

ORIGINAL

BUREAU OF MILITARY HISTORY 1913-21

BURO STAIRE MILEATA 1913-21

No. **W.S. 1,450**

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BUREAU OF MILITARY HISTORY, 1913-21.

STATEMENT BY WITNESS.

DOCUMENT NO. **W.S.** 1450.

Witness

John C. Ryan,  
Carhue House,  
Carhue,  
Dundrum,  
Co. Tipperary.

Identity.

Quartermaster, 3rd Battalion, 3rd Tipperary Brigade.

Subject.

Activities of 3rd Battalion, Irish Volunteers,  
3rd Tipperary Brigade, 1917-1921.

Conditions, if any, Stipulated by Witness.

Nil.

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STATEMENT BY Mr. JOHN C. RYAN,

Carhue House, Carhue, Dundrum, Co. Tipperary.

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Quartermaster, 3rd Battalion, 3rd Tipperary Brigade.

I was born in August 1892 at Carhue House where I still reside, and <sup>where</sup> my father and grandfather dwelt ~~there~~ before me. My mother died when I was only four years old, and some six years later my father too passed to his eternal reward. At 15 years of age I finished my education at Caherue National School and then started my career of farming by assisting my step-mother in the running and working of our farm.

My uncle, Dan Ryan, who subsequently emigrated to the United States of America, was a member of the Fenian Movement, and there was at my home in those early years a dump containing either six or seven rifles of a very ancient type or pattern with three-angled bayonets and 200 rounds of ammunition. These arms, which were originally the property of the Fenian organisation, remained in my possession and later formed a link with our own day, for at least one of the rifles was made serviceable for use in the years of 1920 and 1921, and some of the ammunition was used in a rifle of similar pattern at Rosegreen in 1920.

During the summer or early autumn of 1914 a Company of National or Redmondite Volunteers was formed in the parish of Annacarty. I joined this Company at the time of its formation and remained a member for some seven or eight months. Whilst I was associated with it, the Annacarty Company attended a parade or review of National Volunteers which was held in Limerick on a Sunday in December, 1914. My only recollection of it is that there was a heavy snowfall during the parade and that we saw in Limerick several Belgian refugees whose

whose country had been over-run by the German armies at the start of the 1914-1918 Great War.

commenced

My association with the Irish Volunteer Movement/early in 1917 when, with the late Paddy English, I went to a meeting of the Knockavilla Company at Eamon O'Dwyer's place at Kilshanane and was enrolled into the Volunteers. This unit or Company, which was then not more than 15 strong, had been in existence prior to the Rising of 1916 and had cut the telephone and telegraph wires along the railway lines near Dundrum during Easter Week of that year. At the time I became associated with it Seamus Robinson (later the Brigade Commandant) was a member. He had come to Kilshanane to reside with Eamon O'Dwyer and to organise the Volunteers in South County Tipperary after they had both been released from prison when the general amnesty took place at Christmas of 1916. Our activities then consisted of parading for drill on Sundays, and these parades were enlivened somewhat by our efforts to elude the R.I.C. who seemed determined to keep an eye on us.

A short time afterwards Robinson discussed with me the question of forming a Company in Annacarty and, as a result, a meeting was held there on a Sunday after Mass to which the Knockavilla Company marched. At this meeting the Annacarty Company was formed and at the election of Company officers which followed, Tom Carew of Goldengarden (later Brigade Intelligence Officer) was elected Company Captain, Laurence Joyce was elected 1st Lieutenant and I was elected 2nd Lieutenant. Initially this Company had only about twelve members but a steady stream of new recruits brought its strength to over fifty men.

I do not propose to go into detail about the Company at Annacarty or with the organisation work that took place during that year of 1917. Suffice to say that after Annacarty, Companies were formed in three

other nearby districts, at Hollyford, at Rossmore and at Clonoulty.

In February 1918, a meeting of the officers of the five Companies (Knockavilla, Annacarty, Hollyford, Rossmore and Clonoulty) was held at Michael Sheehan's house in Dundrum at which it was decided to form the Companies into a Battalion. The Battalion Staff elected at that meeting was as follows :-

Battalion Commandant	- Tadhg O'Dwyer.
Battalion Vice-Commandant	- Michael Sheehan.
Battalion Adjutant	- Philip Fitzgerald.
Battalion Quartermaster	- John C. Ryan (myself).

Mine was the only appointment for which there was a secret ballot, the other three officers being elected unanimously. Later when Sean Treacy (the Brigade Vice Commandant) attended a Battalion Council meeting he insisted on having the first three appointments made by secret ballot but the voting made no change. As a matter of fact, with the exception of Michael Sheehan, who went to the Brigade Staff in 1920 and was succeeded as Vice-Commandant by Ned O'Reilly, there was no change in the Battalion Staff until after the Truce in 1921.

The Battalion Council meetings were held regularly at Sheehan's in Dundrum. Sean Treacy frequently attended these meetings at which he spoke about organisation and the urgency of procuring arms. He generally finished the meetings with a short Irish Language class, a subject on which he was very keen.

One of the big tasks then was to get arms or to raise the money to purchase them. The proceeds from dances helped to create an arms fund and by degrees we managed to get a few weapons, mostly revolvers, purchased from G.H.Q. Two service rifles were also obtained, one being taken by the Battalion Commandant from a British soldier stationed in Dundrum and the other was got in a raid on the home of another British soldier who was spending his furlough with his people

in Ardmayle and who had brought his rifle home with him.

Soon after the Armistice at the end of the 1914-1918 Great War, a cousin of mine (a son of my uncle, Dan Ryan, who I mentioned early on in this statement) who was in the American Army, spent 14 days vacation with me here in Carhue. During his stay he learned quite a lot about the situation in Ireland and of what I might call our difficulties with the R.I.C. whom he termed the "Black Fellas". He promised to try and come to Ireland again and to bring some guns with him, saying that his father in Chicago was well got with the American Army authorities and that, through his father, he hoped to get another period of leave before returning to America. I next heard from him asking me to meet him in Dublin, and I wrote, giving him the address of my old friend Phil Shanahan's shop in Foley Street where I arranged to meet him. When I met him there and asked him about the guns he told me he had brought four Colt Automatic .455 revolvers and 200 rounds of ammunition, but that my friend, Phil, had already relieved him of them and had insisted on paying him £20. for the lot. Phil Shanahan later made a present of three of these revolvers, one each to Seamus Robinson, Sean Treacy and Dan Breen and I had to pay £5 to get the other one and some of the ammunition. On another occasion when in Dublin I called to Phil Shanahan and he asked me, presumably on behalf of a client of his, if I would buy a gun and for a £17.00 I got a .320 automatic. Before leaving I succeeded in swapping this small automatic (for which it would probably be difficult to get ammunition) for a .45 Service Webley revolver. I mention these incidents just to illustrate the manner in which arms were procured at the time.

The gelignite which was captured at the ambush of Soloheadbeg on 21st January, 1919, was concealed on the day of the ambush in a field at Greenane by Sean Treacy, Dan Breen and Sean Hogan. It

weighed one cwt. made up in two half-cwt. boxes. Word was sent to Tom Carew of its whereabouts and as there was a grave danger of its being found by the R.I.C., Tom collected it and buried it on his own farm. To hide all traces of the earth having been disturbed where he buried it he foddered cattle at that particular spot. Within a few days, however, the R.I.C. searched Carew's farm and actually drove iron spikes into the ground where the gelignite was hidden. Tom thought that the R.I.C. had got information of where it was and it was decided to move it again. Ned O'Reilly, one of the O'Keeffe's of Glenough, myself and a few others were detailed for the job. We brought it to Carhue and buried it again in a garden about 200 yards from the gate entrance to my home. After a very short time we received information that the R.I.C. were again on its track, so one night Con O'Dwyer and myself exhumed it and re-buried it in a valley at Carhue-Kale. It remained there for perhaps a month or so until arrangements were made to distribute it amongst the Battalions. I still possess a stick of it which I retained as a souvenir.

Prior to the ambush at Soloheadbeg I had, apparently, come under the notice of the R.I.C., for I remember one day in Dundrum being told by an R.I.C. man that my name was included in a list received from the District Inspector in Cashel of those responsible for holding a Feis in Rossmore which had been proclaimed by the British Authorities. A few days later my house was raided by a force of R.I.C. men and searched for arms or seditious documents but they found none. Later during 1919 and 1920 these raids became more frequent and I had to spend a considerable time on the run. I recall one occasion when my house was raided on a Saturday night. I was not there when the raiders called but on the Sunday morning I went home and changed into my "Sunday best" before going to Mass. I had only just left when they came again and they knew that I had been home in the meantime for they

passed some remarks about I having been there and changing my clothes. I did not expect another raid on Monday and, as the farm work had to be attended to at some time or another, I proceeded to work at the hay-saving on the Monday morning. Soon a little girl arrived to warn me that the police were again searching for me, and this time to avoid them, I had to leave the horses in the hayfield and get away across country towards Glenough. Jack Ryan (Jack the Master) and myself had to spend most of that day hidden in the remains of a fort until a woman came to us and told us that the police party had gone away towards Hollyford.

On the night of 1st April, 1920, I took charge of a party of four men, viz. Tom and Dan Carew of Goldengarden, Patrick Hayes of Ballydine and Dan Ahearne of Knockbawn, to carry out a feint attack on Clonoulty R.I.C. barracks. The idea behind this feint attack was to draw out reinforcements of British forces from Thurles and to attack them at Rathcannon where Tadhg O'Dwyer, the Battalion Commandant, and Ned O'Reilly had a strong party in ambush position. It was Ned O'Reilly who asked me to take charge of the party at Clonoulty and I told him that I would require five men and myself, my idea being to split up into two parties of three and to attack from two points. I considered that two men going into action alone was always unsatisfactory for, if one man was wounded, it put too big a handicap on the other to look after the casualty and to look after himself. As events turned out, however, I had only the four men mentioned and myself and we occupied a position behind a broken-down wall about 35 yards to the front of the barracks. In accordance with instructions we opened fire on the barracks at midnight. All five of us were armed with service rifles and our orders were to maintain the fire on the barracks until the garrison sent up Verey lights for assistance.

For fully fifteen minutes we kept up the fire, without any response from the garrison. This set me a poser. Our ammunition was limited and I commenced to wonder if there were any R.I.C. men at all in the barracks, or if they had got prior information of the intended attack and that we were likely to be the victims of a trap. Then to my relief the police did reply to our fire and started to send up the Verey lights. We continued to fire on the barracks for a further fifteen minutes. By that time the police had got the range of our position and when we withdrew we had to crawl away on our hands and knees. That was my first time to be under fire, and during the half hour's attack I fired 45 rounds at the barracks.

From the point of view of the main object of the attack, viz. to draw out British reinforcements from Thurles, it was unsuccessful, and our main body at Rathcannon were withdrawn from the ambush position next day. Later, from a friendly R.I.C. man named <sup>Walsh</sup> who was then stationed in Clonoulty, I learned the reason for the long delay by the R.I.C. in replying to our fire. Sergeant Hamilton, who was suffering from his nerves, went almost crazy when we fired the first shots. He went to look out through a port-hole and one of our shots grazed his forehead. He then lost all control of his senses and the remainder of the garrison had to tie him up and secure him. I have referred to this incident at Clonoulty in some detail because on the following day the newspapers of the time carried a descriptive account of how the fourteen members of the garrison held the barracks against a serious attack by 200 armed men and of the finding of bloodstains which gave the impression that there were casualties amongst the attackers. The bloodstains were those of a dog which was hit by the fire from the barracks.

On the 9th May, 1920, Clonoulty was again in the news for on that day Ned O'Reilly, with four members of his Company, attacked an R.I.C.

patrol on the road between Clonoulty and Goolds Cross. In the engagement an R.I.C. Sergeant was shot dead and his revolver was captured. I was not present at this ambush, but that night Ernie O'Malley, Seamus Robinson, Sean Treacy, Tadhg O'Dwyer, Ned O'Reilly and myself met at O'Keeffe's of Glenough, and it was decided to attack Hollyford R.I.C. barracks on the following night, i.e. the night of 10th May, 1920. A check-up, however, revealed that we were short of explosives and ammunition and it was decided to postpone the attack for two days until the night of 12th May. Meanwhile, some of the officers of the Mid-Tipperary Brigade were contacted and they promised to have ammunition available for us at Hollyford.

On the 12th we met early in the day at Shanahan's house about half a mile from Hollyford to make final arrangements for the attack. Two long ladders were required to reach the roof of the barracks which was at least thirty feet from the ground. As ladders of sufficient length were not available a local stone-mason spliced a number of short ladders into two of sufficient length. Six men under Tadhg O'Dwyer were detailed as a "ladder" party, and during the evening they practised the carrying and hoisting of the ladders. Some home-made bombs were made and later on O'Malley, who was recognised as being in charge of the operation, called all men with arms into a room where we made a check of the arms and ammunition. The shot guns were allotted to the men going on outpost duty and on duty on road-blocks. This left six rifles and eighty rounds of .303 ammunition available for the riflemen who were to be engaged in the actual attack on the barracks. I should mention that the ammunition promised by the Mid-Tipperary men had not arrived at this stage, and in view of our lack of it O'Malley issued strict orders that only every five or ten minutes was a rifle shot to be fired. The success or otherwise of the attack depended mainly on the efforts of himself and Seamus Robinson to set the barracks on fire.

The attack was timed to commence about midnight and at about 11.30 p.m. Sean Treacy, Phil Fitzgerald (the Battalion Adjutant), Rody Hanly, Jim O'Gorman and myself went into Hollyford. We first of all moved a barrel of paraffin oil and a supply of inflammable materials from a point near the Creamery, where they had been left earlier in the evening, to the side of the road opposite the gable wall of the barracks. We then decided the positions to be taken up by the riflemen. Treacy, Fitzgerald, Hanly and myself, with four rifles, occupied a position behind a wall at the bridge about forty yards to the front of the barracks. Jack Ryan (Jack the Master) was our sole rifleman at the rear of the barracks and Sean Hogan with the remaining rifle was detailed to cover a port-hole in the gable wall at the end from which the attack on the roof began. Later and before the attack commenced Sean Treacy and Phil Fitzgerald moved away from Hanly and myself and took up another position behind a low wall about five yards from the barracks.

At first everything went according to plan. About midnight Tadhg O'Dwyer and his team of "ladder" men ran in, in their stockinged feet and placed the ladders against the gable wall. The tops of the spliced ladders just nicely cleared the eaves of the roof. The "ladder" men held the ladders in position whilst O'Malley and Robinson climbed on to the roof and placed two home-made bombs on the slates, one at each side of the roof. To prevent them rolling off the two bombs were attached to each other by a piece of wire. These bombs were fired by lengths of fuse and both exploded almost simultaneously. After the explosions O'Malley and Robinson again climbed on to the roof and with hammers broke holes in the slates large enough to pour in the oil. Jim O'Gorman carried buckets of oil up the ladders and passed them on to the two men on the roof. After the oil they put burning sods of turf in through the holes in the slates. All this was accomplished in the space of four or five minutes and without a shot being fired by either sides.

The instructions to the riflemen were to hold their fire until the garrison opened fire and my own particular instructions were to snipe at the window on the top floor nearest to the gable end against which the ladders were placed. It was through this window that the flames first came indicating that the fire was catching on. The police had by that time opened a rapid fire with rifles and machine guns on to the open spaces around the barracks and on a quarry a short distance away. We could hear stones and chips rattling down the quarry as they were dislodged by the police fire.

Robinson and O'Malley spent a considerable time on the roof pouring in the oil and throwing in burning sods of turf. At one stage I believe tar was got for them and they got that too in through the holes in the slates. As I have said the fire got a grip early on, but it was a long time before a portion of the roof - that portion of it nearest to the gable end - caved in. The garrison had then taken refuge in a room at the other end of the barracks which was cut off from the main portion by a thick dividing wall. Seamus Robinson called on them to surrender but they refused to do so. How they held out for a further four or five hours in the heat, smoke and stifling atmosphere must remain a mystery. All efforts to set this portion of the barracks ablaze failed and at about 7 a.m. Robinson and O'Malley decided to call off the attack. I should also mention that the Mid-Tipperary men did send on a supply of .303 ammunition. It arrived and was distributed while the attack was on. Jack the Master, Sean Hogan, Rody Hanly and myself all got some, but due to the intensity of the fire from the barracks at the time it was impossible to get the extra ammunition in to where Sean Treacy and Phil Fitzgerald were.

We were a disappointed team of men as we moved off from Hollyford that morning. We had failed to capture the barracks and had failed to force the police to surrender. Later that evening we learned with satisfaction that the British reinforcements, who went to Hollyford,

withdrew the R.I.C. garrison. Soon afterwards the R.I.C. garrison at Clonoulty was also withdrawn and this gave us the advantage of having a large stretch of open country without an enemy post in it.

As a result of these engagements at Clonoulty and Hollyford, a big round-up by British Forces in our area was anticipated and, on instructions from the Brigade Commandant, eight of us, including Ned O'Reilly, Jack the Master, Tom O'Dwyer, Dan O'Keefe and myself, moved into the 1st Battalion area and remained for a week or so in the Fethard district. Nothing exciting happened during our sojourn there.

Towards the middle of July, 1920, units from our Battalion went to both Clerihan and Rearcross to assist in attacks on the R.I.C. barracks in both places. It was my lot to go with the unit to Clerihan. There we were in position near the barracks for over an hour when the operation was called off. So near was my position in Clerihan to the barracks that I could hear the voices of some of the R.I.C. men inside and the jungle of their money as they played cards. They certainly were not aware of our presence. The decision to call off the attack was, to say the least of it, very disappointing. I arrived back again in my own area after four days of continuous walking, much of it across-country.

There was another engagement towards the end of September, 1920, in which I was engaged. It was an attack on a party of military accompanied by an R.I.C. man returning on foot along the railway line to Dundrum after a raid on Tom Carew's home in Goldengarden. We received prior information about this raid (through the Brigade Intelligence Officer) from an R.I.C. man stationed in Dundrum. As it was feared that the R.I.C. man with the military might be the R.I.C. man who gave the information, instructions were issued to fire on the military only. This operation was carried out by a few men hurriedly mobilised by the Battalion Commandant, for there was little

time between the receipt of the information and the time of the raid. Again, the raiding party had the option of returning to Dundrum by either of two roads or along the railway line, and it was necessary for our party to remain in a central position pending a report from our scouts as to which route the military choose.

When the signal was received that the military were returning along the railway line we had to scramble a distance of 300 or 400 yards through fields and over fences to reach the railway embankments. There was no time to select any particular position for the military were passing along in extended formation. We opened fire, rather haphazardly, on them - in the circumstances it had to be that way - and an exchange of shots lasting for about half an hour took place. The officer in charge of the military party and, I think, one or two private soldiers were wounded. We had no casualties.

During the latter portion of 1920 and 1921 my time was taken up with the general work of a Battalion Quartermaster. Billets had to be found for the flying columns and for men on the run. In addition, I often acted as dispatch rider between the Battalion and Brigade Headquarters.

The only other incident which I can recall and which might be worthy of recording, relates to the execution of an ex-British soldier named Kirby. Kirby worked with farmers in the Annacarty district. He got very pally with the Black and Tans and spent much of his time drinking in their company. He knew all the local Volunteers and could, if he so desired, be of valuable assistance to the enemy. He was warned by Jim Quinlan, the local Company Captain, about associating with the Black and Tans. He, Kirby, then went to Tipperary town and re-enlisted in the British Army. A week later he was posted to the military barracks in Dundrum.

One night in January of 1921, he visited a public house at Ballybrack about two miles from Dundrum. A hint was given to some of the local Volunteers who arrested him in the public house and took him to a cottage in the mountains. They then acquainted the Battalion Commandant who reported the case to Seamus Robinsen who in turn reported it to G.H.Q. Orders came back that Kirby was to be executed. Meanwhile the British Forces were searching high and low for him. After receiving spiritual aid from a priest who annointed him, Kirby was executed by a firing party at Ring Hill. He was buried there and, as far as I am aware, his body was never found.

Signed: \_\_\_\_\_

*John Kirby*

Date: \_\_\_\_\_

*5<sup>th</sup> July 1956.*

Witness: \_\_\_\_\_

*J. Grace*

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