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ORIGINAL

BUREAU OF MILITARY HISTORY 1913-21
BURO STAIRE MILEATA 1913-21
No. W.S. 1,455

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BUREAU OF MILITARY HISTORY, 1913-21.

STATEMENT BY WITNESS.

DOCUMENT NO. W.S. 1455.

Witness

James O'Sullivan,
Rock Villas,
Bantry,
Co. Cork.

Identity.

O/C, Bantry Company, Bantry Battalion, Cork III
Brigade, I.R.A.

Subject.

Activities of Bantry Company, Bantry Battalion,
Cork III Brigade, Irish Volunteers, 1917-1922.

Conditions, if any, Stipulated by Witness.

Nil.

File No S.2766.

Form B.S.M. 2

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No. W.S. 1455

STATEMENT BY JAMES O'SULLIVAN,

Rock Villas, Bantry, Co. Cork.

I was born at Glengariff Road, Bantry, on June 20th 1900 and was educated at Bantry National School. In August, 1914, I entered the Postal Service in Bantry as a telegraph messenger. In a short time I qualified as a telegraphist. I was then employed as Sorting Clerk and Telegraphist in Bantry Post Office, where I served until January, 1922.

I joined the Irish Volunteers in Bantry in June, 1917. At that time there were only seven or eight men in the Bantry unit. As far as I can recollect these were: Ralph Keyes, Michael Harrington, Paddy Lynch, Robt. Lynch, Michael Coakley, Michael Walsh, Tim O'Sullivan, Tom Walsh and James O'Sullivan (witness). The strength of the unit grew by degrees and before the end of 1917 the strength had increased to about fifty. The officers of the company at this time were:

O/C - Ralph Keyes
1st Lt. - Robt. Lynch
2nd Lt. - Michael Crowley
Adj't. - Michael Harrington
Q/M - Jack O'Mahoney.

The training of the company, which consisted mainly of close order foot drill and marching in formation, was carried out under our own officers in the fields in the vicinity of the town. Parades were held twice each week.

In addition to our normal training and parades, all Volunteers at this period were interested in the organisation of the political side of the Republican

movement - Sinn Féin. As a matter of fact, this organisation was mainly composed of Volunteers, together with a few supporters who were too old to serve in the military side. One of our first organised activities took place during the summer of 1917, when the members of the Bantry Company seized about 100 gallons of petrol in tins from the local oil depot and sent it to East Clare to help in the transport for the electioneering work during the by-election there when Eamon de Valera was first elected to the Dáil.

There was a big increase in the strength of Bantry Company in the spring of 1918, when the British threatened to enforce conscription in Ireland. At this time the majority of the men of military age in the area joined up. The strength of the unit was, I'm sure, in the neighbourhood of 150/200. There was no change in the company officers. I think that a reorganisation of the Volunteers throughout the area took place at this stage and that Bantry area was organised on a battalion basis. As far as I can recollect, the names of the first officers of the Bantry Battalion were:

O/C - Dan O'Mahoney
 Vice O/C -
 Adjt. - Ted O'Sullivan
 Q/M -

Bantry Battalion was made up of the following companies: Bantry, Comhola, Kealkil, Glengariff, Durrus, Caheragh, Kilcrohane and Droumsullivan. The battalion was the 14th Battalion, Cork Brigade.

During 1918 all arms were to be surrendered to the R.I.C., so the members of Bantry Company raided all houses where arms were known to be held and seized them.

The arms obtained were mainly shotguns, to the number of about a dozen. They were dumped in Baurgon^{RM} area. Similar action was taken by all other units in the battalion. Sometime during March, 1918, several members of the unit (Bantry) took part in a raid for explosives at the barytes mines in Derrygrinaugh. A large quantity of gelignite, together with fuse and detonators, was obtained in this raid and removed to a safe dump. These explosives were later used in the manufacture of mines and bombs. As I was specifically detailed for intelligence duties at this time, I was not permitted to take an active part in the public activities of the company.

There was no unusual activity in the area in connection with the general election in December, 1918, as the Sinn Féin candidate for the area - Seán Hayes - was returned unopposed. However, the overwhelming success of Sinn Féin throughout the country gave a boost to the Volunteer organisation, which gradually grew stronger and more determined from now on.

Early in 1919 Cork Brigade, which consisted of some twenty battalions and extended over Cork County, was divided into three brigades. Bantry Battalion now became a unit of a new brigade - Cork 111 - which controlled West Cork area. The other battalions in the brigade were: Bandon, Dunmanway, Clonakilty, Skibbereen and Castletownbere. The first Brigade O/C was Tom Hales, but I cannot recollect the names of the other officers.

Normal training continued throughout 1919, and about August I was appointed Adjutant of the Bantry Company as Michael Harrington was appointed to a post on the Battalion Staff about the same time. Con O'Sullivan was appointed Q/M, as the previous holder of the post - Jack

O'Mahoney - had left the district. The officers of Bantry Company now were:

- O/C - Ralph Keyes
- 1st Lt. - Robt. Lynch
- 2nd Lt. - Michael Crowley
- Adjt.- James O'Sullivan (witness)
- Q/M - Con O'Sullivan.

The first major activity undertaken by the members of Bantry unit was carried out on November 17th 1919, when about a dozen men from the company under the Battalion Vice O/C (Mossy Donegan) and Company O/C (Ralph Keyes) raided a British Naval M.L. boat, No. 171, which was tied up at Bantry Pier near the railway station. These boats, which were employed as submarine chasers, were based on Bantry, ^{and} for security reasons, normally anchored some hundred yards from the shore in Bantry Bay. However, the officer in charge of this boat decided, against the advice of the local R.I.C., to tie up at the pier. This procedure had been followed for some time, and each time the boat was in port the movements of the officers and crew were noted by a Volunteer - McCarthy - employed on the steamboat "Princess Beara" which plied between Bantry and Bere Island. These reports were considered by the officers of the company and Moss Donegan (Battalion V/C), and eventually it was decided to attempt the raid on Sunday night, November 17th 1919. About ten members of the company, including Ralph Keyes, Seán Cotter, Michael O'Callaghan, Jack Teehan and Mossy Donegan, assembled in the vicinity of the railway station about 8 p.m. They were armed with two .38 revolvers and a few rounds of ammunition. Two men were delegated to watch the movements of the enemy patrol which usually moved about the town, while four others were to stand by

to assist in removing any arms that might be available should the raid be a success. Four men - Ralph Keyes, Moss Donegan, Seán Cotter and Michael O'Callaghan - strolled slowly on to the pier in pairs. They kept a close watch on the sentry on duty aboard the M.L. boat, and as they drew near they saw him go below decks to the crew's quarters. The four I.R.A. men, with Moss Donegan leading, then crept aboard the boat, and the leader (Mossy Donegan) from the top of the companionway called on the crew to put up their hands. While he had the crew under cover, his comrades (Ralph Keyes, Seán Cotter and Michael O'Callaghan) dashed to the magazine and burst in the door with a sledge, which had been carried along by the men who had been standing by near the railway station. The armoury contained six Ross Canadian rifles, four revolvers, 2 Verrey Eight pistols and a large quantity of ammunition. All stores were removed, and warning the crew not to move for at least an hour, the raiding party withdrew round the northern and eastern side of the town to the spot selected for dumping the captured material - the national school. However, they were unable to dump the arms in the school and had to take them to the church nearby, where they were dumped for the time being with the co-operation of Ralph Keyes's father, who was sexton there at the time.

In December, 1919, I took part in a raid for arms on Roycroft's Stores, Main St., Bantry, in which we obtained three hundred cartridges, a large supply of black powder and two cartridge filling machines. Bantry Company was a very active unit at this period. The members were continuously engaged on raids on enemy stores passing through to the enemy garrison at Bere Island and

to the Naval forces at Bantry. Nearly every member of the unit was engaged on these activities at one time or another. Some of these, whose names I can recollect, were: Paddy Connolly, Michael O'Sullivan, Paddy Lynch, Michael Coakley, Wm. Coakley, Ml. Lynch, Tim Sullivan, Ml. Walsh, Denis J. O'Brien and Jack Sullivan.

During 1919 the R.I.C. at Bantry telegraphed the R.I.C. at Drimoleague each day as follows: "Letter by next train". This letter, whatever it contained, was taken to Bantry Railway Station by an escort of R.I.C. and handed to the guard on the train. Sometime towards the end of the year a message in code was despatched to R.I.C. Drimoleague, but there was no message to indicate "Letter by next train". I immediately assumed that the message in code referred to the text of the usual daily message and set about deciphering the code message on those lines. In the course of a day or two the code messages were readily deciphered. As far as I can recollect, the first code was "ESKORUF". At this stage messages in code became a regular feature with the R.I.C. and military authorities. Several messages now passed through Bantry Post Office each day. Copies of all messages were taken, decoded and passed to the Intelligence Officer, Bantry Battalion (Tom Reidy), always before the message was actually despatched to the addressee. The messages were sent to the Battalion I/O in telegram envelopes addressed to officers of the enemy forces or prominent enemy supporters, the messenger in all cases being aware that the message was for delivery to the I/O (Tom Reidy).

I should have mentioned earlier that during 1919 I was engaged in training selected men in the work of

operating morse signalling equipment and the sending and taking of messages. Some of these men whose names I can remember were: Paddy Connolly, Michael O'Sullivan, Michael Connolly. These men were later to prove most efficient when placed in listening posts where the wires had been tapped.

Several members of Bantry Company carried out a raid on the goods store at Bantry Railway Station in the summer of 1920. In this raid we obtained a considerable quantity of army stores which were being despatched to Bere Island garrison. The goods seized included boots, shirts, underwear and socks. They were removed via The Strand to a dump in Newtown area, where they were stored until they were removed to another district for distribution to the Brigade Column. About the same time we carried out a raid on the steamboat plying between Bantry and Bere Island - "Princess Beara" - in which we secured a large supply of cigarettes, bacon and tinned foods which were on their way to the enemy garrisons at Bere Island and Castletownbere. These were also dumped and later distributed to the column. I was in charge of these operations. Others who took part were: Patrick Lynch, Michael Coakley, Jerh. O'Sullivan, Michael Walsh and Michael O'Sullivan.

The Company O/C (Ralph Keyes) was "on the run" at this time. I was acting for him in September, 1920, when I received a message from a bread-van driver - Con Lynch - that a convoy of mule carts carrying rifles and a Lewis gun was on its way from Castletownbere to Bantry. He informed me that he had passed the convoy between Ballylickey and Snake Bridge - about four miles from the

town. I immediately mobilised the company (Bantry) and within about thirty minutes had up to forty men at Donemark Bridge - about 1 mile from Bantry. I sent a section of six men to the nearest dump at Wilkinson's Wood - about two miles away - to collect some arms, but before they got back the convoy had passed on its way to Bantry, so the opportunity was lost.

In the autumn of 1920 a "listening in" station was established at Gortnavallig, about five miles from Bantry on the Glengarrif road. The telegraph wires between Bantry and Castletownbere were tapped and leads taken into sounders, which were installed in a cave at this point. This post, from date of establishment, was staffed round the clock by Paddy Connolly, Michael Connolly and Michael O'Sullivan, who worked in shifts. The establishment of this post enabled our Intelligence service to get first-hand information regarding enemy plans on a number of occasions. In addition to the post at Gortnavallig, we had a secret telephone installed in the home of the Resident Magistrate (Mr. Brady) at Ballylickey. In this case the telephone was installed in order to enable a member of Cumann na mBan who was employed by the Resident Magistrate, to communicate with us in the post office in the event of any unusual happenings. This telephone was installed in a concealed cupboard. A telephone was also installed at Whaley's, Glengarriff Road. This phone was in contact with a morse sounder, and messages were read off the bells of phone.

Raids on the mails, both local and general, were a regular occurrence in the district at this period. With the co-operation of the other I.R.A. men in the post office - Patrick J. Lynch and Patrick J. Casserly -

I made an arrangement by which all mail likely to contain information of military value was made up in parcels and placed in one bag. I then arranged to have the car conveying the mails to the railway station held up and the bag seized. The man in charge of the mails on the way to the railway was, of course, co-operating in the plan. On one occasion the man detailed to hold-up the mail car took the wrong bag, and when he had dashed away, the driver, in his excitement, shouted after him, "Blast you, you have taken the wrong bag". On one occasion a loaded mail van stood outside the post office while two lorry loads of Auxiliaries were in the office. As the mail van driver was preparing to move off for the railway station, Michael Coakley, a member of Bantry Company, slipped into the seat beside him and ordered him to turn the van and drive away. The driver, being co-operative, did as he was told. The van was driven to Ardnageehy - about $1\frac{1}{2}$ miles from Bantry - where some other Volunteers were waiting to remove the mails. All the mails, with the exception of one bag, were removed. This oversight was probably due to the large number of mailbags involved and the necessity for haste, having regard to the fact that the Auxiliaries had been at the post office when the van was driven off and were likely to be searching the area within a very short time. Anyhow, there was considerable activity by the military and R.I.C. and in a short time the van was discovered. When taken back to the post office, the van was searched by Lieut. Boardman - British Military Intelligence Officer - who found the bag. He remarked in my hearing, "I don't give a d... about the others, but my death warrant is in that", pointing to the bag. The

bag was now handed in to the post office to await the next despatch. I immediately made arrangements with two local I.R.A. men, Michael Lynch and Michael Sullivan, to call to the back door of the post office, and when the opportunity arose I slipped the bag to them. They removed the bag to a safe place without delay. The contents were censored and reposted. I cannot now recollect what information, if any, we gleaned from the examination of the mail in this particular bag.

About November, 1920, the military force billeted at West Park, Bantry, were receiving messages in a despatch bag dropped by a British army aeroplane. The bag was usually dropped in the field adjoining the billets where a large circle was marked out with white-washed stones. A number of men from the Bantry Company obliterated this circle by covering the stones with grass. At the same time, another group were making a large circle with white-wash in the adjoining field. The ruse worked and next day the enemy despatch bag was dropped in the circle prepared by the I.R.A. The bag was seized by our men immediately it touched ground and was taken away. As a result of the operation, the enemy discontinued the use of the aeroplane in the conveyance of messages.

Ralph Keyes (O/C Bantry Company), who had been 'on the run' for some time, was arrested together with the Battalion O/C (Mossy Donegan) and Battalion Adjutant (Seán Cotter) ^{on 28/11/1920}. On the orders of the Brigade Vice O/C (Ted O'Sullivan) I was now appointed O/C Bantry Company. All my activities in connection with the work of the unit had to be under cover, otherwise my value from the Intelligence aspect would be nil. However, I was able to carry out regular inspections of the company as well

as a number of outlying sections, and so keep the officers and men on a regular routine of service. Mails were raided at least weekly; bicycles were commandeered for the use of the Brigade Column; men were held ready at all times to act as scouts or despatch riders. In addition, enemy posts were sniped as opportunity offered. These activities continued until May, 1921, when instructions were received from Brigade H.Q. to burn Vickery's Hotel, Bantry. This action was taken on the strength of information received from G.H.Q. Dublin that the hotel was to be taken over by the Auxiliaries and used as a barrack as had been done in the case of the Eccles Hotel, Glengariff, at an earlier stage. This was a big job for the company, but it was carried out efficiently. It necessitated the removal of a number of guests, together with the staff and their belongings, from the hotel to Canty's Hotel across the street. All beds were saturated with petrol and the floors of other rooms were similarly dealt with. When all the men engaged on the job had been withdrawn from the premises, a cushion soaked in petrol was ignited and thrown up the stairs. There was a violent explosion and the walls of the hotel were blown into the street. Approximately 100 men - every available member of the company - were engaged on this job. The operation was commenced about midnight and was completed about 1.30 a.m. I was in charge. The hotel was situated in New St. in the centre of the town and within 400 yards of the military and R.I.C. posts, but not one made his appearance during the course of the operation. All streets leading into the area were held by armed sections drawn from Bantry Company.

Curfew patrols, which were operating in Bantry town ~~on~~^{over} a prolonged period, were often foiled of a capture due to an arrangement by which I.R.A. men in the town were able to utilise post office letter boxes to dump incriminating correspondence and even ammunition when held up. In this connection I had an arrangement whereby all letter boxes were checked by one of my agents first thing each morning.

In addition to the important military operations performed under arms, there was the multitude of services to be performed - both collectively and individually - which go to make the company a valuable unit and to render it a useful link in the vast chain of the Irish Republican Army. Discipline had to be maintained and military training practised at weekly parades. Lectures on military operations, lessons on signalling, scouting, bombing, first-aid, the care and use of arms, the manufacture of bombs and mines, target practice and all such activities had to be carried on under the gravest difficulties and demanded the wholehearted co-operation of each and every member of the army. Many of these parades and lectures had to be carried on under the protection of armed scouts, and it is an everlasting credit to the unit (Bantry) to record that the attendance was largest when the danger was greatest. During the curfew period the spirit and morale of the men exceeded all expectations and proved a source of constant worry to the enemy forces. They never knew what to expect next, for the work of the company (Bantry) was carried out punctually, efficiently and with the greatest courage and daring. Mails were raided in one street while patrols of military and R.I.C. and Auxiliaries were drawn up in another.

Copies of secret cypher telegrams were delivered to the Battalion Intelligence Officer (Tom Reidy) before the originals were handed to the invading forces. As already outlined, phones were installed and tapping stations constructed in order to ensure that the maximum amount of information would be available at all times.

Every individual member of the I.R.A. in the area regarded it as his personal duty to collect information likely to be useful and to transmit it to the Intelligence section with the minimum delay. Every stray cartridge found its way to Company H.Q. Every article likely to assist in the fight - bayonets, belts, leggings, etc. was collected and handed over to the column. Plans of enemy posts, the movements of guards and patrols, times of arrival and departure of British warships, stray words from anti-nationals, in fact, everything of a hostile nature was recorded, sifted and submitted to the officers in charge of the Active Service Units (Columns) to assist them in the formation of plans.

Clothing was commandeered as required to protect the men of the Column during the winter campaigns.

Arms were transferred from one hiding place to another. Fresh dumps were made, cartridge cases were filled with buckshot. Chains of despatch riders were established between the town (Bantry) and the outlying sections and so on to the adjoining areas for the expeditious conveyance and delivery of despatches. Petrol was seized as required and made available at suitable dumps in readiness for company and battalion officers.

Every road and bridge was rendered impassable for heavy enemy transport and their movements were hampered in every possible way. Roads were cut in several different places when the enemy adopted the plan of forcing civilians to fill in trenches. Their patrols beyond the town area were in the end few and far between, and they moved into the country only when absolutely necessary and then in bodies of 300/400.

The amount of work involved in the establishment of this organisation was enormous. It occupied the best attentions of the company's (Bantry) officers throughout the whole period. How well the various arrangements worked may be judged from the fact that no single hitch occurred at any time, nor was any arrest made subsequent to the carrying out of instructions. All operations were carefully and coolly executed and so well timed that it was rarely necessary to alter a plan. It is quite probable that this series of activities of the Bantry Company constitute a record of efficiency in view of the fact that some task - big or small - was performed each day and night during the whole period of the war of independence.

My rank at the Truce - O/C Bantry Company,
Bantry Battalion, Cork 111 Brigade, I.R.A.

The strength of the company at the Truce was about two hundred.

During the Truce I was still employed in the post office, Bantry. I acted as Camp Adjutant of a training camp which was held at Letterlickey, and continued to carry on my duties as O/C Bantry Company until January, 1922, when I was transferred by the post

office authorities to serve in Rathdrum, Co. Wicklow.

The officers of Bantry Company during my period of service were:

1917 - August, 1919:

O/C - Ralph Keyes
 1st Lt. - Robt. Lynch
 2nd Lt. - Michael Crowley
 Adjt. - Michael Harrington (to Battn. Staff
 Aug. 1919)
 Q/M - Jack O'Mahoney (left area Aug. 1919).

August 1919 - Nov., 1920:

O/C - Ralph Keyes (arrested 28/11/1920).
 1st Lt. - Robt. Lynch " 22/11/1920.
 2nd Lt. - Michael Crowley (to A.S.U. Nov. '20).
 Adjt. - James O'Sullivan (witness)
 Q/M - Con O'Sullivan.

28/11/1920 - 11/7/1921:

O/C - James O'Sullivan (witness)
 1st Lt. - Jerh. O'Sullivan
 2nd Lt. - James McCarthy
 Adjt. - Patk. Lynch
 Q/M - Jack Sullivan.

Signed: *J. Sullivan*

Date: 11/7/56

Witness: *P. J. Lonnell*

(Investigator).

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