

ORIGINAL

W.S. 1412

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BUREAU OF MILITARY HISTORY, 1913-21.

STATEMENT BY WITNESS.

DOCUMENT NO. W.S. 1412.

Witness

Michael Hennessy,  
Dundrum,  
Co. Tipperary.

Identity.

Member of East Limerick Brigade Flying Column.

Subject.

Activities of Kilfinane Company, Irish Volunteers,  
1914-1921, and  
East Limerick Flying Column,  
1920-1921.

Conditions, if any, Stipulated by Witness.

Nil.

File No S. 2740.

Form B.S.M. 2

ORIGINAL

BUREAU OF MILITARY HISTORY 1913-21  
BURO STAIRÉ MILEATA 1913-21  
No. W.S. 1,412

STATEMENT BY MR. MICHAEL HENNESSY,  
Dundrum, Co. Tipperary.

I joined the Irish Volunteers when a company of that organisation was formed in my native place of Kilfinane, Co. Limerick, towards the end of the year of 1914. I was then about twenty-one years of age. There were about thirty young men in the company, and Sean McCarthy, then resident in Kilfinane, was the company O/C. Justin McCarthy, Sean's cousin, and Dan McCarthy were the other two officers of the company.

We paraded about once or twice a week for training and drill. Foot drill was practised in a field near the town, and occasionally we went on route marches to places like Ballylanders and Glenbrohane. The training was done with wooden guns and, as far as I am aware, the company at that time possessed no effective arms.

I should also mention that ~~our~~ company - the Kilfinane company as it was then known - was attached to the Galtee battalion of which, if my memory serves me right, Willie Manahan, then the creamery manager in Ardpatrick, was O/C.

My recollection of Easter Week 1916 is that the company was mobilised to parade on either Easter Sunday or Easter Monday morning, and each man was instructed to bring sufficient rations to maintain him for a couple of days. The parade took place just outside the town on the Tipperary road, and it was generally understood amongst the rank and file that we were to

march to Limerick Junction. As, however, the parade was dismissed before we started, I cannot say definitely that this was the intention, and, as far as I can remember, there was no further activity by the company during that week.

During the years of 1917 and 1918, there was little change as regards our activities as a Volunteer unit, except perhaps that our numbers increased as selected men were approached to join the company. There was, however, a big change in the attitude of the general public, and men and women, who before 1916 thought we were just a bunch of foolish boys, were now fast becoming our greatest sympathisers and supporters. This was particularly so during the conscription scare in 1918 when we had a big influx of new members <sup>into</sup> ~~the~~ the company. Many of those who joined at that period did not remain long with us, but left again after the danger of conscription had passed. The R.I.C. were also paying much more attention to us and, as a result, our parades were held secretly in quiet unfrequented places.

The first intimation I had that the R.I.C. were paying any special attention to myself personally was in May of 1919. I believe it was on the day following the rescue of Sean Hogan at Knocklong railway station. I had no part in the rescue, but when I returned home that evening, my mother told me that Sergeant Maguire and a constable of the R.I.C. in Kilfinane had been to the house inquiring for me. I accosted the sergeant on the street and questioned him, to know what he wanted me for. He said, "You know that Hogan was rescued at Knocklong,

and I want you to account for your movements on that day". I told him that I had no intention of accounting for my movements on that day or on any other day, and that it was useless for him to question me about them. He said that he knew all about my Volunteer activity, and he was advising me to get out of them. I replied that I was a Volunteer since 1914, and that I intended to remain one. He made no attempt to arrest me or to question me further, and the incident ended at that. This same Sergeant Maguire was shot dead in Kilmallock on March 6th, 1921.

My first active engagement against the enemy was on the night of April 27th, 1920, when Ballylanders R.I.C. barracks was attacked and captured. This was a battalion job. Sean McCarthy, who at that time may have been the battalion O/C, told me about the proposed attack on the night of the 26th, and he instructed myself and four other members of the Kilfinane company, including Peter Steele and the late Pat Carroll, to report at the mobilisation point on the following night. The mobilisation point was at Ned Tobin's house at Glenbrohane, about one and a half miles from Ballylanders. When we arrived, Sean McCarthy and about twenty other Volunteers were already there. We were issued with shotguns and shotgun ammunition. Final instructions for the attack were given, and we then marched to Ballylanders. Sean McCarthy and, I think, Sean Forde (Tomás Malone) were in charge of the operation. The members of the Ballylanders company who took part in the attack did not assemble at Tobin's. They had their instructions, and they awaited our arrival in the town.

On arrival in Ballylanders, my first task was

to assist in the removal of the sick wife of a constable of the R.I.C. from her house, opposite the barracks. She was the sister of a Volunteer, and we carried her on a mattress to the post office where we left her in the care of Miss Burke, the postmistress. I then went to my position which was at the corner of O'Grady's public house, about twenty yards from the barracks.

At twelve o'clock midnight, Sean Forde mounted the roof of the barracks. This was the signal for the attack to begin, and an intermittent fire was then opened. My target was the windows of the barracks, facing O'Grady's premises. The R.I.C. replied with rifle fire. The exchange of fire lasted, I should say, for about twenty-five minutes or half an hour. During that time, Sean Forde had succeeded in breaking holes in the barrack roof, poured in petrol, and had got the roof burning steadily. This forced the police to surrender. As far as I can now remember, there were either eight or nine R.I.C. men in the garrison, and three of them were wounded. After their rifles, revolvers and some grenades had been collected, I assisted in removing a wounded Volunteer named Sean Meade to a farmer's place where he was attended by a nurse, Miss Babs O'Sullivan. I then returned home to Kilfinane. Sean Meade was our only casualty in this attack, and his wounds were not too serious.

On the night of May 28th 1920 when Kilmallock R.I.C. barracks was attacked, I was on duty at an outpost on the Kilfinane-Kilmallock road. Our party at the outpost, where the road was blocked, consisted of ten or twelve Volunteers, all armed with shotguns.

Paddy Ryan of Kilfinane was in charge, and our instructions were to attack any police reinforcements who might leave Kilfinane for Kilmallock. . There was no activity at or near our outpost, but we remained on duty until 7 a.m. next morning, when the attack was called off in Kilmallock.

About the middle of July 1920 (14th), I was a member of a party of about thirty Volunteers who lay in ambush for a mixed party of R.I.C. and British military near Foynes. I am not very familiar with that district and cannot give any particulars about the exact position of the ambush. I believe Sean McCarthy was there that day, and that either himself or a man named Coliveto was in charge. We were not very long in position when the patrol came along. We had hoped to take them by surprise, but after we had opened fire, the patrol succeeded in getting cover, and opened up on us with rifle fire. An inconclusive engagement or skirmish, lasting about twenty minutes, took place. Both sides then withdrew, and I am not aware of any casualties on either side.

Again, on August 4th 1920, a somewhat similar engagement, at which I was present, took place at Powerstown, near Bruree. On this occasion, the enemy party was composed solely of British soldiers who, after a brief exchange of fire, withdrew from the positions which they occupied when we opened fire on them.

On the 10th December 1920, the East Limerick flying column, of which I was a member, occupied a position at the Cross of the Tree, near Garryspillane. The column on that day was about twenty-five strong, and was under the command of Donnchadh O'Hannigan. All

members of the column were armed with rifles and, in addition, some were armed with hand grenades, and some had short arms. We were about an hour in position when our objective - two lorries of enemy forces - travelling from the Ballylanders direction towards Hospital, approached. My position on that day was with a small party of three or four members of the column who were deputed to act as a rearguard, in the event of the ambush being unsuccessful.

An accidental shot, fired by some member of the column, warned the enemy forces of our presence before they had driven into the actual ambush position. They dismounted from the lorries, took cover and an engagement between themselves and the main portion of the column took place. In this engagement, Sean O'Riordan, who was a member of the column and who was with the main party, was killed. It was stated at the time that he was killed by a grenade which had been thrown at the military, with the pin undrawn, and that one of the soldiers picked up the grenade, drew the pin and flung the grenade back at the main body of the column. The warning which the military received through the discharge of the accidental shot destroyed the column's chance of taking them by surprise. They (the military) succeeded in getting under cover along the roadside ditches, and after the firing had continued for ten or fifteen minutes, the column commander withdrew the column to Glenbrohane where we billeted that night.

It was, too, I think about this time that the Glenacurrane ambush took place. We billeted the night before the ambush in the area, and at the time we had

been joined by a few members of a Cork unit which included Leo Callaghan and Dick Willis of Mallow. Callaghan and Willis had with them a Hotchkiss machine gun which was captured in the raid on Mallow military barracks. Glenacurrane is about three miles from Mitchelstown, on the Tipperary-Mitchelstown road. The ambush position was, to my mind, a very suitable one. There were woods at both sides of the road, with hilly or mountainy districts in the background. There was also a sharp bend in the road, at which motor traffic had to slow down considerably, so much so, in fact, that it was not necessary to barricade the road.

We took up our positions about 7 a.m. Mine was with the main party in the centre of the ambush, and on that day I was armed with a shotgun. The Hotchkiss gun, with Callaghan and Willis acting as gun crew, was in a position on a slight height, about eight or ten yards from the main body and from where there was a commanding view of the road. Sean Forde (Thomas Malone) was with the gun crew, and I am not certain whether it was he, (Forde) or Donnchadh O'Hannigan was in charge of the column on that occasion.

It was a bitter cold day and, as I have said, we took up our positions about 7 a.m. It was not, however, until the early afternoon that a large touring <sup>car</sup> and a caged lorry of British troops coming from Mitchelstown drove into the ambush. The touring car was travelling in front - I would say about twenty-five or thirty yards from the caged lorry - and, before it reached the bend in the road, fire was opened on it by the machine gun crew. At the same time, the members of the main body of the ambush party opened rifle and



shotgun fire on the lorry. The Hotchkiss gun did deadly damage, and after the first few volleys from it, the touring car crashed, and its occupants were either dead or wounded. Willis and Callaghan then brought the machine gun into play on the occupants of the lorry, and any who were not dead or wounded soon surrendered. We then found that the enemy casualties were four dead and several wounded. We captured there about sixteen or eighteen rifles, a good quantity of rifle ammunition and some hand grenades. There were also some bags of mails, and I believe it was Sean McCarthy who pulled the mails and the box of grenades out of the burning lorry after we had set both itself and the touring car on fire.

A pony and trap were then secured from a farmer's place, and the soldiers, who were most seriously wounded, were placed on it and were sent back to Mitchelstown. I was particularly struck on that day by the youth of the soldiers. They were all young men, and the shock of the ambush was apparently too much for their nerves, for some of those who were wounded and some of those who surrendered cried like children when they realised that we were not going to shoot them.

The Cork unit remained with us for a few days after the ambush at Glenacurrane during which we occupied a position near Thomastown, on the Kilfinane-Mitchelstown road. After we had been in position for some time, the commander of the column (Donnchadh O Hannigan) withdrew the column to Knockadea. I understand that he had got information that the enemy were aware of our position, and that a round-up on a huge scale by enemy forces was to be expected.

The next incident of major importance to which I will refer is the Drumkeen ambush which took place on 3rd February 1921. For this engagement, the column was reinforced by a party of the Mid Limerick brigade under the command of the late Sean Carroll of Castleconnell. The column commander (Hannigan) had information that two lorries of R.I.C. men and Black and Tans passed Drumkeen regularly on a certain day of the week, on their way to Limerick from Tipperary town. The column billeted in the Drumkeen area on the night before the ambush, and moved into position just about daybreak. The ambush position extended for about 250 or 300 yards, and a barricade, consisting of a farmer's cart and a couple of ploughs, was placed across the road at a bend on the Limerick side of the position. I was one of a party of seven members of the column under the command of David Malone, at the extreme end of the position, on the Tipperary side. I should mention that the lorries could be clearly seen by us while still about one mile away, as they came over the brow of a hill on the road.

About mid-day, two lorries were seen to cross the brow of the hill, and our party was then instructed to allow both lorries to pass into the main ambush position. This was a disappointment to us, as we felt we would be taking no part in the actual ambush, and we would have no chance of a shot at the enemy. So, we decided amongst ourselves that we would disregard the instruction and attack the second lorry.

As the first lorry passed, I saw that it had five occupants, four R.I.C. men or Black and Tans in uniform, and one, apparently an officer, in civilian clothes.

The second lorry, containing six R.I.C. men and Black and Tans, including the driver, arrived seconds later at our position. From behind the pier of a gate, I fired point blank, at about three yards range, at the driver. He fell dead over the steering wheel, and his foot must have been on the brake at the time, for the lorry stopped immediately in the centre of the road. My six companions fired almost simultaneously at the four policemen who were seated in the back of the lorry, and all four suffered the same fate as the driver. The sixth policeman, who was in front with the driver, took cover down behind his dead companion and remained there for perhaps a minute or so. When he moved as if to stand up or to try to get out, Malone ordered me to fire at him. I did so, and he too fell dead.

As regards the occupants of the first lorry which we had permitted to pass, two of them were killed, two were wounded and captured, and the officer in civilian clothes escaped. The fight between themselves and the main section of the column was almost as sharp and decisive as was ours with the second lorry. Our only casualty that day was that an officer of the column, Liam Hayes (afterwards Major General Liam Hayes) received a wound in one of his fingers.

When the arms of the policemen had been collected and the lorries set on fire, the column commander decided that we should re-occupy our positions and be ready to attack any British forces which might be sent to the scene as reinforcements or as an investigating party. This decision was welcomed by the members of the column. We were in a good position, supported by the unit of the Mid Limerick brigade, and elated by

the success of our attack on the police lorries, we felt very confident and capable of taking on any enemy force which might come along. After two hours had passed by, and no sign of any British forces coming to the scene, Hannigan then decided to evacuate the position. As a matter of fact, no British forces appeared on the scene until the following day, and it was only then that the bodies of the dead constables were removed from the roadside. Some houses in the locality were burned by the British as a reprisal.

About a week after the Drumkeen ambush, when in a farmer's house near Kilfinane with a section of the column, I saw a British army aeroplane flying low and landing in a field near the house. We rushed out and went towards it. The observer, a man named Mackey, had got out of the aeroplane. I held him up, and Sean McCarthy, who was in charge of our party and who was with me, took charge of him. I climbed into the aeroplane in the hope of finding some arms, but was disappointed. The only equipment I found were an airman's fur-lined overalls and a pair of flying goggles. The aeroplane was set on fire, and it blazed furiously, burning itself out in a few minutes. Mackey, the observer, was held prisoner for a few days, and when he was released at Atlacca, he expressed his thanks for the kind treatment he had received, that it had been a pleasure for him to have been with us, and that we were far different people from what he had been led to believe we were. During his stay with us, we provided him with, amongst other things, a pair of boots, for he was wearing light shoes or slippers on the day of his capture.

Towards the end of March 1921, I lost a good

friend and neighbour when James Crawford was shot dead by British forces. At the time of his death, Crawford was guarding a spy named Gordon and was taking him along the road at Glenbrohane when they encountered the British troops. Gordon called out who he was to the troops, as they passed by. They halted and, finding a revolver on Crawford, they shot him on the roadside. Gordon was taken away by the military, and I believe he was sent to England. We saw or heard no more of him.

About the end of March 1921, the column, with Donnchadh Hannigan in charge, moved into the West Limerick brigade area. Activities were scant in the West Limerick brigade area, and I understand Hannigan had, on instructions from Headquarters, made a visit to that area a short time previously, with a view to increasing activity there. It was his intention to carry out an ambush at Ballyhahill, on the road between Athea and Shanagolden, and it was to carry out this operation that the East Limerick column moved to West Limerick.

On the evening of the 29th March 1921, five of us were sent on ahead of the main portion of the column to Ballyhahill, bringing with us batteries and mines with which it was proposed to mine the road at the ambush position. We billeted in two farmers' houses, three going to one house near the roadside, and myself and the other going to a house some distance further away. About 3 p.m. on the following day, the house where the three were billeted was raided by two lorry loads of Black and Tans, or Auxiliaries. The three members of the column got out the back before the house was surrounded. They were however seen by the Tans who opened fire on them. One of them fell into a dyke,

and the Tans lost sight of him. Another, Davern from Ballylanders, had his rifle shot out of his hand, but he and his pal got safely away and came to the house where I was. Shortly afterwards, while we were having tea, the woman of the house warned us that the Tans were coming towards the house. Looking out, I saw them about two or three hundred yards away and, getting my rifle and bandolier, I fired four or five shots at them from outside the door which halted them while my comrades got away. I then went in the direction of another house which I did not enter, but the Tans apparently thought I did, for they surrounded this house and poured rifle fire into it. This enabled me to get some short distance further away from them, and the next thing I heard was a whistle which I recognised as Hannigan's signal for the column to assemble, but owing to my position and that of the Tans, I could not move towards the assembly point. My next recollection of the incident is that of seeing Hannigan, three members of the column (Thomas Howard, James Finn and David Quane) and Sean Finn, commandant of the West Limerick brigade in a field, but, still due to my position and the proximity of the Tans, I could not get to them. They opened fire on the Tans who replied, and it was in this exchange of fire that Sean Finn was killed and David Quane was wounded. Hannigan, Howard, Finn and Quane then withdrew, and soon afterwards the Tans withdrew to the road, taking Sean Finn's body with them. In connection with this incident, I might mention that the Tans put Sean Finn's dead body up against a lorry and fired so many shots into his head that, when the remains were handed over to the relatives, they were almost beyond recognition by his parents.

That night, six or ten of us contacted each other, and went to a place called Kilcoran and, on the night following that again, the full column assembled near Athea and started the march back to East Limerick.

On the 1st May 1921, the full column was in billets in Shraharla, but left it and went to Knockadea, and then to Kilbenny, to make room for the Mid Limerick column. In Kilbenny we heard firing in the Shraharla direction, and Hannigan, who was in charge, took the column back to Shraharla, but the firing had ceased when we got there. We learned that the Mid Limerick column had been surprised by a large force of British military, and three of its members, Patrick Starr, James Horan and Tim Hennessy, had been shot dead. A fourth member, Patrick Casey, was captured. He (Casey) was tried by drum-head court martial and executed in Cork on the following morning.

That night, the column went to the Cross of the Tree and broke up into small parties to go to different billets. About 1 p.m. next day (May 2nd 1921), four members of our column, James Frahill, Patrick Ryan, William O'Riordan and Thomas Howard, were surprised in a boreen in Lackelly by a party of twenty-one Black and Tans. Frahill, Ryan and Howard were shot dead. O'Riordan was badly wounded, but managed to crawl to a field where he was discovered by the Tans and bayoneted to death. At the time, I, with eight or ten others, were within earshot of the firing, and we went in that direction. We saw the Tans in a field. They had procured a donkey and cart, with which they were removing the four bodies. Sean O'Grady and I got into the field without being observed by the Tans, our idea being to make an attempt to take the bodies from the Tans. We were

recalled by Ned Ryan who was in charge of our party. Donnchadh Hannigan, with some other members of the column, then arrived, and Hannigan instructed us to extend out so as to surround the field. Before this movement was completed, an accidental shot fired by some member of the column warned the Tans of our presence. Leaving the bodies behind them in the field, they ran under cover of O'Callaghan's house towards the road where their bicycles were parked. We opened fire on them, but they succeeded in reaching the road and retreating, before we got to the road. Our fire prevented them from recovering their bicycles which we captured, and I remember that we had twenty men for the twenty-one bicycles. The remains of our four men were taken away by Hannigan and some members of the column for burial.

Towards mid-day on the following day, I and two other members of the column, Tom O'Grady and Michael Callaghan, were surprised in a house near Nicker. We were in bed at the time, and received a warning from the woman of the house. Looking through a window, I saw three or four Black and Tans slowly approaching. They were then about three hundred yards from the house. We pulled on our clothes and boots hurriedly, got our rifles and ammunition and left the house. Under cover of a hedge and following car tracks, we reached a field at the back of the house. The cover here was very bad, and we separated, O'Grady taking a different direction to O'Callaghan and myself. At that stage, the Tans had opened fire on us, and O'Callaghan received a wound in the leg. I succeeded in getting him over a wall into another field where he fell, and was unable to go any further. He implored me to leave him and to go away



whilst there was still a chance. Reluctantly, I did so, and a few minutes later, he was a prisoner of the Tans. Crossing another fence, I landed on a lot of overcoats and caps which the Tans had left there, as the day was very warm. The pursuit was, however, too hot to do anything about the coats and caps. Later that evening, I again linked up with the column.

It must have been about that time or shortly afterwards that, using the twenty-one bicycles which we captured at Lackelly, a cycling section was formed in the column. As far as I remember, Hannigan himself took charge of the cycling section. It was too about that time (May 1921) that Sean Wall, the brigade commandant, was killed, and at the time there was talk amongst the members of the column that Hannigan was making some arrangements to bring twenty-seven members of it into the South Tipperary brigade area. If there were any such arrangements under consideration, nothing, as far as I know, ever came of them.

About June of 1921, I was a member of a section of the column under the command of Commandant Dan Allis, who was a section commander in the column, that made another trip to the West Limerick brigade area. On this occasion, we had no fighting or engagements with enemy forces.

After our return to East Limerick and not very long before the Truce, there was a slight skirmish between some members of the column and a party of British military in the demesne of Riverstown House, near Kilmallock. I was not present there on that occasion, but I believe there were no casualties on either side.

Some few days before the Truce, the column was

disbanded, and we were instructed by the column commander to return to our own districts and to make our own arrangements for billeting. I understand that the intention was to disband only for a few weeks, as Hannigan felt that we were badly in need of a rest, which we certainly were, but, as a fighting unit of the East Limerick brigade, the column never assembled together again, as the Truce with England came into operation on July 11th 1921.

As a member of the rank and file, I would like to take this opportunity to pay a slight tribute to the officers of the column. In particular, I would like to mention Donnchadh Hannigan, Liam Hayes, Sean Forde (Tomás Malone) and Sean McCarthy. These officers never asked the members of the column to undertake a risk, or go into an engagement in which they themselves were not foremost, or to undertake a march, be it one mile or twenty miles, on which they did not accompany them every step of the way. Hannigan was a strict disciplinarian and, amongst his orders, was one prohibiting the taking of intoxicating liquor by members of the column, which reminds me of the following incident.

On one occasion, Sean Stapleton, who was noted for his wit, myself and two others were billeted in a house where we were more than welcome. The man of the house was a bit free with the bottle. He insisted on plying us with whiskey, and soon we were a bit the worse of the wear. Hannigan heard about this, and ordered that we be brought before him. Fortunately, we were tipped off beforehand, and we had time to have a good wash in a nice, cool well, and as we presented ourselves to him,

we were at least clean and sober looking. Looking us over, he remarked, "I will never again believe the half of what I hear!" - to which Sean Stapleton replied, "No, nor if I were you, sir, would I believe the half of what I see!"

Con Burke of Doon wrote a ballad about the East Limerick flying column. It was often sung by the members of the column and is still very popular in County Limerick. So, to conclude my statement, I will include it here.

THE EAST LIMERICK ACTIVE SERVICE SQUAD.

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I

Come, all ye gallant Irishmen, and listen to my song,  
It's of the active service squad. I won't detain you  
long.  
There's McCarthy and Maloney, Clancy and Tom Rea.  
They are the finest soldiers in the Ireland of to-day.

II

There's Bourke from Ballindangan, and Ryan from  
Cappawhite,  
And the hefty blacksmith, Tobin, ever ready for a  
fight.  
There's Stapleton from Oola, with his kit upon his  
back,  
Marching ever onwards, and never looking back.

III

Of Sean Stapleton from Oola, I must make a few  
remarks.

He's generous and noble, and fond of making larks,  
And when in marching order, he is a sight to see,  
With his old German Mauser, oh, he's the man for  
me!

IV

Now I must sing of Shanahan, that brave Glenlara  
boy,  
For to his home and people, he long since said  
good-bye,  
And has taken up his rifle to fight for the old  
sod,  
For God, and home, and Ireland, in the active  
service squad

V

Now, the guide and the observer, a couple of  
lines deserve.  
They're Michael Walsh and Hennessy, of brave  
unflinching nerve.  
For a guide and close observer, the equal can't be  
found,  
Of Mick Hennessy from Kilfinane, who can trail the  
roughest ground.

VI

Last, but not least, come Maurice Meade and Donard  
of the Glen.

No Irish poet did ever write of more determined  
men,

That long have famed East Limerick, from the Glen  
to Cappawhite.

God send them strength, those Limerick boys, to  
help the fight go on.

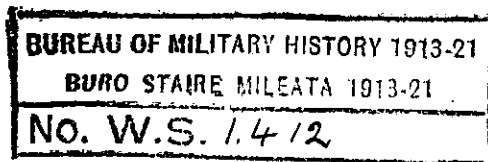
Till, from the shores of our dear land, the Black  
and Tans are gone.

And when the war is over, and the fight is fought  
and won,

Let none forget this active squad, and its noble  
work well done.

SIGNED: Michael. Hurmaney

DATE: 8<sup>th</sup> May 1956



WITNESS J. Grace