

ORIGINAL

BUREAU OF MILITARY HISTORY 1913-21

BURO STAIRÉ MILEATA 1913-21

No. W.S. 1470

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BUREAU OF MILITARY HISTORY, 1913-21.

STATEMENT BY WITNESS.

DOCUMENT NO. W.S. 1470.

Witness

Peter Cummins,
Mersheen,
Arthurstown,
Co. Wexford.

Identity.

Battalion Engineer, 2nd Battalion, South Wexford
Brigade (1920-1922).

Brigade Engineer, South Wexford Brigade (1922-1923).

Subject.

Activities of 2nd Battalion, Irish
Volunteers, South Wexford Brigade,
1917-1922.

Conditions, if any, Stipulated by Witness.

Nil.

File No S. 2807.

Form B.S.M. 2

A.A. 1470

ORIGINAL

BUREAU OF MILITARY HISTORY 1913-21

BURO STAIRÉ MILEATA 1913-21

No. W.S. 1,470

STATEMENT BY Mr. PETER CUMMINS,

Measheen, Arthurstown, County Wexford.

In October, 1917, I was sworn in as a member of the Irish Volunteers. There were nine or ten others with me. The Oath was administered by Seamus Rafter of Enniscorthy, who later was killed while making explosives. At that time all the area known as New Ross district was called New Ross Company. Our instructions at that time were to make pikes similar to those used in '98.

The only activities at that time, apart from the working of the Sinn Féin clubs, were public parades in the anti-conscription movement. It was during these parades that we learned how far the R.I.C. were prepared to go in their support of England. In this parish (Ramsgrange) one of the De La Salle Brothers of Ramsgrange Monastery, Rev. Brother Remidges (Remiges), made a speech in support of the movement at every public parade. The R.I.C. were always present and took notes: they reported the speeches to the Brother's Superior and had him removed.

Mr. Phil Kennedy of Shælbaggon, who was the standard bearer of Sinn Féin in this and the surrounding parishes, took an active part in these parades and it was through his example that most of the men in the Sinn Féin club became members of the I.R.A.

In December, 1918, at the General Election, I acted as tallyman for Doctor J. Ryan. I was too young to vote. We of the Sinn Féin club took up all the best positions outside the polling booth, while the Redmondites, or the Ffrenchites as they were called in this county, stood apart in a small group with dour faces. Mr. John Cummins, of Shælbaggon, drew my attention to them, saying that he saw their fathers

and their grandfathers standing there, and that I could see their sons and their grandsons standing there. Well, I have, and their daughters and grand-daughters too. The same families without a change.

In 1919 the Republican Courts were established in "C" Company area (Ramsgrange parish). The appointment of the local Magistrates took place at a public meeting held outside Ramsgrange Church. The meeting was presided over by Mr. Phil Kennedy.

The first Magistrate appointed was Mr. Phil Kennedy, Shæelbaggon. The second was Mr. Patrick Cummins of Ballyhock who, up to 1918, was a staunch supporter of the Irish Party. He was one of the defenders of Foley's Fort in the Land League and was jailed for the disabling of an R.I.C. man on that occasion. During the 1918 election campaign he came over to the Sinn Féin platform and addressed many meetings in the locality. I believed it then and I believe it still that, that is one of the biggest things a man can do. The third man appointed was Mr. Jim Devereaux of Ballystraw. He was not present at the meeting and Mr. Phil Kennedy/^{Jack Stafford,} Michael Hodman of Arthurstown, and I were appointed as a delegation to ask this man to accept the position. All the members of the I.R.A. were active in the collection of the Dáil Loan.

In or about April, 1920, I was serving my time as Estate Carpenter at Lord Templemore's and, in that capacity, worked at renovations to Arthurstown and Duncannon R.I.C. Barracks for defence purposes. I was in the unusual position of testing the attackers' and defenders' positions and I made full use of it. I drew plans of both/^{barracks and} the surrounding positions of each and discussed these plans with the officers of the Battalion. I cannot remember if they were

all officers or just eager men of other Companies.

The discussions were usually held on Duncannon sandbanks and some of those present were :-

- Tom Hanlon, Gussarone,
- Henry Donovan, "
- Tommie Sullivan
- Phil Lennon, New Ross,
- Tommie O'Neill "
- Sec. Walsh "

Willie Owens (Later killed in either Bray or Gorey).

These plans and suggestions always had to be placed before the Enniscorthy men to be sanctioned. They were always sanctioned, but the attacks were always called off at the last hour.

From early in March, 1920, our task was to collect all the two-inch metal pipes we could and cut them into five-inch lengths. To these we fitted wooden ends, grooved in a lathe for the ends of the pipes to sit in. There was a hole bored in the centre of each end for a bolt to pass through and a smaller hole in one end to insert a detonator and fuse. This work was carried on in our workshop at Arthurstown. It was situated in the same range of houses and sandwiched between the dwelling houses of two R.I.C. men. The workshop yard adjoined the R.I.C. Barrack yard.

Often No. 1. R.I.C. man would walk out of his back door and into the workshop. But always while he was taking these fifteen paces we were able to have our work covered up. He would remain a long time talking and would remain longer if No. 2. R.I.C. man did not walk in from the other side. They used both talk a lot to us but they had not much use for one another. Little did the poor men

know that they were completely holding up the work of an I.R.A. shell factory. They were both within a few months of being pensioned out. They knew our views but did not share them. They knew if anything happened that our sentences were already passed and they did not want to be enemies.

When a quantity of these shells were cut and fitted they were removed by members of "C" Company to "A" Company for filling. One evening we had a large quantity made and Paddy Power of Coole (an uncle of mine) took them out of the village in a cart to the Cross of Coole about four miles from the village. Six members of "C" Company met him there and divided the load on to bikes. The six were - Joe McGrath, Tom Sutton, Jimmie Duffin, Paddy Duffin, Michael Hodman and I. We brought them beyond Gussarone to a place called ~~Clonahilly~~ ⁱⁿ where/a corrugated iron shed there were a number of men attending a demonstration on how to fill the cases with explosives and charge them with detonators and fuse. The instructor was the late Joe McMahon of County Clare - who went under the assumed name of Joe Cassidy. On the floor of the shed were some bed-sheets covered with explosive powder which had been taken from the Hook Lighthouse (where it was used for the fog gun). There were also bundles of electric detonators. As there was no one present who knew how to wire up the batteries and detonators, I showed how it was done and, while I was engaged at this, someone took a handful of the explosive material, placed it on a runner of the shed and then put a lighted match to it. It only blazed up brightly but it could have been serious.

It was only a few months afterwards that the explosion occurred at St. Kieran's. The men present belonging to "A" Company, as far as I can remember, were -

Tom Hanlon, Martin Walsh, Henry and Jack Donovan, one of the Fitzgeralds and one of the Rochfords.

From about May, 1920, the R.I.C. did not civil duties and, with the establishment of the Republican Courts, members of the I.R.A. served notices on the owners of all licensed premises to open and close at fixed hours. Also all licensed premises were notified to close on the day of Terence MacSwiney's funeral. On one occasion all the pubs. in Duncannon were visited in daylight on Sunday and all ordered to clear their houses. One Saturday night we raided a "Shebeen". There was a lot of drink stored there for Sundays' drinking. It was all brought out to the yard and the bottles broken.

This Battalion, No. 2, was an area of about 136 square miles. It is in the south-west portion of County Wexford extending from about three miles of New Ross to Hook Head. It was divided into four Companies, "A", "B", "C" and "D".

"C" Company covered an area of about 17 square miles, about one-eighth of the Battalion area. It was situated in the south-west of the Battalion area and embraced the villages of Ballybrack, Arthurstown, Ramsgrange and Duncannon. In the entire Battalion area there were thirty licensed premises and twelve of these were in "C" Company area. There were seven Post Office in the Battalion area and three of these were in "C" Company area. There were six R.I.C. barracks in the Battalion area, and two of these were in "C" Coy. area; there was a Coastguard Station (six men and their families); two lighthouses; a Courthouse (where monthly sittings were held); the Resident Magistrate, the Clerk of Petty Sessions, two J.Ps., and a hostile Rate Collector. These were all symbols of English occupation and the number of people involved was enormous in a small rural area; and all the members of the I.R.A. who took a prominent part were marked men from very early in the struggle.

In May, 1920, the R.I.C. barracks in "A" Company, "B" Company and "D" Company were vacated and the garrisons transferred to the two barracks which were in "C" Company, namely Arthurstown and Duncannon.

The first attempted attack on Arthurstown barracks was one night in July 1920. My uncle (William Cummins) and I went by pre-arrangement about a mile (north) outside the village (Arthurstown) to meet the men from New Ross who were to take part in the attack. We had to travel out of the village in our stocking-feet.

Joe McGrath (Company Captain) went to Kelesk ("A" Company area) where "A" Company had assembled and were awaiting the arrival of the New Ross men. Some of them arrived but others were held up and arrested. At about 1.30 a.m. Joe McGrath came from Kelesk and told us that the attack was called off. The Enniscorthy men were not mentioned on this occasion. We then went to where the members of "C" Company were assembled, a section of which had been told off to cut the telegraph wires and block the road from Duncannon to Arthurstown. The road from New Ross to Arthurstown was blocked with felled trees at Dunbrody by the men of "B" Company. The members of "C" Company present were - Tom Sutton, Quartermaster, Tom Cummins, 1st Lieutenant, Pat Kennedy, Adjutant, Peter Donnelly, Jack Stafford, Tom Stafford, Ned Stafford, Richard Sutton, John Sutton, Jimmie Duffin, Paddy Duffin, Phil Flaherty, Patsy Kehoe, Paddy O'Neill, Denis Hayes, Paddy Leary, Michael Rossiter, Joe Henrick, Jack and Nicholas Nolan.

The next attack on Arthurstown was planned to take place on a Sunday morning at 10. o'clock. It was usual for the R.I.C. to come outside the barracks at that hour to sit and talk and watch the people going to second Mass at Ramsgrange. The attackers were to be met by me outside the village at 2 a.m. and guided through a wood and

across a mill stream beside the barracks and into our workshop where they were to rest until morning. I had the fencing cut and the stream planked across. I was to be in a position where I had full view of the R.I.C. and where my uncle could see me from the workshop door. I would be in full view of the R.I.C. and when they were all outside the barracks I was to light a cigarette as a signal to my uncle who, in turn, would tell the attackers. They were to run towards the barrack door. They could not be seen until they turned the corner which was three paces from the barrack door. Cars were to be waiting a half mile away to take the attackers and booty away.

At 11 o'clock on Saturday night Tommie Sullivan came to Arthurstown and told me that the Enniscorthy men had called off the attack.

In August, the R.I.C. barracks at Arthurstown was being vacated. The garrison dismantled the steel shutters, removed the sandbags and packed their arms and ammunition. At 5 p.m. they had everything ready but no lorries arrived to take the stuff to Duncannon. Michael Hodman went on his bicycle to New Ross and got in touch with Phil Lennon and told him what had occurred and asked him to come out and that everything could be taken without a fight. He declined to come.

When Arthurstown barracks was vacated, "C" Company was instructed to destroy it. I with some others thought it would make a wonderful hall or meeting place for the Sinn Féin club. So we sent back word to Battalion headquarters that it would be more value to the Cause to have a Sinn Féin hall where an R.I.C. barracks previously stood. Headquarters sent back word that all evacuated enemy posts should be destroyed and if we would not do it that "B" Company would be ordered to carry out the operation. We members of "C" Company, who had so many disappointments up to this, stood aside and let "B" Company do the

job. But the attempt was a failure; there was only a hole two feet square burned in an upstairs floor. A few nights after that "C" Company was ordered to meet the members of "A" Company at Doctors Cross, a position halfway between Arthurstown and Duncannon. The purpose of the assembly was to destroy Arthurstown barracks. Among the members of "A" Company were Tom Hanlon, ^{AND} Pat Byrne. And amongst the men of "C" Company was Peter Donnelly carrying a road-mine that was made by "C" Company and filled and charged by "A" Company. It was to be used in the destruction of the barracks.

Joe McGrath, Company Captain, and I were sent to hold the road leading from Arthurstown to Duncannon. We cut the telegraph wire leading from Arthurstown to Ramsgrange and Duncannon and proceeded to the Light-house turn (the best position for shot guns). All the others went to Arthurstown. After about two hours waiting we thought we should have heard an explosion and, thinking something should be wrong, Joe sent me in the direction of Arthurstown to investigate. When I came near to Doctors Cross I met Richard Sutton of "C" Company coming to tell us that the operation was off.

My uncle told me that when they arrived at the barracks he was sent to procure a ladder and when he returned with one they were gone. Three days afterwards we received instructions that the barracks must be destroyed without any more fumbling. The night was fixed (the last Tuesday in August) and "C" Company assembled at Arthurstown. William Cummins had petrol and oil which he procured during the day. He brought four men with him to where he had it stored. Some of the others went to a nearby shed and got straw and made it into a sugaun (sugán) while others sprinkled the petrol inside the building.

I brought Joe McGrath and Pat Kennedy to hold a position that could be used with deadly effect by the enemy if they got there first. I went back to the barracks and laid the Sugaun which was to act as a fuse. It was steeped in petrol. It reached from the attic down the stairs and out the hall on to the roadway. When everything was ready and everyone out and told to stand aside I waited a few minutes to let the petrol vaporize. I got a short piece of candle from Paddy Duffin. (Paddy had everything that was wanted in his pockets). I lighted the candle and threw it on the sugaun. The whole barracks lit up with a roar and then the doors and windows banged shut. I had to run from falling slates and flying glass. The enemy post was ~~shaken~~ to the foundations. The roof fell in and all was burned when the R.I.C. and military arrived in the morning. Within two days everything in the out-offices was looted. So the I.R.A. found it necessary to act as police and tell the people to put the loot back again as it was the property of the landlord. These people brought the loot back and be it said to their credit they told the R.I.C. that those who ordered it back were unknown to them.

There were only two occupied R.I.C. barracks in the Battalion now, one in "C" Company and the other in "D" Company twelve miles away. We had come to the stage that anyone who was not with us had to be treated as being definitely against us. So as well as being Company Engineer I was appointed Company Intelligence Officer, principally to trail members of an adjoining Company who used to frequent unfriendly houses in our Company. It was a mean job to steal to your neighbours' back windows and a hard one where there were dogs. Tommy Duffin was appointed as my assistant and one Sunday night, when returning from such a job we walked right into two lorries of R.I.C. and military: they were arresting Paul Foxristal of Arthurstown.

There was also the trouble of irresponsible members of other Companies coming and carrying out such silly acts as flashing torches on girls who had the name of keeping company with R.I.C. men. These acts were unofficial and thwarted the plans of the local I.R.A.

Then there were raids for arms carried out by young men who were not members of the I.R.A. but said they were. One of these young men's people were most hostile to the Movement. These young men threw stones through the windows of the farmers' houses they raided. One of these farmers was hostile and the others were friendly to the Movement. I happened on them one night as they were getting ready for a raid. I contacted five or six members of our Company. We caught the raiders at Suttons Cross near Ramsgrange. They were armed with sticks shaped like guns. They were let off very lightly and they promised never to do it again.

Early in September I was threatened by R.I.C. and Black and Tans that I would be held responsible for anything that would happen in the Company area. They came to where I worked and put me on my knees. They brought out my father also as a witness to what they had to say. If anything happened to any of the R.I.C. or their friends, I was to be shot. A week after that they called to my home and I and my parents were threatened that if I was caught out after 6 o'clock at night that I need not be expected back. Joe McGrath, Company Captain, was also threatened if anything happened that his home would be burned. And Michael Hodman got a similar threat.

At this time we were drilling and also attending Gaelic League classes at Shielbaggon. Tommie Sullivan used to teach the Irish class. He was a 'wanted' man at the time. A section of the Company

used keep guard while the class was on. At this time also there was a change in officers of Brigade. Tommie Sullivan was appointed as Brigadier in place of Tom Hanlon. So when the class was over the Company used to assemble at Kennedy's and the Brigadier usually attended. One night after the class there was a section sent on a job. I was advised to go home. While on my way home there was a terrific explosion. It was the St. Kierans explosion in which five Volunteers lost their lives.

I felt these months very trying in case any unofficial action would be taken and I would be arrested unawares.

In November, 1920 there was an extensive operation carried out in "C" Company. The Brigade officers took charge and there were some men from "A" and "B" Companies as well as all the men of "C" Company. The Courthouse at Arthurstown was partially wrecked and all the books and documents burned. The house of the Petty Sessions Clerk was raided and his typewriter and documents taken. The Post Offices at Ramsgrange and Arthurstown were raided. Men from Arthurstown and Ramsgrange who were suspected of giving information to the R.I.C. were pulled from their homes and brought some miles away and, having been warned and threatened, were released again. In other houses some of the occupants were searched. These operations were carried out during one night, so the next morning the members of "C" Company were in 'No Man's Land'. Four of them were arrested by the R.I.C. and beaten up. Some of them were not released until December 1921. They were Michael Rossiter, William Cummins, Peter Donnelly and John Henrick. They were in Waterford, Kilworth and Ballykinlar. When William Cummins was arrested at Arthurstown everything in the house was smashed and thrown out in the street.

Three others evaded arrest and had to go on the run. Joe McGrath served with County Waterford A.S.U., Pat Byrne served with "A" Company and I served with "A", "B", "C" and "D" Companies until the Truce. Jimmie Howlett joined the I.R.A. at this time and was put in Joe McGrath's place.

During the eight months I was on the run I worked as a carpenter, coach-painter, house-decorator, each, according as the jobs turned up. My movements from Company to Company were less noticeable as a journeying tradesman. I moved first into "B" Company. Mr. Simon Murphy, Manager of the Shelbourne Co-Operative Society was the leading man in the National Movement in that area. He was also a District Justice of the Republican Courts. He gave me several weeks' work at a time. It was he who got the jobs for me in "A" and "B" Companies. It was only then that I found out that it was easiest to act outside one's own Company area.

When William Cummins was arrested his revolver was not got and no one knew where it was. So I cycled to Waterford where he was in jail to find out where it was. When I arrived in Waterford I was arrested by an R.I.C. man and a Black and Tan from Duncannon Barracks. They were under the influence of drink and brandishing revolvers. While they were holding up a street musician I ran and left my bicycle with them. I came back to the same place after an hour or so and got my bike. I also found out where my uncle's revolver was hidden.

Late in December the complete destruction of Arthurstown Courthouse was carried out by "G" Company. It was late in the night when I arrived in the area, so I was not actually on the job. It was over when I got there, so I went back into "C" Company area early next morning.

About this time the roads were trenched in all Company areas. I was on the job blocking the roads in "B" Company leading from New Ross to Duncannon on the night of the first attack on Duncannon R.I.C. barracks. Larry Rowe, Jim Dunne (afterwards in Free State forces), Jim Cleary, Jack Foley, Jim Carr, Wattie Hanlon, Mick Dunphy, Larry Walsh, Martin Nolan (afterwards killed by Free State forces) and some others whose names I don't remember now, were also on the job.

There was a boycott on all Belfast goods at this time. There was a man in "B" Company area who acted as agent for Messrs. Dicksons, Seed Merchants, Belfast. His house was raided on a Sunday night. As I was a stranger in the locality I could show myself without a mask. I was the person picked to speak to him and ask for seeds and documents in his possession.

"B" Company were instructed to trench the New Ross, Dunmain, Duncannon road for the second attack on Duncannon R.I.C. barracks. I was also on that job and the following morning two girls cycled into the trench; one of them was seriously injured. Both were members of "C" Company Cumann na mBan.

All the time I was in "B" Company I took part in every activity that was carried on. I used to go home to "C" Company frequently, mostly at night. I used to report at Kennedy's as the lads used to be there cleaning their guns. If they were not there those at home could direct me to where they were. Perhaps they'd be in Cummins's field drilling. It was at these parades that I would get my copy of An t-Oglach.

About April, 1921, I went into "A" Company. I stayed at Fowlers of Nash. Many 'wanted' men stayed there from time to time, Phil Lennon included. It was there that I first met Danny McGrath

of No. 1 Battalion, afterwards Divisional Quartermaster, 3rd Eastern Division. I painted a hayshed while there and so passed the neighbours as being a painter from the Board of Works. Babs Fowler was a nurse and gave lectures to the Cumann na mBan of the Battalion.

One night there was a bridge to be torn up: it was where a small river crossed the road at a place called Askin Lane. It was the boundary between Nos. 1 and 2 Battalions within three miles of New Ross. There was a public house nearby (Shannons of Ballylane). I travelled from Nash to Ballylane with Tommie Duffin, Mattie Sullivan, Andy Byrne, Henry Donovan and some others. As we walked along the road in the daylight of the evening carrying arms, I was thinking of how hard it would be to do that in "C" Company's area. It was decided by the officers of the Company to enter the public house and commandeer all those, who would be drinking there, to tear up the bridge. The officers knew of one man who would be there whom they could not trust. So it was decided that I should bring him out and blindfold him so that he could not recognise the local members. When we arrived at the public house it was dark and there were more than a dozen men drinking there. I got some beer splashed on my clothes (which came in useful later on in the night). The blindfolded man was taken charge of by Mattie Sullivan and Andy Byrne and they tied his feet and hands and put him lying in a cottage garden until the operation was over. I went with the rest of the Company and the commandeered men to the bridge. As the place was near New Ross it was expected that a walking patrol of military would be stalking along the road. So I was told to keep walking along in the direction of New Ross. My instructions were to keep to the centre of the road and pretend that I was drunk.

If I was halted by the enemy I was to tell them that I was a painter working at Mr. D. Eaths' and coming from the pub. So I took down my pioneer pin and staggered along the centre of the road with the smell of beer still on my clothes and happy in the thought that being drunk was the best proof that I was not a rebel. I did not know at that time if Mr. D. Eaths' was on my right or left, but I was just going on until I was halted by the enemy or by the two men armed with .303 rifles walking on either road bank behind me. They were Tom Hanlon and Phil McGrath. McGrath was an ex-soldier and a member of No. 1. Battalion. I do not know what rank Tom Hanlon held at that time. It was the men whom I was scouting for that halted me and told me to go back to the bridge. From the bridge I went with Ned Walsh to do sentry on a part of the road called the "Look Out".

As I have already stated, at this time I was Battalion Engineer and I.O. for "C" Company. For the last few weeks before the Truce I was in the Fethard-on-Sea area ("D" Company). One of the two R.I.C. strongholds was in "C" Company area and "C" Company, in all, made six attacks on Duncannon Barracks, and on one occasion brought a land mine which exploded but did not do much damage. But it was afterwards learned that the garrison was ready to surrender on that particular night, but the Company had no way of knowing this and had no proper arms to press home the advantage they had.

It has since been stated by Battalion officers that certain of these attacks on Duncannon barracks were major engagements. This has obviously been done for pension purposes. I would like to give here a complete list of the Company membership at the Truce :-
 Joe McGrath, Tom Cummins, Pat Kennedy, William Cummins, Tom Sutton, Richie Sutton, Jimmie Duffin, Paddy Duffin, Ned Stafford, M. Hodman, Denis Hayes, Paddy O'Neill, Paddy O'Leary, Michael Rossiter,

Jack Nolan, Nick Nolan, Phil Flaherty, Patsy Kehoe, Finbar Sullivan, John Henrick, Jack Stafford, Tom Stafford, John Sutton, Jimmie Howlett, Joe Henrick (R.I.P), Peter Cummins (Bodron), Peter Cummins (myself), Battalion Engineer.

The following were members of Na Fianna Eireann :- J. Kennedy, Martin Kennedy, William Cummins, Paddy Shannon, Peter Murphy.

Following the Truce, of course, several members came to enrol and a Brigade Camp was formed. I attended as Battalion Engineer. I also attended lectures twice weekly at Wexford Town Hall. The lectures were conducted by Mick O'Keeffe who was Brigade Engineer. I made all kinds of trap mines etc. for demonstrations at these lectures. I also visited each Company in the Battalion once weekly, giving lectures. The last lecture held in Wexford is an easy date to remember: it was the 6th December, 1921. I had to do several other things such as protecting a Protestant farmer from being turned out of his farm. The Clerk of Petty Sessions also wrote asking for protection.

When the split came following the Treaty, only one man of the Company joined the Free State Army, namely Jimmie Howlett, now, I think, Sergeant-Major in Dublin. All the other members remained Republican, but we were then called "Irregulars" and any who were not in jail had to go on the run until long after the "Cease Fire" order. Thank God they are still all together in the one organisation, Fianna Fáil.

Signed: Peter Cummins

Date: 23rd July 1956

Witness: Sean Brennan Lieut. Col.

