

ORIGINAL

N. S. I. 391

BUREAU OF MILITARY HISTORY 1913-21

BURO STAIRÉ MILEATA 1913-21

No. W.S. 1391

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

DOCUMENT NO. W.S. 1,391.....

Witness

William Meagher,  
Ballynaclogh,  
Nenagh,  
Co. Tipperary.

Identity.

Member of A.S.U. No. 1 Tipperary Brigade;  
Vice-Comd't. No. 2 Battalion Tipperary Brigade.

Subject.

Toomevara Company Irish Volunteers, Co. Tipperary,  
1914-1921.

Conditions, if any, Stipulated by Witness.

Nil

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Form B.S.M. 2

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STATEMENT BY WILLIAM MEAGHER,

Ballynaclogh, Nenagh, Co. Tipperary,

formerly

Vice Commandant, 2nd Battalion, No. 1 (North) Tipperary Bde.,  
and also a member of the Active Service Unit of that brigade.

I was born on 23rd February, 1889, at Monanore, Toomevara, where my father owned a farm. I received a national school education which ceased when I reached the 6th standard. On leaving school I worked at home for my father and was still so engaged when the Irish Volunteers were formed.

I became a member of the Irish Volunteers as soon as they were started in Toomevara in 1914. There were over a hundred men in the company from the outset. Our drill instructor was an ex-British soldier named Pat O'Meara. Though the majority of the Toomevara Irish Volunteers disagreed with John Redmond when the "split" occurred in August, 1914, the movement collapsed in the district soon afterwards. I'm almost certain that there were no Irish Volunteers there at the time of the Rising in 1916. A first cousin of mine, William (Gobbin) Burke, 174, James's St., Dublin, was killed while fighting in the South Dublin Union during that Rising.

Early in 1917 Patrick (Widger) Meagher restarted the Irish Volunteers in Toomevara. He became captain of the company. Jack Harty was 1st Lieutenant and I was 2nd Lieutenant. We began with about 60 men and, for a couple of months, drilled secretly under the company captain near

Knockane Castle outside the village twice a week.

At the commencement of the public drilling in August, 1917, the Toomevara Company met one Sunday in Looby's field adjoining the village and marched from there to the sports field, where drilling went on for over an hour. This was repeated each Sunday afterwards and also on one or two nights each week. No arrests were then made. The local sergeant, Gaffney, was an argumentative type of individual; himself and the company captain had several wordy conflicts during which the sergeant repeatedly told Meagher: "I'm not going to make a hero out of you", meaning, of course, that he had no intention of arresting Meagher over his Volunteer activities. Eventually, in March, 1918, following a parade to Dunkerron where the Volunteers were addressed by Seamus Burke, B.E., Meagher and the 1st Lieutenant, Jack Harty, were arrested and sentenced to three months' imprisonment for illegal drilling.

I assumed control of the company on the arrest of these two officers and continued drilling in public. I was "tipped off" by a friendly R.I.C. man named O'Brien that my arrest was imminent and I went "on the run". From that time until the truce in 1921 I spent most of the nights away from home. When Widger Meagher and Jack Harty returned from prison they both resumed their former ranks and I reverted to the post of 2nd Lieutenant.

The first rifle which we acquired in Toomevara was one which was taken from a British soldier named Ned Meagher, who was on furlough from the 1st Great War shortly before Christmas, 1917, and had brought the gun home with him. In this raid I was accompanied by Hugh Kelly, Jim O'Meara and Michael Kennedy. We watched until Meagher had

gone for a drink to one of the local 'pubs' and then, wearing masks and armed with revolvers, we went to his home for the gun. His father tried to resist but was overpowered and we took away the rifle, which we hid in a loft in one of the outhouses owned by Miss Wells, a Protestant but a good friend of ours.

The first military action taken in the Toomevara area by the Irish Volunteers was the shooting of two R.I.C. constables named Rock and Healy in the village on the night of 16th March, 1920. I did not take part in this. There were only two men concerned in it, Paddy Whelehan and Jack Hackett. They shot both policemen dead and accidentally wounded another Volunteer, Con Treacy, who happened to come within the range of the shots.

I cannot remember being again involved in anything worthwhile relating until the attack on Borrisokane R.I.C. barracks on 26th June, 1920. This was an operation planned by the staff of the North Tipperary Brigade. By that time the R.I.C. barracks all over the country were well fortified and, as a result of the closing down of some of the smaller barracks, the garrisons in those still held by the police were well reinforced. The equipment at the disposal of those who planned the attack, about ten or twelve rifles and a few dozen shotguns, was only sufficient to compel the police to remain inside the barracks, but any hope of capturing the place could only be based on setting the building on fire and thus force the garrison to surrender.

The preliminary move for the attack was the seizure of a lorry load of petrol stored in two gallon tins. So far as I remember, the lorry was seized at Nenagh railway station by the Volunteers in that town. It was driven out to Moneygall, where the petrol was removed and buried in a

gravel pit. Word of this must have reached the British authorities because within a few days the gravel pit was searched by the military, who, however, failed to discover the petrol. A couple of nights later the combined Moneygall and Toomevara companies took the petrol in carts to Borrisofarney at the foot of the Devil's Bit Mountain and there it was transferred into bottles. It remained in Borrisofarney for about a month, when it was conveyed on the evening of 25th June, 1920, to a quarry within half a mile of the village of Borrisokane.

On the same evening about twenty men from the Toomevara Company and an equivalent number from the Moneygall Company went in a procession of side-cars to the quarry referred to above. In all, around two hundred men assembled at this quarry. The Brigade Commandant, Frank McGrath, and his Adjutant, Seán Gaynor, were present and superintended the arrangements. The men were chosen for different jobs and I was one of a section of six armed with rifles who, under Paddy Kennedy, Toomevara, were sent to a position at the back of the police barracks and not more than 20 yards from it. We got into a carpenter's shed which had two storeys under a galvanised roof. We occupied windows in the upper storey. I can only think of the names of two of the others who were in my section, Tim Gleeson and Ned Kennedy, both from the Moneygall side. The shed was directly behind the second house from the barracks, on which we had to fire from an angle. Our job was to prevent any of the police from coming out the back way as <sup>well as</sup> to fire at loopholes in the steel plates fitted into the barrack windows. Approaching midnight, on a signal given by a whistle blast from the Brigade Commandant, we started firing.

By that time a couple of men had started to break a hole through the roof of the house next to the barracks. Soon they were out on the roof breaking another hole on the roof of the barracks itself. When the latter job was completed these men hurled bottles of petrol through the hole into the barracks which they followed by hand grenades.

The police were not long in replying to our fire. The galvanised roof overhead was riddled by their bullets and the mortar on the wall behind us was knocked off in lumps. After the opening shots our fire was only desultory but we kept it up until about half past four in the morning, when whistle blasts ordering us to retire were blown. In our section we had no idea of what was taking place. The barracks was burning and we did not know whether the garrison was after surrendering or not. However, after getting into the opening we met a Volunteer who had come along from the main street and he told us to clear away as military reinforcements were coming. This proved to be false. The brigade commandant had ordered a retirement as he felt the barracks could not be captured. We went along by the fields and got as far as Cowle where a lot of the attacking party had gathered before us. I had a drink or two in Bill Dwyer's 'pub' in that village and with two other men from my own company, Bill Hackett and Martin Hassett, we walked ten miles back home to Toomevara.

On the death of Terence MacSwiney, Lord Mayor of Cork, an order was issued in the No. 1 Tipperary Brigade that, as a reprisal for the action of the British Government in allowing him to die while on hunger-strike, at least one policeman should be shot in each battalion area. In our

battalion area the Cloughjordan Company had been reporting the aggressive behaviour of some of the police and it was decided that the brigade order should be carried out in that village.

The men selected for the operation were Paddy Whelehan, battalion quartermaster, Jack Hackett, battalion I/O, Joe O'Brien, Bill Kelly and myself, all from the Toomevara district. After dusk on 2nd November, 1920, we cycled to Cloughjordan. Each man carried a revolver. At the Cloughjordan railway station we met Jack Williams, one of the local I.R.A. men, and he led us along by the railway line into the village, where we proceeded to Toogher's Hotel, a favourite haunt of the police when they went out at night to drink. In accordance with a prearranged plan, Jack Hackett and Jack Williams took up a position at the back of the hotel to watch for any police who might try to escape out the back way, while Whelehan, O'Brien and Kelly went in the front entrance. I was posted at the door with orders to allow no one in or out. As Whelehan and the others were making towards the bar they saw two policemen and a man in civilian attire drinking in the hallway. One of the police was near the back door and when he saw guns being pulled he made off, getting away safely to the barracks. The other policeman, Constable Maxwell, was shot dead. His revolver was collected and we then left the hotel.

The civilian turned out to be a local bank clerk. He had been ordered to put up his hands inside in the hotel. When the shooting was over he was allowed to go home. It was amusing to see him some minutes afterwards walking down the street still with his hands up. With regard to

the escape of the other policeman, it appears there were two doors at the back of the hotel and that the yard was divided by a wall in which there was another door.

Hackett and Williams were watching outside the latter door but the escaping policeman did not come through this. Instead, on getting into the yard he went on directly and climbed over the end fence and in that way got away unseen. The shooting took place about 9 o'clock.

I do not think Cloughjordan experienced any reprisals over this shooting. The police must have got information that it was done by the Toomevara I.R.A. because later that night masked and armed men raided the homes of Paddy Whelehan, Jack Hackett, "Widger" Meagher - Company Captain - and O'Donoghue. In no instance was there a man of military age found by the raiders.

Early in April, 1921, I joined the brigade active service unit, or the A.S.U. as it was then called, on orders from brigade headquarters. At the time this unit was billeted around Moneygall. In a day or two we marched to Ballinacloy, where we were distributed among the farmhouses to be housed and fed. We spent several days in that townland and went through pretty stiff training under the supervision of the A.S.U. commander - Jack Collison - a strict disciplinarian. From Ballinacloy we moved on to Lower Graigue between Nenagh and Borrisokane, and then into Eglishe in the Lorrha district where we were billeted for about four weeks. In the intervening periods we occupied positions at two different places, Ballygibbon, between Nenagh and Cloughjordan, and Knockfadda, near Lorrha, to ambush enemy lorries, but without result as the lorries did not travel.



While we were billeted in Eglish the training of the A.S.U. continued, especially in semaphore drill. Our commander was an expert at it himself and had great regard for its practical value. By the end of May, 1921, nearly every member of the unit was competent in the sending and receiving of messages by this method of signalling, and its usefulness was soon demonstrated when the scouts in the Modreeney ambush hand signalled to the officer in charge of the attack full details of the composition of the approaching enemy force, which, incidentally, was much different<sup>from</sup> and considerably stronger than what was expected.

The Modreeney engagement took place on 3rd June, 1921. It was the biggest ambush which took place in North Tipperary during the Black and Tan struggle.

My recollection of the events which led up to it is that the intelligence officer of "C" Company, 2nd Battalion, Michael Joseph Costelloe, afterwards Major General Costelloe, reported to the column commander that a cycle patrol of twenty policemen had travelled on the two previous days from Borrisokane to Cloughjordan to a court in the latter village, and that he had heard it would also be travelling on the following day. The A.S.U. were in Eglish at the time the message was received. The commander immediately made up his mind to attack this patrol. He moved the unit that evening to Middle Walk and billeted his men for the night there. The brigade commander, Seán Gaynor, accompanied by Jimmy Nolan, Nenagh Company, happened to arrive in Middle Walk the same evening and they stayed with us to help in the next day's operation. The following morning we were roused soon after dawn and got an early breakfast. During the night six men from the

Cloughjordan Company, armed with shotguns, joined us. The total force now numbered twenty-five or twenty-six, about fourteen of whom had rifles and the rest shotguns. After breakfast we marched through the fields to Modreeney, a townland about midway between Borrisokane and Cloughjordan and through which ran the main road between these two villages, which are six miles apart.

The position selected for the attack was around where the road from Borrisokane takes a fairly sharp turn to the left and a laneway branches off from the right-hand side of the bend. Just at the junction of the laneway and the main road a group under Seán Gaynor held a position behind the road fence. He had seven or eight men with him here and on his right flank were the six men from Cloughjordan who carried shotguns. Another group of five or six men under Seán Glennon were in position on the opposite side of the road and about two hundred yards nearer to Borrisokane. Two men armed with rifles were put in between Gaynor's and Glennon's section about one hundred yards from the road, and almost directly opposite them on the other side of the road and roughly the same distance from it were two more riflemen. Bill Dwyer and another signaller were posted on a height, from which they had a clear view of traffic coming from Borrisokane for a distance of a mile and from which they could send hand signals by semaphore to the officer in charge, Seán Gaynor. I was in a small section of three men, the other two being Joe Mangan and Joe Liffey, four hundred yards on the Cloughjordan side of the main party on the same side of the road and about twenty yards from it. Seán Gaynor, brigade commandant, was in charge of the whole operation, probably because he was senior in rank to the column commander.

At about 9 o'clock in the morning the scouts signalled that the enemy were approaching. From our position we could not see what developed afterwards but an outburst of shooting let us know that the attack had begun. For the first five minutes afterwards we could only hear the reports of shots and the whizzing of bullets over our heads. Mangan then suggested that we should move out to the road fence where we might get a chance of a shot and get a better view of how the fight was proceeding. After reaching the roadside Mangan fired one shot at a policeman who, he told me, had come running towards us and who staggered into the fence after he had fired. I did not witness that incident but Mangan was nearer to the main party than I was and had a better opportunity of seeing in that direction.

After about twenty minutes the firing was still going on and bombs were exploding. I knew the bombs were being used by the enemy as we did not have any. Seán Gaynor came along to us at that stage and told us that he was giving orders to retreat and instructed us to move back through Ballygibbon Hill. The fire from the enemy was very brisk and a number of their bullets were coming uncomfortably close. In order to get out of where we were in safety, it became necessary to crawl on our hands and knees for a couple of hundred yards. Mangan got separated from us during this time and I did not see him again until two nights later. At the top of Ballygibbon Hill Liffey and I met the Cloughjordan group of shotgunmen, who had with them four or six rifles and ammunition captured during the fighting. They also had their own guns and were in a bit of a quandary as to what they should do next. I advised them to hide all the guns in some safe place.

and then go home. They lived quite close to the vicinity. Along with Joe Liffey I went back to Middle Walk, and after having a meal in Garvan's we went to Cullenwaine in Moneygall where we stayed for that night. The following night we got to Heenan's in Clonalloughan where the other members of the A.S.U. gradually assembled, and by midnight we were all together again, having sustained no losses in the Modreeney operation. The British had four or five killed and about the same number wounded. Four or five houses in the district were burned by the enemy as reprisals, including Bill Dwyer's "pub" in Cowle.

I think it was on 6th June, 1921, that Collison decided to take the A.S.U. to the Roscrea district for a few days rest. We marched about fifteen miles to Summerhill on the Leix-Offaly border and for the next three or four days were well looked after by the Roscrea I.R.A. and Cumann na mBan. We spent about the same time in Carrig Hill before coming to the parish of Moneygall. The day after we arrived in Moneygall Collison notified myself and Paddy Kennedy that we were to return home to Toomevara on the instructions of the brigade commander. Trouble had arisen there over the disappearance of money collected as a special levy for the civilian population and which amounted to about £180.

About 15th June, 1921, I was summoned to a meeting in Gleeson's in Cullenwaine which was attended by officers from G.H.Q. in Dublin and the brigade vice commandant, Liam Hoolan. It was announced at the meeting that the commandant of the 2nd Battalion, Jeremiah Collison, vice commandant, Hugh Kelly, quartermaster, Paddy Whelahan, and intelligence officer, Jack Hackett, had been removed from

their posts and would be replaced by Paddy Kennedy, myself, Joe O'Brien and Michael J. Costelloe respectively. I should add that by that time the missing money had all been returned through the parish priest, who refused to disclose the source by which the money came to him.

The disappearance of the money and the sequel thereto caused a good deal of comment throughout the battalion area in the ranks of the I.R.A. and among the civilian population, and the prestige of the I.R.A. was not enhanced thereby. In the period that passed between the replacement of the old battalion officers and the truce, we who succeeded them were kept busy in trying to cope with matters affecting discipline and organisation. We managed to iron out these difficulties and by the date of the truce the battalion was again in fairly good trim

Signed: William Meagher  
(William Meagher)

Date: 30<sup>th</sup> March 1956

30th March 1956.

Witness: D. Griffin (D. Griffin)  
(Investigator)

