

ORIGINAL

BUREAU OF MILITARY HISTORY 1913-21
BURO STAIRÉ MILÉTA 1913-21
No. W.S. 1,338

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BUREAU OF MILITARY HISTORY, 1913-21.

STATEMENT BY WITNESS.

DOCUMENT NO. W.S. 1,338

Witness

Michael Desmond,
Ballymacarbery,
Co. Waterford.

Identity.

Company Adjutant;
Company and Battalion Intelligence Officer.

Subject.

Ballymacarbery Company I.R.A.
Co. Waterford, 1919-1923.

Conditions, if any, Stipulated by Witness.

. Nil

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STATEMENT BY MICHAEL DESMOND,

Ballymacarbery, Co. Waterford.

I was born at Inniscarra, County Cork. My parents were farmers and, when I had left school, I secured employment in various Co-Operative Creameries throughout Munster until, eventually, in October, 1919, I came to Ballymacarbery, County Waterford, where I was appointed Manager of the Co-Operative Creamery, a position I still hold.

Prior to my coming to Ballymacarbery, I had not been a member of the Irish Volunteers but, very soon after my arrival in that village, I got into touch with the local Company and became a member.

By reason of my position as Creamery Manager, I was appointed Company Intelligence Officer very shortly after I joined.

Ballymacarbery was, at that time, in the 1st Battalion, West Waterford Brigade area.

The Company was comprised of about thirty men, mostly of the small farmer and farm-labourer class. The more prosperous farmers in this district kept aloof from the Volunteer Movement, as a general rule.

My first Company officers were as follows :- Michael O'Ryan, Captain; Paddy Ryan, Lieutenant and Tom Whelan, Adjutant. About half of the Company were armed with shotguns. There was a revolver (or two) also, of which I had one. Mine was of the type known as a "bulldog".

The year 1919 was mostly taken up with drilling, general organisation and raids for arms. The latter were carried out on the instructions of the Brigade O/C., Pax Whelan of Dungarvan, County Waterford, when it was learned that the R.I.C. had been warned to collect all firearms from people in the district.

I took part in many of these raids which were carried out at night. Invariably, about six of us were engaged, one or two being armed. There was no opposition encountered on any of the raids in which I took part. The householders, who had shotguns, handed them over readily enough when requested by us to do so.. We picked up about a dozen or so in this fashion. They were given over to men in the Company for safe keeping. We did, in fact, have one or two dumps for arms in the nearby woods but, as a rule, each man kept his own gun and ammunition.

With regard to the question of ammunition, this was always a thorny problem. As time went on it became impossible to buy any with the result that efforts were made to manufacture our own shotgun ammunition. A proper mould was secured and buckshot was made in this mould. We made our own powder and filled all the empty cartridges we could lay hands on. A crude type of bomb was also constructed from the iron casing which goes into the wheel of a farm cart. This casing was about twelve inches long, four inches in diameter and three inches thick. It was filled with scrap iron; powder was put in and a fuse attached.

My principal duty as Intelligence Officer was to report the movements of police and military patrols in the neighbourhood. The nearest police barracks were (1) in the village of Ballynacarber where a sergeant and four constables were stationed; (2) at Kilmanahan, two miles to the north, which had a garrison of one

sergeant and four constables (in 1920 increased by a few Black and Tans), and (3) Ballinamult about four miles to the south. The latter, in addition to six police, had a party of military stationed there.

At this stage it might be well to define the exact position of Ballymacarbery as its location had a very definite bearing on the activities of the Volunteers in the district..

The village is situated in North West Waterford on the main Dungarvan-Clonmel road. It is about fourteen miles north of Dungarvan and eleven miles south of Clonmel. It lies at the entrance to the Nire Valley - so called from the River Nire which runs through it. This ^{VALLEY} ~~road~~ stretches for about five miles into the Comeragh Mountains, which 'range' ~~are~~ east from Ballymacarbery. To the west, the country is also mountainous on to the borders of South West Tipperary, which is only about two miles distant from Ballymacarbery at one point. The Nire Valley, to which Ballymacarbery might be said to be the "key", was extensively used by the I.R.A. Flying Columns from South Tipperary and by the West Waterford Column occasionally, as a sort of safe hide-out where the men could rest and get into shape, generally, for further action against the British.

From the autumn of 1920 until the Truce of July, 1921, the activities of the Ballymacarbery and Nire Companies consisted, to a large extent, of duties in connection with the comings and going of the Flying Columns I have mentioned.

On receipt of a despatch notifying the arrival of, say, the South Tipperary men on a certain date, our men were mobilised, some to act as scouts to lead the incoming Column which, invariably, came by night. Others of our lads would be engaged

arranging billets and scouting on the hills and roadways for miles outside the Nire Valley. An armed guard was also 'mounted' while the Column was in our district and scouts did duty in relays day and night. When the Column moved out, sometimes after a period as long as three weeks, our men guided them safely across the mountains until contact was made with the I.R.A. Company in the neighbouring district into which the Column was moving.

To ensure that the Ballymacarbery-Nire area would be as free as possible from enemy forces, instructions were issued from the Brigade that active opposition should be reduced to the minimum. These orders were carried out. The result was that no major engagement with British Forces took place in our area and the Nire Valley continued to be maintained as a safe resting place for the Columns, right up to the cessation of hostilities against the British in July, 1921.

Kilmanahan R.I.C. Barracks attacked.

It was, so far as I can remember, early in the year 1920, when I took part in a night attack on the R.I.C. barracks at Kilmanahan, County Waterford. Kilmanahan is a small village on the Dungarvan-Ballymacarbery-Clonmel road situated about four miles south of Clonmel, County Tipperary. The R.I.C. barracks was a two-storied stone and slated building, standing in its own grounds adjoining the main road to Clonmel. The windows were fitted with steel shutters loopholed for firing. There were five or six windows in all. The garrison consisted of a sergeant and six constables (two of whom were Black and Tans). The actual attacking party, of which I was one, numbered twelve men under the command of Jack Morrissey, Captain of the Kilbrien Company (adjacent to Ballymacarbery). A man named Barron of Old Parish, Dungarvan, was second in charge.

In addition to the attacking party, there were about twenty to twenty-five men drawn from the Nire and Ballymacarbery Companies engaged in scouting, cutting telephone and telegraph wires and blocking roads in the vicinity of Kilmanahan.

Our party was armed with shot guns, mainly. There were, I think, two rifles also. I carried a 'bull-dog' revolver and about twenty rounds of ammunition.

At about 9 p.m. we took up positions close to the barracks. On the north side of the building were placed about four or five shotgun men. Opposite the main entrance (on the east side) and about ten yards from it, Morrissey the O/C., myself and Liam Dalton of Ballymacarbery were in position and on the south side were the remaining shotgun and rifle men of our party.

It so happened that one of the R.I.C. was seen through a window (the shutter of which was open) carrying a lighted candle. One of our riflemen spotted him and fired. This was the 'signal' for a general attack by all of us. The garrison replied at once with rifle and machine gun fire. Verey lights rocketted into the sky from the barracks. We 'answered' with fire at the loopholes in the windows. After about half an hour Jack Morrissey gave instructions to break off the fight. There was no hope of compelling the garrison to surrender with the weapons at our disposal and there was every danger that we would be attacked by much superior enemy forces coming out from the garrison town of Clonmel which was only four miles distant. We withdrew safely to the south-east in the direction of our Company area without encountering any enemy troops.

There were no casualties on our side that night and I cannot say whether the R.I.C. suffered any. I believe that one of them was

wounded, but I cannot state this with any certainty.

Although this attack may not, on the face of it, appear to have accomplished much, it did, in fact, compel the garrison to evacuate the barracks shortly afterwards, thus removing an enemy post from the region of the Nire Valley and making the latter place safer for those of our comrades using it as a base for rest and training.

Following the Kilmanahan barrack attack, police and military from Clonmel carried out extensive raids and searches in houses in our area and on the Ballymacarbery Co-Operative Creamery premises, of which I was the Manager. No arrests of our lads took place as many of them were 'not at home' when the raiders called. I was present when my home and the Creamery were searched by military, but nothing incriminating was discovered, although, at the time, I had a revolver hidden away in a building which was very carefully searched without the gun being located. I was not arrested.

About three weeks or so after the attack on Kilmanahan barracks previously described, Sean Morrissey, Liam Dalton and I, went, at night, to Kilmanahan village to shoot the two Black and Tans attached to the garrison of the R.I.C. Barracks there. These two fellows made a habit of assaulting people, nightly, in Kilmanahan and we decided that something should be done about it. It was well known to us that the two 'Tans' frequented a certain public house in the village each night, so it was to this 'pub' we went on the particular night in question. The four of us were armed with revolvers. Morrissey was in charge of the party.

As we entered the public house, Morrissey leading, a Tan was inside drinking. He saw us and seemed to sense what was coming, because he ran for the back door. Morrissey fired at him, but missed. The 'Tan' made his way out into the darkness and got back to the barracks in safety. We returned to our own district.

In late 1920 and early 1921, the activities of a robber gang in our area engaged the attention of the I.R.A. in the Ballymacarbery-Wire districts. This matter was more than an occasional raid on houses by one or two men; it was an organised affair, carried out by about a dozen men, mostly sons of farmers, who, taking advantage of the fact that the R.I.C. had left the area, carried out a system of wholesale robbery in the neighbourhood. At night, farmers' houses were entered by these men who were masked and armed. Valuables were taken as well as sets of harness and farm implements. Shops in villages were raided at night and goods stolen. Hundreds of tons of hay were burned by these night marauders, and matters had come to a serious pass when we were forced to take action.

As local Intelligence Officer I received information regarding one of the suspected men and I proceeded to become somewhat friendly towards him to the extent that I persuaded him to join my I.R.A. Company. When I got him into the Company I asked him to make a statement regarding the robberies. He did this, naming the offenders and giving particulars of the houses raided and the property stolen. I reported the matter to Brigade Headquarters in Dungarvan, County Waterford, and, on the instructions of the Brigade O/C., Pax Whelan, I arranged for the arrest of the persons concerned.

At a subsequent 'court-martial' carried out by Pádraic Whelan and other officers of the Brigade Staff, the men engaged in the robberies were convicted and heavily fined. A large quantity of property stolen was recovered and handed back to the owners. In some cases where the fines were not paid, stock was taken from the land of the convicted men and sold to cover the fine imposed on them.

The confidence of the people in our organisation, which we were losing as a result of the continual robberies, was restored following the action we took. No further offences of that nature recurred afterwards.

Sinn Féin Courts functioned regularly in our area during the latter part of 1920 and up to the Truce of July, 1921. These Courts tried cases of a minor nature. There were no big criminal cases heard. The presiding officers were usually Patrick O'Grady, Michael O'Ryan and Tom Sheehan, all local farmers. When the Courts sat (as they did, by day) we formed an armed guard in case of any interference by the enemy. Scouts were also posted in strategic positions to warn of the approach of British raiding parties. As a result, the Courts carried out their duties unmolested.

In late 1920, following two raids by military on Ballymacarbery Creamery, I decided not to sleep on the premises, so I remained, at night, in some houses of farmers in the locality. At that time I had (in addition to my job as Intelligence Officer) to carry out the duties of Company Adjutant in place of Liam Dalton, who had gone on to the West Waterford Flying Column.

As Intelligence Officer, I arranged to have the local mail car raided frequently. I examined letters seized in these raids for any useful information. In one of these raids a letter was discovered addressed to a local resident which pointed to the suspicion that he was a spy in the pay of the British. As the

man in question lived in the Clonmel area I reported the circumstances to the Clonmel Battalion. The Tipperary men took action quickly and came out one night to arrest the suspected spy, but the latter had left the district when his place was raided.

Due to the shortage of ammunition generally in the Battalion, we succeeded in obtaining a machine for making some home-made stuff. This machine we used for pressing wadding, measuring out the powder and buckshot and sealing the caps of shotgun cartridges. It was quite an excellent machine for this job. The powder was home-made too, but I cannot explain how it was prepared. The buckshot we made in a mould specially constructed for the purpose.

I have referred earlier to the importance of the Ballymacarbery-Nire Companies in the assistance given to Columns from other areas entering our district and the precautions we took to safeguard the Columns while they were with us. It might, therefore, be of interest to record what took place on one occasion when a Tipperary Column came to shelter in the Nire Valley without our having received advance notice of their arrival.

One night I was in charge of a party of about fourteen of our lads in the neighbourhood of Fourmilewater, two miles west of Ballymacarbery. We were resting on the roadside waiting for two others (of our men) to catch up on us. It was a moonlight night. Suddenly I heard sounds of men marching down the road. It seemed to be a large party judging from the tramp of feet and I suspected a British military patrol. I shouted "halt" but got no reply. I repeated the shout and again got no answer. I then saw one of the advancing men unsling a rifle from his shoulder. This man fired several rounds in our direction. I fired in reply and ordered our lads to retreat. My party retreated some distance. The firing

ceased, but the marching men came on. We then discovered that these were part of a South Tipperary Column coming in to the Nire to rest up. They had captured one of the lads for whom we had been waiting on the roadside and then discovered who we really were. They thought we were an enemy force.

What happened was this. The Tipperary Column had sent a despatch earlier in the evening saying they were coming to billet in The Nire. Paddy Ryan, a Lieutenant in our Company, received the message but we had already left by the time he got it and we had no knowledge of the matter until we clashed with the Column men in the manner I have described. I refer to this incident to illustrate how necessary it was for us to take every precaution to safeguard I.R.A. Columns coming in to our district. The slip-up on this occasion might easily have resulted in serious consequences for the Tipperary men, if they had run into a strong enemy patrol on that particular night.

The day following this incident we heard that another Section of the South Tipperary Column under Dinny Lacey was in the district of Newcastle, about four miles west of Ballymacarbery. District Inspector Potter of the R.I.C. was a prisoner with this part of the Column. A few of our lads made contact with Dinny Lacey's men that same evening and remained on guard duty during the night. The following day our Company was in readiness to receive the Tipperary men. We led them safely into the Nire Valley where the Nire men took over. From there the Nire men guided the Column over the Comeragh Mountains to the district of Rathgormack, County Waterford. It was in this district that District Inspector Potter was, shortly afterwards, shot by a firing squad from the Tipperary Column.

To hamper enemy forces passing through our country we regularly cut trenches in the roads. These trenches were cut only half-way across roads, to allow farm carts to pass. In addition, telegraph wires to the garrison town of Clonmel were frequently cut.

When the Truce came in July 1921, I was still with my own Company in Ballymacarbery but in August of that year I was ordered to report to the Battalion Training Camp at Lackendarragh, near Ballinamult, County Waterford. At this training camp we received instruction in signalling, munition making and guerilla tactics generally.

During this period Republican Courts were held in Touraneena, a few miles north of Ballinamult, and in connection with these Courts I acted as Police Officer for the area. I dealt with offences such as breaches of the licensing laws and minor offences generally.

During this time I again came up against one of the robber gang to which I have already referred. As Police Officer I called on him and asked him to hand up a gun he had. He refused to do so. I, thereupon, took him prisoner and put him into an old disused barracks in the Nire valley. At a subsequent courtmartial at which I presided this man was fined £50. He paid the fine and handed up his gun.

In October, 1921, the 7th Battalion, Waterford Brigade, was formed from Companies previously in the 1st Battalion. These Companies were as follows :- Knockboy, Ballymacarbery, The Nire, Dyrick, Touraneena, Kilbrien and Ballinamult. The Battalion comprised about three hundred men.

The officers of the Battalion were :-

Sean Morrissey	-	Commandant
James Butler	-	Vice Commandant
William Dalton	-	Adjutant
John Phelan	-	Quartermaster
Michael Desmond	-	Intelligence Officer.

On the outbreak of Civil War I took the Republican side and, before the siege of Waterford, I went to that area to obtain information about Free State troops for Pax Whelan, Dungarvan.

I returned to Ballymacarbery as Battalion Adjutant and acted as liaison officer and despatch carrier between the Waterford and Tipperary Brigades.

I continued to look after Brigade Officers and Columns which came into my area until the Cease Fire Order of March, 1923.

Signed: Michael Desmond
(Michael Desmond)

Date: January 16th 1956.
January 16th, 1956.

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

