. McCarthy, Ml. O'Sullivan, Denis O'Sullivan, Con Calnan, John Brickley, Denis Murphy and Denis O'Brien (witness). This party then travelled across country on foot to Clogagh where we met Sean Hales (Battalion O/C.). We then travelled by horse and trap to Newcestown area where we made contact with the main body of the column under Tom Barry, O/C.

On the night of March 16th, 1921, the whole column moved to Shippool where, next morning, we took up positions on the Innishannon-Kinsale road. The strength of the column was about 100. All were armed with rifles. The position selected at Shippool was behind a roadside wall on the western side of the road. With four others I was in a position about 150 to 200 yards south of the main body with instructions to allow the enemy convoy to pass by us into the main ambush position before opening fire. Although we remained in position all day, there was no appearance by the enemy. About nightfall, instructions to withdraw were given by the O/C. (Tom Barry) and we all moved into billets in the

area where we remained until late next evening. The column then moved during the night of 18th March 1921 to Crossbarry area where we billeted some time after midnight.

About 3.30 a.m. on the morning of 19th March 1921, the column were assembled and informed by the O/C. (Tom Barry) that large parties of enemy troops were raiding in the area. He then divided the column into a number of sections. I was allocated to the section commanded by John Lordan (now Vice O/C. Bandon Battalion). Some members of this section, whose names I remember were Con O'Donoghue and Jack O'Donoghue, both of Ballinadee Company. These two were beside me in our position in Beasley's farmyard. The strength of each section was about 12/14. All sections moved off to their positions about 5 a.m.

With other members of John Lordan's section, I took up a position in Beasley's farmyard, north of the old Cork-Bandon road. With the two O'Donoghues (Con and Jack), mentioned in the previous paragraph, I was placed in position in a car house (lean to type) at the western end of the farmyard. The remainder of the section were extended along the roadside fence to the east. In my position with the O'Donoghues we had to force the galvanised roof of the car house from its wall fittings in order to find a suitable position from which to use our rifles and at the same time have a good view of the roadway in front. We were in position until about 8 a.m. before anything happened. Then the leading lorry in the enemy convoy passed our position. It was followed at a short distance by a second lorry. As the latter lorry reached our position firing broke out on our eastern flank and we immediately opened fire on the lorry directly in front of our position. At the opening outburst of fire there was a blast of martial music to our rear - Flor Begley had begun to play

Irish war tunes on his pipes and he continued to play throughout the engagement. Those of the enemy in the second lorry who survived the opening burst of fire left the lorry, scrambled over the fence at the southern side of the road and took to their heels in a southerly direction. After about ten minutes our section with two other sections on the eastern flank were ordered on to the roadway. We collected all arms and ammunition left by the enemy including a Lewis gun. We then set fire to the three enemy lorries which were inside the ambush position.

Just as this work had been completed, firing broke out on the eastern flank of the main position and the party on the road were ordered to take cover. At this stage I was carrying, in addition to my own rifle and equipment, the Lewis gun which we had captured. The men of my section (John Lordan's) retired along the road towards the western end of the position where we moved into a boreen leading north. We travelled about 500 yards along this boreen and then crossed the fence on the western side. We had only crossed this fence when fire was opened on us by an enemy party who were under cover of a copse to the west. We immediately recrossed the fence and took cover behind the fence on the opposite side of the boreen whence we replied to the enemy fire. After a short interchange of fire, the enemy party broke off the engagement and we then continued our withdrawal until we made contact with the main body of the column some distance further on.

The column was then assembled and casualties noted. We had lost three killed (Peter Monahan, Con Daly and Jerh. O'Leary) and had two seriously wounded. A number had also received slight wounds.

At this stage an enemy party was observed on our eastern flank and the O/C. selected about 15 men who were ordered to open fire on this party. The remainder of the column moved off in a north westerly direction and were joined a short time later by the covering party of 15 or so. The wounded were then attended to and left in a farmhouse while the column moved away a cross country to billet that evening in Gurranereigh about 12 miles west of Crossbarry.

We remained in billets in Gurranereigh until next evening when we were again assembled and informed that the Brigade O/C. (Charlie Hurley) had been killed in Crossbarry district on the morning of the ambush. The column then marched off across country to Clogagh Churchyard where Charlie Hurley was buried with military honours about 2 a.m. on the morning of 21st March 1921.

On the morning following the burial of the Brigade O/C. (Charlie Hurley) I was instructed by the column O/C. (Tom Barry) to return to my home area (Barryroe). On my return I continued to take part in the activities in the area until I was arrested in a round up by enemy forces on 30th April 1921. I was taken to Bandon military barracks, Cork Gaol, Spike Island Internment Camp and later to Maryboro Prison where I was detained until 8th December 1921, when I was released.

My rank at the Truce - 2nd Lieutenant, Barryroe Company,
Bandon Battn. Cork III Brigade.

Strength of the company at the Truce - about 120.

Signed: Denis O'Brien

(Denis O'Brien)

Date: 8th December 1955

8th December 1955.

Witness: P. O'Donnell

(P. O'Donnell)

