

ORIGINAL

BUREAU OF MILITARY HISTORY 1913-21

BURO STAIRÉ MILEATA 1913-21

No. W.S. 1,309

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COSANTA.

BUREAU OF MILITARY HISTORY, 1913-21.

STATEMENT BY WITNESS.

DOCUMENT NO. W.S. 1,309

Witness

Frank O'Connor,
Meehan,
Coosan,
Athlone,
Co. Westmeath.

Identity.

Lieut. Irish Volunteers, Athlone Coy. - 1916;
Captain Coosan Company, 2nd Battalion,
Athlone Brigade;
Battalion Commander, do.

Subject.

Irish Volunteer activities,
Athlone, Co. Westmeath, 1914-1921.

Conditions, if any, Stipulated by Witness.

Nil

File No. S.2646

Form B.S.M. 2

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STATEMENT BY MR. FRANCIS O'CONNOR

Meehan, Coosan, Athlone, Co. Westmeath.

I was born locally and went to the local school at first and then to the Marist Fathers, Athlone. The Marist Fathers were of different nationalities and I could not say that there was anything particularly Irish or patriotic in their teachings at the time.

When the Irish Volunteers were started in Coosan around July 1914, I joined the local company which was about 60 strong. No oath or declaration was required of anyone on joining. We held regular parades and we had the services of a man who was then a reservist of the British Army as our drill and general instructor. This man was Patrick Downey. When the Great War started in August 1914, he was recalled to the colours and served throughout the war and was fortunate in being one of the few of his class to survive it. We had no arms of any sort at this time and used sticks and wooden guns to do our drill with.

When the Volunteer force became split owing to the very pro-English attitude adopted by John Redmond who led the Irish Parliamentary Party at the time, our company was also affected. The great majority of the Volunteers elected to follow Redmond and formed a different formation which now became known as the Irish National Volunteers. Only a small number remained loyal to the Irish Volunteers and we were organised into one company known as the Athlone Company. We were a section of this company which also included other areas like Drumraney. Sean Hurley was in charge of the company. Some time before 1916 we got 6 or 8 rifles from Headquarters in Dublin. Some of these were what was known as Howth Mausers and the remainder were Lee Enfields of the long type pattern. We also got a small amount of ammunition for those

weapons. Liam Mellows and other representatives from our G.H.Q. visited us occasionally and put us through drill exercises and manoeuvres.

A short time before Easter Week 1916, we were warned to be ready to fight when called upon to do so, but were given no further information. On Easter Sunday morning we mobilised at Maghera. About 24 or 25 men turned out for this mobilisation. We had been warned to provide ourselves with food for I think it was 48 hours and we all expected that there was something serious going to take place. We had about eight rifles and a small supply of ammunition. We had by this time got another rifle, a short Lee Enfield. This was procured from a British soldier named Robert Farragher who was home on leave. Prior to 1916 it was customary for British soldiers coming home on leave from the front to take their rifles and ammunition issue home with them. On a Sunday morning some of our fellow fellows went to Farragher's house and took the rifle. This brought our supply of rifles up to nine, as far as I can remember, and a few revolvers.

Sean Hurley was in charge and, after mobilisation was complete, we started for Shannonbridge on bicycles. A party had been left behind in the area to destroy the railway lines and telegraph and telephone communication in the Athlone area and then to rejoin the main party at Shannonbridge. I understand we were to hold Shannonbridge until Casement's Brigade passed through. Mellows was to meet us there. The rifles were taken to the Shannonbridge the previous day by Edward Farrell in a horse and trap. Farrell had friends there. Zero hour was to be 6 o'clock on Easter Sunday evening. When we were a bout halfway to

Shannonbridge we received a countermanding order which was brought by some person whom I can't remember now. We did not travel in any military formation, just in parties of twos and threes and carried only our rations. We were now told to go home, but to hold ourselves in readiness for recall. There was a dance in Coosan that night and nearly all of our men went to this dance. A number of the men remained together and stayed in a house near Coosan while others returned to their work in Athlone and other places, on the Monday and Tuesday following. The greater part including Hurley remained mobilised during the following week awaiting the further instructions from headquarters, but this never came. They remained together until it was learned that the Rising in Dublin was over and that our men had surrendered there.

Hurley had established contact with the R.I.C. through the Friars in the Abbey in Athlone, or they had contacted him, and they gave an undertaking that if he surrendered himself his life would be spared, so he surrendered himself to them. Quite a few others were also arrested. While some of them were released again, a number including Seamus O'Brien, John Blayney, Peter Malinn and I and some others were held for some time. Hurley was interned in England.

A remarkable thing about the mobilisation on Easter Sunday was that some of our men who had become inactive for some time prior to the Rising - and as such were not now members - now mobilised, also a few men who had originally elected for the Redmond Volunteers. Amongst the men who mobilised, and one who had always been a staunch supporter of ours, was Mick McCormack of Drumraney.

The rifles were not surrendered to the R.I.C. and military except the one that was taken from the British soldier,

Farragher. Through the offices of one of the Friars, it was arranged that this rifle would be left at a certain spot where the R.I.C. could pick it up, and this was done.

After the surrender in Dublin and elsewhere and the subsequent arrests, the movement to all intents and purposes was dead for some time. The Volunteers, working in conjunction with Cumann na mBan, did, however, organise concerts, dances and so forth to gather funds for the purpose of providing funds for the men who were in prison or in internment camps in England. When the general release of prisoners took place in 1917, the reorganisation of the Volunteers got under way again. Herbert Mitchell and Sean Mulaney were instrumental in getting the organisation going again. Nearly all our old members joined up again and we had about 50 members all told and sections were organised in Bliery and Coosan among other areas. Mitchell was in charge of the Coosan group. The whole area was organised in the company area which was known as the Athlone Company area. We still had the rifles we had in 1916, less the one that was returned, and we also had a number of shotguns.

Drill parades by sections were held regularly, usually on Sundays in the different section areas. An officer's class for training was held near Coosan in the summer and night classes were held in Athlone in the winter of 1917. Sean Hurley and Ernie O'Malley were the principal instructors and the officers in turn passed on what they learned to the men. The principal subjects taught at these classes were drill, musketry, Morse code, map reading, and talks on guerilla tactics.

Around the end of 1917 a brigade was organised in the Athlone area. Sean Hurley was appointed Brigade O/C. and Sean O'Mara was Vice O/C. John Farrell was adjutant.

Sean Hurley was arrested at the end of 1917 by the police and sentenced to a term of imprisonment for having made a seditious speech, and Sean O'Mara took over command of the brigade then. O'Mara was subsequently elected brigade O/C. and Tom (Con) Costello was made vice O/C. George Manning was appointed adjutant.

When the country was threatened with conscription in the early days of 1918 there was an enormous influx of men into the ranks of the Volunteers and big companies were soon in existence in Drumm, Moore, Taughmaconnell, Summerhill, Clonown and other places. The men who joined up for the most part were just raw recruits and in need of an amount of drill and training, and the services of ex-British army men and anyone who could help were availed of to try and lick them into shape. All parading was now done openly as we were only too anxious to demonstrate to the British authorities our determination to fight conscription. A great wave of patriotic feeling had now swept over the country and the anti-conscription fund was liberally subscribed to by all ranks of society. The Volunteers did a big job collecting for this fund and also in having everyone sign the anti-conscription pledge. The R.I.C., of course, were always with us at our parades and we welcomed this as we knew that they would be reporting everything to their headquarters and to the Castle authorities in Dublin. I believe the great majority of the R.I.C. were just as much opposed to conscription as we were.

The arms position was no better than it was in 1917, except that we knew that everywhere there was a shotgun held by a nationalist family - and many unionist too - it was at our disposal when we required it. We collected a large

number of springs of cars and vans which had been dumped at Coosan and had them cut and made into pikeheads by a number of blacksmiths. When the heads were made they were ground by Bill Concannon and others. The car springs, being of specially tempered steel, was ideal for the making of pikeheads although it was hard metal to work. Ash handles were prepared for the pikes, but were not fitted to them then, to facilitate storage. When completed, the pikeheads and handles were concealed in selected farmhouses and in places in town. Andy Moore, an old man of Church St. Athlone, rendered valuable service in this respect, and another most ardent worker in the fight against conscription was Father Kane of Summerhill, Athlone.

The Cumann na mBan made supplies of bandages and first-aid dressings. Some rifles and ammunition were purchased from members of the British army stationed in Athlone. When the First Dáil was set up early in 1919, all the money subscribed in the area to fight conscription was handed over to the Dáil, not as a loan, but as a subscription towards the finances of that body. When the threat of conscription had finally died down, the larger part of the men who had joined up then became inactive and faded out of the picture once again.

After the conscription crisis, a battalion was formed in the Athlone area. This was then known as the 2nd Battalion, Athlone Brigade. It was subsequently renamed the 1st Battalion, Athlone Brigade. The companies which went to make up the battalion were:- "A" Coosan and Bliery - Captain Henry O'Brien; "B" Mount Temple - Captain James Shortall; "C" Kiltoom - Captain Brian Lenihan; "D" Athlone Town - Captain James Fox; "E" Moate - Captain Hugh Sheerin; "F" Faheeran - Captain Thomas Claffey.

Prior to the Truce in 1921, Faheeran and Moate were amalgamated into one company and Jack Daly of Newtown, Moate, was then appointed company captain. The other battalions comprising the brigade were the 1st Battalion in the Summerhill area west of the Shannon, and the 3rd Battalion the Drumraney area. The O/C. 1st Battalion, was Bernard Gaffey; Patrick Watson was vice O/C; Michael Cunniffe was adjutant, and his brother Edward was quartermaster. The 3rd Battalion was commanded by Richard Birthles until he was arrested in May 1921 and then by Thomas John McGiff until the Truce.

During the General Election in the late winter of 1918 the Volunteers did an enormous amount of work in the way of attending and keeping order at election meetings and protecting the speakers, canvassing voters, etc. On the day of the polling they did duty on the polling stations and arranged transport to bring the supporters to the polls. Sinn Fein was fairly well organised in the area at this time and most of the Volunteers were members of this organisation also. The Irish Parliamentary Party had a big following in the area still at this time and this, to a large extent, was made up of what we called camp followers of the British army in the way of families of soldiers serving in that force and who were drawing money from the British government as such, and also others who were getting something out of the British forces by selling them produce such as horses, hay and foodstuffs. For hundreds of years certain elements of our people had served in the British army or in the British civil and other services and this had left its mark. Such elements were hostile to our ideas of Sinn Fein and the R.I.C. were wont to shut their eyes to their activities, so it was necessary for us to take steps to protect our speakers and others engaged in the election. One area in which this

element were particularly bad was that of Irishtown, Athlone. Big rallies of Sinn Fein were held in Tullamore, Mount Temple and Mullingar among other areas, and the Volunteers turned out at such centres in strength to ensure that the speakers on behalf of Sinn Fein were given a hearing. The Volunteers on such occasions either carried hurling sticks or short wooden batons. On the whole, however, there were no serious disorders.

In January 1919, the First Dáil met and, having declared its allegiance to the Irish Republic, floated a loan. Here again the Volunteers were instrumental in canvassing and collecting for this loan which proved very successful. In the Coosan area, which is not big by any means, over £100 in amounts of £5 and smaller units was collected. Every penny of this money was officially acknowledged by the Department of Finance of the Dáil and, although at the time everyone looked upon it as just another subscription to a fund, the money was paid back in full some years later by the government of the time.

In the spring of 1919 we raided the oil depot in Athlone for petrol which was stored there. Petrol at this time was a scarce commodity and was supplied in two-gallon containers. There were no petrol filling stations as we know them today. There was no trouble in gaining admission to the stores as there was no guard of any type on it. We removed over three hundred two-gallon tins of petrol from the store which was loaded into horse carts and two motor cars and taken to different parts of the area. Some of it went to the Drumraney area. A very big consignment of it came to Coosan where it was buried in sand. This operation was carried out at about 8 p.m. It was a battalion operation carried out by selected men from the different

companies who could be depended upon to keep their mouths shut. There was a house belonging to the oil depot close by, but there was no one living in it. The operation was completed without incident of any sort.

In March 1919, we raided the railway quarries at Lecarrow on the Co. Roscommon side of the Shannon for explosives. We got no explosives as there was none in the store there. We did get some fuze and some detonators. We cut the lock off the explosives store with chisels. Only a few selected men from the battalion were engaged on this job.

When the British Government instituted their bogus German plot as an excuse for the arrest and internment of the leaders of Sinn Fein, Sean Hurley was arrested and interned in Wormwood Scrubbs, England, as were also some other individuals in the area. By this time the Volunteers were doing a certain amount of police work in the area such as keeping the course clear at the local race meetings and also did duty at a carnival which was held to collect funds for the building of a new church.

In February 1920, an attempt was made to attack and capture the R.I.C. Barracks at Ballymore which contained a garrison of four or five police who were armed with Lee Enfield Rifles, carbine or cavalry type. The rifles we had were transferred to the Drumraney area some time previous to the date planned for the attack to be in readiness there. I do not know how it was planned to take place. I think it was by open assault. When we arrived at Ballymore at the appointed place we were met in a field at the back of the barracks by John McCormack of Drumraney who informed us that the attempt had been cancelled. He told us that the R.I.C. were aware of our intentions and were prepared for

us and that our rifles had been returned to our battalion area, as they expected a raid of the area by enemy forces from Athlone. All we could do under the circumstances was to withdraw and go back to our homes. We subsequently found out that this was all wrong and that the R.I.C. were not aware of our intentions and that the only man in the barracks on the night we were to attack it was the sergeant in charge. This man's wife was being confined at the time and he would certainly have put up hardly any resistance. There was no raid on the area by British forces. The Drumraney Battalion, or certain officers of that unit, did not want any trouble in the area that would draw the attention of British forces on it. ~~Seamus~~ O'Mara was in charge of about 30 of our men for this operation. I don't know what the strength of the Drumraney contingent was to be. We had a mine to blow in the barrack wall and a load of hay to provide cover for our men while working in laying the mine. Ballymahon Barracks was attacked on the same night by the Longford Brigade and we could see the Verey lights going up from there.

I put up a proposition that Glasson R.I.C. Barracks should also be attacked, but the Brigade O/C. ruled this out on the grounds that it was too near Athlone which contained a big garrison of military and police. We also raided the mails in the summer of 1920. We held up the mail train at Faussagh Bridge on the Athlone-Moate road. We stopped the train by means of fog signals placed on the line. We got the mails from both the up and down trains. We loaded the mails into horse-drawn carts and took them to the Shannon and across it in boats to the Roscommon side, where they were censored. I do not know exactly what the censorship revealed in the way of information. It did reveal that the R.I.C. were under a great strain, as there were numerous

letters to the members of that force from their relatives appealing to them to resign from the force. The mails were subsequently handed back to the Post Office, small consignments of them being given to the postmen at various places. ~~Seamus~~ O'Meara was in charge of this operation.

In May 1920, an attempt was made to capture the R.I.C. Barracks at Streamstown. The plan was to hold up two or three of the police who would be on their way to Mass and then dress in their uniforms and, in this way, get the barrack door opened. While this would be happening, our men were to take up position under cover near the barracks and, when the door was opened, rush in and overpower the remainder of the police force which would be only two or three men. If this plan did not work, an alternative plan was to blow a hole in the gable end of the barracks and, at the same time, men were to get on to the roof by ladders and make holes in it through which petrol and paraffin would be poured and the roof set alight.. All this was worked out at a Brigade Council meeting, The barracks had no windows on the back or ends and the windows on the front were equipped with steel sheets. It normally held about six R.I.C.. The police going to Mass were to be questioned separately to try and find out the password they used as it was believed that they did so.

The arms from this battalion were moved up to the Streamstown area. The operation was really to be done by the local companies but it would have the assistance of eight or nine men specially selected from our area. The Brigade O/C. - O'Meara - took charge of the operation. I was one of the men selected to assist. We commandeered two cars to take us to Streamstown. In addition to the party that was to rush the barracks there was also a covering party detailed.

to take position on the railway close to the barracks. David Daly and Claffey were in charge of the party. Tom Costello, the vice O/C. of the brigade, and some others were to hold up the police going to Mass.

The two police on their way to Mass were held up as planned and taken to a house and stripped of their uniforms into which Tom Costello and Manning got dressed. Costello and Manning then proceeded to the barracks and tried to gain admission. Meanwhile, the two police were kept under guard as prisoners. Costello and Manning failed to get the door open. I do not know if they had learned the password or if any was in use. Manning then ran across the road to the signal box on the railway and put the 'phones out of order. Before this had taken place the police had adjusted the steel sheets on the windows. We now opened fire on the front of the barracks. The police returned the fire through the loopholes in the steel sheets and actually pushed some bombs through the loopholes also. The bomb, or mine, was brought up for use against the gable wall but this failed to go off. A ladder was put up against the rear and a hand grenade or grenades were placed on the roof, but they likewise failed to explode. We had no alternative now but to abandon the attack and, very disappointed at our failure, we withdrew and disbanded. We all got away safely without any casualties. I don't think the police had any either. We had about six or seven rifles for this attack, some few revolvers and the remainder had shotguns.

The police from Mullingar came out to Streamstown and took the garrison back with them to Mullingar. That night, David Daly, our battalion O/C., mobilised some men hurriedly and went back to Streamstown and destroyed the barracks by

burning it. Somehow or other the police had got to know that an attack was pending, because while we were moving into position they were actually putting the steel sheets on the windows.

The R.I.C. now evacuated their barracks at Creggan, Kiltoom, Bealnamulla and the Brawny Barracks in the Irishtown area of Athlone and these were all burned on Easter Saturday night 1920, without any mishap to our men. That same night we tried to raid the Customs and Excise offices in Athlone, but could not get in to them without a fight and this was not feasible as it was only about 60 yards from the police barracks and about 100 yards from the military barracks.

Later on, on 28th June 1920, we did succeed in getting into the offices. We now watched the place and as the caretaker was coming from the pictures and knocked at the door we were behind him and entered when the door was open. He was held up and put out of the way and we then collected all the books, documents and records and made a bonfire of them in the yard, totally destroying them. Amongst those taking part in this affair were :- ... O'Mara, Tom Costello, Brian Mulvihill, Tom Mannion, George Manning, Bob Ramsay, Pat and John Doolan, myself and some others. We had only gone out of the place about five minutes when a party of military arrived. I understand that a resident opposite 'phoned the military.

In October 1920, an ambush was planned on a party of military who were escorting explosives to the quarries in Lecarrow. We had information from a clerk in the Engineer's office in Athlone that a supply of explosives were going out there on a certain morning. We planned to conceal ourselves in the quarry and surprise the military party when they arrived. About 30 of us went up the river in a motor launch to a point about $1\frac{1}{2}$ miles on the Roscommon side and from there proceeded

to the quarry. We had about ten rifles and the remainder had shotguns and buckshot. We had one eight-bore shotgun which was a great weapon and nearly as effective as a rifle. O'Mara and James Tormey were in charge. Tormey had worked in the quarry previously and knew the routine of the place. We took up our positions in the quarry at about six in the morning and waited there until two in the afternoon. but no escort or explosives turned up. There was no explosives in the quarry and the men were waiting for them to come. We suspected that someone had tipped off the military, as they came out that evening and held up people and questioned them about armed men being in the area, but we had returned via our boat by this time and dispersed safely.

In the spring of 1920 we had also planned to ambush a party of military who were doing guard duty in that area at night. There was a dispute going on about a local estate which the residents around wanted to have divided up. A military guard from the barracks came out there at night on cycles and the officer in charge on a motor cycle. We took up positions near a corner where the guard would be cycling up a sharp hill. The orders were that the officer, who would be leading on the motor cycle, was to be shot first, and then we were to open fire on the main party. We were behind hedges and walls and had somewhere around 40 or 50 men and the same number of rifles as we had at Lecarrow and the usual number of shotguns for the remainder. Sean O'Mara was in charge of the whole party. Although we waited several hours, no military ever turned up and once again we were forced to withdraw without any contact with the enemy. No explanation was forthcoming as to why the military failed to turn up that night and before we could make another attempt, the guard was withdrawn.

The withdrawal of the R.I.C. from their small outlying stations meant that the Volunteers had to police the countryside and they also carried out this duty in the towns where the R.I.C. were still quartered. The R.I.C. by this time were looked upon by the people as a foreign enemy force and were given no assistance or co-operation except by a few of their followers and the loyalist-unionist element. They were despised by the people in general, even more so than the British army of occupation, and, socially, there was a distinct barrier between them and the people. A number of them had resigned and a boycott was instituted to force them to do so, but this was not very effective. It did, however, help to make the social barrier more effective. The police work meant a busy time for the Volunteers, as very few of them had other than their spare time to devote to this work.

The withdrawal of the R.I.C. had, of course, tempted certain individuals to take part in lawbreaking activities such as local petty robberies and suchlike, and the Volunteers had to put their foot down on this; a number of arrests were made in the area and prisoners were detained in an "unknown destination". Sometimes we kept prisoners in the Hall in Coosan, and at other times across the Shannon in the Summerhill area. The Volunteers had to provide guards for such places as well as providing food and fuel. Prisoners were generally brought before a Court comprised of Volunteer officers and tried. Two men were deported to Scotland for five years for robbery and they did not return till the five years were up.

The Sinn Fein Courts were now organised and operating successfully in the area, and the people were taking their troubles to them and ignoring the British Courts. The people abided by the decisions of the Sinn Fein Courts and only in a

few cases had the Volunteers to enforce the decision. An attempt to hold one Sinn Fein Court in the Courthouse in Athlone was frustrated by the action of the military who raided the place while the Court was sitting and arrested the Sinn Fein judges and other people present. They were kept as prisoners overnight and then released.

About September 1920, an ambush on a party of military took place at Coosan. Information was received that a party of military about 40 to 50 strong had commandeered Cohen's motor launch and had gone up the river towards Lough Ree. James Norton, who lived at the Strand, Athlone, had seen them go aboard the boat in the early morning while it was still dark and, as such, he thought they were Black and Tans as he could not distinguish between the uniforms. Norton told a girl, Miss Lily Mulvihill, who was a member of Cumann na mBan, about this and asked her to tell the Volunteers. She came to me and told me what Norton had told her. The brigade adjutant, George Manning, was in hiding in the woods in Coosan at this time as were a number of others and some of the column, and we decided to attack them when they were returning. We presumed they had gone to raid the Islands in the Lough.

We mobilised a party of our men about 40 to 50 strong. We had a good few rifles, I would say nearly 20, and shotguns. We moved to and occupied a position on the river bank convenient to the "Thatch" publichouse at Hill Quarter, Coosan. Scouts were placed on the hill tops where they could observe the river towards and into the Lough and these men had runners or connecting files to us. About 2.30 in the afternoon we were informed by the scouts that the boat was returning. When it got into the narrows of the river and broadside to us we could see that the deck was crowded with soldiers, not Tans. Sean O'Mara was in charge of our party and he had ordered us

beforehand to fire at the water line of the boat. O'Mara had joined us just previous to the ambush and his idea was to sink the boat and deal with the occupants as they left it. The idea was ridiculous to think you could sink a launch that quickly by rifle and shotgun fire. A whistle blast was the signal for our men to open fire. When the whistle was sounded I shouted at our men to fire at the men on the boat deck. Our first volley knocked out seven men - three officers and four privates were wounded. We kept up the fire and followed the boat down the river, moving from cover to cover along the river bank to about a quarter of a mile from the town. On firing our first volley the engine of the boat stopped, but started again in the matter of a few seconds. The military had a Lewis gun on board and they opened up with this, but their fire was ineffective as they were too low down on the river and we were on the banks and their fire was going over our heads. We kept up fire on the boat moving from position to position as it sped down the river, but our fire was not effective and as we neared the town we had to call off the chase and they escaped. Some time prior to the boat coming into the ambush position, two soldiers from the garrison started to fish from a small boat in the river just opposite us and we had to call them in and keep them prisoners until the ambush was over. We had no casualties. Had our men been told to concentrate their fire on the men on deck instead of the water line of the boat, the British casualties would have been much heavier. As it was, they never attempted to raid the islands again.

In February 1921, Tormey, who was O/C. of the flying column, was killed and just after he was buried we occupied a position on the canal bridge on the road from the town (Athlone) to the Batteries. Information had been received that a patrol

of Tans were in the habit of going out that far on Saturday night. We had mobilised a party for this - about 30 men including scouts. We had all the rifles available which we had at Coosan. We waited in position until nearly 10 p.m. which was zero hour for curfew, but no patrol turned up and we had to withdraw and disperse. We again occupied this position on the Sunday night, but again no patrol turned up. Soon after this, we occupied a position in the Fair Green with the same party to ambush a similar patrol. I took charge of these parties. We had hand grenades as well as rifles, but again no patrol turned up.

A few nights before Tormey was killed I was at the railway bridge on the Roscommon road. O'Mara had gone out with a large party to attack Clonart R.I.C. Barracks which was in Co. Roscommon. My duty was to bomb any reinforcements, either Tans or military, going out to Clonart. I had six men with me on the railway bridge which crosses the main road. We were armed with revolvers and about half a dozen bombs of the G.H.Q. type. Clonart was not attacked, for some reason I don't know, and of course ^{No} reinforcements went out and the curfew armoured car passed under the bridge. Bombs and revolvers were of no use against an armoured car, so we had to withdraw.

In 1921, and coming on to the Truce, I was informed that three British soldiers were in the Thatch area in Coosan and that they were drunk and firing shots from revolvers and generally acting in a disorderly manner and terrorising the people. George Manning, Joe Kennedy and I, armed with revolvers, went to the Thatch area and met the soldiers and held them up and took from them one service revolver which was all the arms they had. They put up no fight and were all three fairly the worse for drink. We warned them not to attempt this sort of thing again or they would not get off so lightly and then let them go.

About two months before the Truce we were informed that a lorry load of military used to go daily from Athlone to Hunstan in Offaly where the British army had another camp with rations - so we decided to ambush it. We brought all our arms to Hickey's of Clonbony the night prior to the day set for the ambush, carrying them mostly across country to there. While at Hickey's the following morning we saw a lorry as reported to us going towards Offaly, but we were not sure whether they were military or Tans as we were some good distance from them. We sent a dispatch to the Offaly area to ascertain whether it was military or Tans had gone down and we got word back that it was military. We then moved and occupied position at Tubbrit Hill. We had about 30 men all told, armed as previously with rifles and shotguns. The position selected was the best one in the area. The lorry would have to come up the hill losing speed as it did so and would then have to slow further to take a bend in the road. The position gave us a good view of the road in the Offaly direction. A man armed with an 8-bore shotgun was placed in a favourable position to shoot the driver of the lorry, while the remainder of the men were located in the fences near the road. At about 3 p.m. in the afternoon we heard firing in the Offaly direction about two miles away. We thought that the boys of the Offaly Brigade had forestalled us and ambushed the lorry. We hung on to our positions and after some time we saw a soldier approaching on a cycle from the direction of the firing. We called on him to halt and when he did not do so, fired a shot over his head. He still continued on and I ordered Brian Costello with the 8-bore gun to shoot him. He did so, breaking his arm. He fell off the bicycle and then ran into a house and we did not bother any further about him. We stayed there for some time, but nothing showed up and we withdrew. We subsequently learned that the Offaly men had blocked the roads with trees and had

prevented the lorry returning. The military opened fire on the spot where the trees were, thinking they were being ambushed, but there was no ambush. It would appear that the Offaly men did not want trouble in that area and so make it an area of enemy activity and blocked the road to prevent us ambushing the lorry. Tubbrit, where we planned to carry out the ambush, was on the borders of the Offaly Brigade area.

There was an intelligence officer in the garrison headquarters in Athlone named Captain Tully. He was a very daring man and went around on a motor cycle with two guns - revolvers - strapped to him, and was reputed to be a first-class shot with either hand. He struck terror into people wherever he went and we were very anxious to get him. One day we learned that he had gone out on his motor cycle as usual and we took up position on two different roads which we estimated he might return by, but he did not return our way. The men on the other road had left their posts earlier and he had returned that way.

While we were in position two lorries filled with Auxiliaries passed our way. Some local I.R.A. men told us that they passed that way every Thursday. We planned to ambush them on the following Thursday at Ballykieran village on their return from Athlone when we estimated they would be the worse for drink. I understand they came from Ballinalee to Athlone for supplies. We took up a position convenient to the road. We were on high ground which gave us a good fire position on to the road. There was a bridge on the road over a mill race and we mined this for a blowing up when they were crossing it. The mine was made of a piece of piping filled with explosives and we had an exploder to put it off. We were all in readiness to receive them, but they never turned up. We sent a scout into the village to ascertain if they had gone into Athlone

that morning and found that they had not. It appears that there had been an ambush in the Leitrim area and the Auxiliaries had gone up there. We remained there until around five in the afternoon, but to no avail. We had come by boats near Ballykieran. We now returned to Coosan and dispersed. I was in charge of this operation and this was the last time we ever took position,

A week before the Truce we burned Moydrum Castle near Athlone as a reprisal for the burning of a number of houses by the Black and Tans consequent on the shooting of General Lambert. After the shooting of Lambert, the Tans had come into the Coosan area and burned a number of houses and treated the occupants very cruelly, not even giving them time to dress themselves after being forced out of their beds. Headquarters in Dublin had sent down instructions that an equal number of houses of loyal British subjects should be burned as counter reprisals. On considering the matter that it would not be equitable to burn the houses of people who had no part in either affair, it was decided instead to burn Moydrum Castle. Moydrum Castle was the residence of Lord Castlemaine who was a member of the British House of Lords and who always opposed anything which was patriotic or Irish national and was really an enemy of Ireland. He had dismissed men from his employment because they would not join the British army. The destruction of his castle would hit in the spot where it would be most felt, whereas the destruction of a few small loyalists' houses would not be felt. British officers often stayed at the Castle and the officers from the garrison in Athlone were regular visitors there, so we might meet with a hostile reception when we got there. Lady Castlemaine and her daughter and a large staff of servants were in residence in the Castle.

We mobilised a party of between 30 and 40 Volunteers armed with rifles and shotguns and revolvers and went to the Castle. We carried with us a supply of petrol which was part of that taken from the Oil Depot in Athlone, and also large hammers or sledges with which to break into the place, should we fail to gain admission otherwise. Our new Brigade O/C., Tom Costello, was in charge of this operation. There had been general discontent in the brigade some time previous to this with the Brigade O/C. management of affairs. It was felt that he was not active enough in pursuing the fight against the enemy, particularly in the Athlone town area. Simon Donnelly came down from G.H.Q. in Dublin, new elections were held and Tom Costello was elected new Brigade O/C., with Adamson as Vice O/C. O'Mara took this decision very loyally and continued to serve on the column as an ordinary Volunteer.

When we arrived at the Castle and knocked at the main door - this was at night time - we were not admitted and the hammers had to be used on the door. When the panels had been broken in Lady Castlemaine and the butler opened the door. She was informed that the castle was going to be burned as a reprisal for the burning of houses by the Black and Tans. She pleaded for time to collect some valuables and necessaries and this was agreed to, it being pointed out that the Tans did not grant that privilege to the people whom they had burned out. A party of our men was detailed to assist her in this task. Meanwhile the staff were rounded up and brought to a place of safety under guard and the place was prepared for burning. Holes were made in the ceilings to give ventilation to fan the flames and the place was liberally sprinkled with petrol and paraffin which we found on the premises. Holes were also made in the roof by ripping off the slates. When the place was ready to set alight, the O/C. fell-in our party and made a check to

see that everyone was accounted for and then the place was set on fire. It was completely burned out. When the place was well alight and we were satisfied that it would be destroyed, we withdrew. We were lucky that there were none of the British officers there that night and we had no fight, We all got away safely. On the following Sunday night we burned Creggan House which was also another loyalist centre.

In April 1921, a number of young men who were not in the Volunteers went to the rifle ranges outside Athlone and destroyed the apparatus in the ranges including telephones and telephone cables. These men were subsequently taken into the Volunteers.

In the latter part of 1920, and principally in 1921, the enemy carried out a number of large scale round-ups and, as a result, quite a good few of our men had been arrested and interned.

An active service unit, or flying column, was started in the Athlone Brigade area in November 1920. It consisted of about 20 men most of whom were wanted by the British. All the rifles in the brigade area were collected together and also some of the best shotguns to arm this unit which was commanded by James Tormey from Moate, who was afterwards killed. Shortly after being organised, the column ambushed a convoy of Black and Tans at Parkwood, inflicting some casualties on them. Tormey was killed out on the Roscommon side of Athlone when he and a few other Volunteers tried to ambush a party of Tans on cycles who were proceeding from Athlone to Clonart R.I.C. Bks. The remainder of the Volunteers escaped. I believe that Tormey did not know that the Tans party was so big - actually 22 - or they would not have taken them on. It was a chance meeting and the Volunteers had seen only two Tans on cycles approaching. Those were the advance file of a much larger party who deployed unseen and got Tormey. Tormey's body was recovered that night

and buried in Clonmacnoise Cemetery. Apparently the Tans were not aware they had shot anyone and did not search the area.

Sergeant Craddock of the R.I.C., Athlone, had made himself particularly hated by his bullying tactics such as ill-treating and beating up men whom the R.I.C. patrols held up. He was generally in charge of R.I.C. patrols in the town. Orders were received from G.H.Q. that this man was to be shot on sight and this was carried out by four of our men within 50 yards of the military barracks.

Another R.I.C. man who was with him escaped. As a result of this shooting a number of our men had to go on the run, their homes being raided by enemy forces. This affair took place in August 1920.

In November 1920, after the burning of Granard, a large number of Tans and Auxiliaries were gathered in Athlone celebrating and James Tormey and Harry O'Brien were leaving the Royal Hotel as things were beginning to look bad. Someone apparently tipped off the enemy about them and they were pursued by the Tans and Auxies who called on them to halt. James Tormey bolted into Maguire's publichouse and into the yard where he hid himself. As he did so, O'Brien pulled a revolver from his pocket and fired two rounds at one of the Auxies who fell immediately. Henry ran for it as the other Tans and Auxies opened fire on him, but he succeeded in making good his escape. The enemy forces then burned Maguire's publichouse to the ground and, in the general mix-up around the place, Tormey escaped and made his way out to Coosan.

Around January or February 1921, a man named Blagriff was shot at Ballykieran crossroads. This man was going to join the Tans, having passed the medical examination for them. He told his employer about this while under the influence of drink. The boss gave him some more whiskey and talked further to him. He discovered that Blagriff knew all the local

Volunteers, as he had worked for a considerable time in the area. He had always been more than friendly to the Volunteers. With the knowledge he had he would have been a dangerous man to allow to join the Tans, and it was decided he would have to die. When we held him up prior to shooting him, he would not admit anything. The police and military raided the area extensively after Blagriff's shooting and ill-treated his boss severely because he would not supply them with information about the men who shot Blagriff.

Another man named Johnston was shot as a spy. This man was a Protestant in religion. He had been a gamekeeper in earlier years and, as such, was responsible for a number of prosecutions against individuals. He actually fired at some of our men one morning. His place of residence was at Baylinn about four miles from here and knew all around this area very well. When our men went to get him, I understand he put up a desperate fight to escape. He was shot in a house next door to his own house and then taken some short distance from the house and labelled that he was executed for spying. I cannot give any actual details as to his guilt, but it was accepted by everyone without question that he was a spy, and it was further understood that he was the principal enemy agent in the county. The Tans now burned some more houses in the Coosan and Mount Temple areas. In all, six houses and three halls together with a large amount of hay and corn were burned by enemy forces in the Coosan area.

The Truce found us in a fairly good position for carrying on the fight, at least no worse than it had been a year or so previous. Arms of all types of course were still very scarce and our H.Q. in Dublin could do very little to help us in that respect. Ammunition for the weapons we had was also scarce enough, but sufficient to carry on with for the time being

and we were always living in hopes of capturing a further supply from the enemy. At the time of the Truce the initiative could be said to have passed to the enemy. This was so principally in the fact that the days were so long about that period and the weather so fine it gave them practically unlimited hours in which to operate and they were thus able to put the pressure on very hard. Night or darkness was our great ally and with the advent of this we would be up and doing again. The column was to a great extent scattered into small groups to avoid the enemy but could without much trouble be got together again and the morale of all ranks was high despite a few deaths and many arrests and imprisonments.

Arms was the principal trouble - we longed to get a certain number of service weapons for each battalion as well as equipping the column and we hoped that the advent of the Truce would fill this gap. The only thing that could be done in the area in the way of making munitions was the construction of road mines and bombs from cart boxes and pieces of metal piping, and quite a good few of these were made. We also filled some hundreds of cartridges with specially made slugs after having removed the ordinary shot fillings. In addition to this, some of our members in the town of Athlone were in touch with members of the British garrison there and were able to purchase from them an occasional rifle and some thousand rounds or more of ammunition. O'Mara should be in a position to tell about this side of our activity.

Intelligence sections were organised within the battalions and brigades and were able to keep a watch on people suspected of co-operating with the enemy. They were not in a position to report on intended enemy plans. There was a clerk in the Post Office in Athlone named Jim Hogan and he used to tap the code messages passing through to the enemy posts and send them

to G.H.Q.. What the value of this was I am unaware. Some of our men actually worked in the military barracks and were able to get information sometimes about impending raids, particularly when big round-ups were being planned. They could see transport and other equipment being mobilised. There were also a couple of R.I.C. men who were inclined to be friendly and to pass out little bits of information about people who were on the wanted list and suchlike.

I became a member of the I.R.B. early in 1917. Peter Malinn was the head of our circle. I took Malinn's place at a later date when he was considered not to be active enough. We paid a subscription of, I think, threepence per week. Meetings were held generally every month. Business was of a routine nature and discussions on the existing situation in the area and the country in general/^{took place} and suggestions of what might be done to intensify the work were made. Such suggestions usually came to nothing. Looking back since, I cannot see that the organisation served any useful purpose, but the powers at headquarters seemed to think that it did.

When David Daly was arrested in April 1921, I was then appointed battalion commandant of the 1st (or Athlone) Battalion. Prior to that I was company commander, Coosan Company. I held the rank of lieutenant in 1916, at the time of the Rebellion.

In conclusion, I would like to pay a special compliment to the people of Coosan and the surrounding districts. They were with us almost to a man and their houses and food were always available to us when needed. Few people realise now the risks the people underwent at that time in taking into their homes and giving food to men who were wanted by the British authorities. They ran the risk of getting shot for such activities or at least having their houses and property

destroyed and deprived of their means of living. They never asked for any thanks or publicity for their work in the struggle and they got none. Without their willing aid all the efforts of the Volunteers would have come to naught.

Signed: Frank O'Connor
(Frank O'Connor)

Date: 7 December, 1955.
7 December, 1955.

Witness: Matthew Barry
(Matthew Barry) Comd't.

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