

ORIGINAL

BUREAU OF MILITARY HISTORY 1913-21

BURO STAIRE MILEATA 1913-21

No. W.S. 1524

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BUREAU OF MILITARY HISTORY, 1913-21.

STATEMENT BY WITNESS.

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Witness

Michael O'Regan,
Sirmount,
Ovens,
Co. Cork.

Identity.

Battalion Q/M
" Comdit.

Subject.

Activities of 3rd Battn. or (Ovens)
Cork No. 1 Bgde., 1917-1921.

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ORIGINAL

BUREAU OF MILITARY HISTORY 1913-21
BURO SAIRE MILEATA 1913-21
NO. W.S. 1,524

STATEMENT BY MICHAEL O'REGAN

Sirmount, Ovens, Co. Cork.

I was born in the townland of Curraghbeg, Ovens, in February 1900. I attended the local national school until I was 15 years of age. When I left school I started work on my father's farm.

A branch of the Gaelic League was formed in Shrelane, Ovens, about the latter end of 1916. With other young men of the parish I joined. Michael O'Donovan of Garryhesta was instrumental in starting the club and a Mr. Dillon of Blarney was appointed teacher. From among the members of this club the first company of Volunteers was formed in the spring of 1917. We numbered about 20 at first. Tim Healy became captain and Tim Herlihy became 1st Lieutenant. I was then appointed section leader. We drilled and paraded weekly and, by the early spring of 1918, had a membership of about 40, when new officers were elected. Walter Leo Murphy, who was always known as Leo Murphy, of Ballincollig, became company captain. I became 1st Lieutenant and James O'Brien 2nd Lieutenant.

During the conscription scare of this year, our membership increased to over 100. During the period we had intensive drilling and we collected some shotguns which we used in drilling. Other activities included the holding of feiseanna around this time. When the scare had subsided our membership dwindled to about 50 approximately.

Later in the year, a battalion staff was appointed for the area which became known as the 3rd (or Ovens) Battalion of Cork No. 1 Brigade. The companies making up this battalion were:- A - Shrelane; B - Killumney; C - Ballinora; D - Aherla; E - Farran and F - Farnanes. Peter O'Donovan of Cork City was

appointed by the Brigade O/C. as Battalion O/C. Jerry O'Shea of Waterfall became vice O/C. William Cotter became adjutant and Thomas Hickey, Q.M. Roughly, the strength of the battalion was 300 men or an average of 50 men to each of the six companies. Each company had an average of 25 shotguns. In addition, there were two rifles as well as a few revolvers in the battalion.

On the anniversary of the deaths of the Manchester Martyrs in this year, a public parade of the Volunteers in the brigade area was arranged for Cork City, but it was proclaimed by the British authorities and did not take place. On the evening of the day arranged for the parade Leo Murphy and I followed a British soldier down one of the quays in the city and disarmed him of a rifle and 100 rounds of .303 ammunition. During the general election at the end of the year, all Volunteers canvassed for the Sinn Fein candidate - Terence McSwiney.

Soon after the general election, the battalion O/C. - Peter O'Donovan - was replaced by Tim Herlihy as battalion commandant of the area. Routine drilling continued in the company and other companies in the area throughout the year 1919. About the end of the year all shotguns and arms of any kind were collected on the instructions of the battalion O/C. Some motor bikes were also collected.

Prior to the I.R.A. attack on Blarney R.I.C. barracks on 3rd June 1920, roads in the battalion area were blocked by fallen trees. On the same night, Tim Herlihy, the battalion O/C., with selected members of the battalion, carried out a sniping attack on Farran R.I.C. Barracks using shotguns and rifles. Among those who took part in the attack were: Jeremiah Herlihy, a brother of Tim Herlihy, Denis Conway and myself. Prior to the attack on Carrigadrohid R.I.C. Barracks

on 11th June 1920, I assisted in blocking roads in the area. Later, on 20th June, an attack, in charge of Dan O'Donovan (who was known as "Sando"), was again carried out on Farran R.I.C. barracks. The majority of the attacking party were members of the Cork City Battalion who were armed with rifles. Five or six members of this battalion participated in the actual attack.

The barracks was a two-storey building situated in the village of Farran and was attached to a single-storey house. After the removal to safety of a family who lived in the single-storey house, the City I.R.A. placed some explosive material against the dividing wall of the two buildings (to the best of my knowledge, the explosive used was gelignite). When the explosive had been laid, a number of sandbags which I had helped to carry in were placed on top. In the meantime, the riflemen had been placed around the barracks itself. When all was ready, the charge of gelignite was exploded. It split the wall between the two buildings and blew the roof off the single-storey house. A small hole was blown in the dividing wall but was not large enough to afford an opportunity to attack on that side of the barracks. As the explosion occurred, the attack proper was opened by the men surrounding the barrack. The garrison within withdrew to the upper storey and immediately replied to the fire, at the same time sending up a number of Verrey lights through the chimney. One of the city I.R.A. effected an entry to the barracks and threw some bottles of petrol and paraffin on the stairs, but did not manage to set it alight. After about an hour, our scouts informed us that military reinforcements were on their way to Farran so we hastily withdrew. Next day, the garrison evacuated the building and the same evening it was completely burned down by members of the battalion. The local Courthouse was also burned down. The battalion vice O/C., Jerry

O'Shea, was severely burned during the operation which put him out of action for some time. Following the burning of the barracks and Courthouse, a large force of R.I.C., Tans and military raided the area and burned down the local hall which had been used for Sinn Fein and Volunteer meetings.

Activities around this time included raids on post office mails in each company area. Among the letters which we seized and censored was one from a soldier to his people in England in which he described how he had taken part in the shooting of two I.R.A. men in Birr, Offaly. His photo accompanied the letter. We passed both letter and photo over to the 8th (or Ballyvourney) Battalion, in which area the soldier was stationed. The soldier was subsequently identified and shot dead in the village of Ballyvourney. It was around this time I also participated in the burning of Ballincollig Workhouse.

Some short time after this, I was appointed battalion quartermaster in place of Tom Hickey who had resigned. On 23rd October, on the instructions of the battalion O/C., Tim Herlihy, we went into the 9th (or Passage West) Battalion area, with the object of attacking a military lorry which travelled at regular intervals from Cork city to Bandon. About 60 men of this battalion went to the area where we proposed to carry out the ambush at the Chetwynd Viaduct near Ballinhassig. Our arms consisted of six rifles, several shotguns, a few revolvers and some bombs. Tim Herlihy was in charge. Positions were taken up mainly by the shotgun men on one side of the road while two riflemen - myself and Leo Murphy - took up a position on the opposite side. We had been in position from 7 a.m. to 11 a.m. when our scouts brought word that we were being surrounded by the enemy. The main body of our men got away under heavy fire, while Leo Murphy, Jack Herlihy, John Horgan

and myself, armed with rifles, fought a rearguard action for about half an hour and thus enabled the main body to escape. One of the main body, a man named Jeremiah Herlihy, a signaller, was captured by the military and told to run. He turned and just walked away and was shot in the neck as he did so. He was found, a few hours later, taken to a hospital in Cork city where he died the next day. He was later buried at Cloundrohid with military honours.

Shortly after this, several attempted ambushes were laid, but for one reason or another they never materialised. It was around this time that Leo Murphy was appointed battalion O/C. in place of Tim Herlihy who, with the adjutant, William Cotter, had been demoted by the brigade staff. Dan Keane was appointed battalion adjutant in place of William Cotter. I remained quartermaster, and James Foley was appointed vice O/C. instead of Jerry O'Shea, who retired.

On 15th November 1920, I got word that four unarmed ^{were} British soldiers/in the area of Ovens. I mobilised "A" Company and proceeded to Ovens where we found the four soldiers. We arrested them, questioned them and held them prisoners for about a week in Farran Company area, after which they were shot dead on the instructions of the brigade O/C. and were buried in the Aherla company area. Around the same time, a postman from Waterfall - named Nagle - was arrested, tried and executed as a spy. Shortly after, a Captain Thompson, an Intelligence officer attached to Ballincollig Military Barracks, while proceeding by motor bike from Cork to Ballincollig, was held up by a section of I.R.A. men in charge of Leo Murphy. His motor bike and revolver were seized and he was taken into a nearby field and shot dead. He was regarded as a very dangerous man.

His body was found next day by the local military who had been searching for him since he failed to turn up at the barracks.

On 21st January 1921, two R.I.C., on bicycles, a Head Constable and a sergeant, proceeding towards Waterfall from Ballincollig, were ambushed by a party of I.R.A. under Leo Murphy. The sergeant was shot dead, but the Head Constable escaped. The sergeant's rifle and revolver were captured.

On the night previous to the Crossbarry ambush on 19th March 1921, Leo Murphy, James Foley, Sean Murray and myself slept for the night in a hayloft over a stable in Waterfall. We reached the loft by a ladder which we drew up after us. We were armed with a rifle each. About 3 a.m. a convoy of military lorries from Cork pulled up outside the farmhouse beside the stable. The military searched the farmhouse and outhouses. When they came into the stable over which we were located, we heard them discussing the possibility of someone sleeping overhead. As they could find no ladder to search the hayloft, they went on their way. Shortly after they had gone we proceeded towards Crossbarry. It appears that Leo Murphy was aware of the impending ambush there, although he did not mention it. When we got within two miles of Crossbarry the ambush had started. We spent the day in the locality under cover and could see and hear lorry loads of troops coming and going all day. The countryside was strange to us. Late that night we came upon a convoy of fourteen military lorries which had been on their way from Ballincollig to Crossbarry and which appeared to be bogged down on the road, or were reluctant to proceed to Crossbarry. It was now quite dark so we opened fire on the convoy, firing a few rounds each. They replied to our fire immediately; after a while we returned to our own area.

Some time afterwards we obtained the loan of fifteen rifles from the Macroom, or the 7th Battalion, and started a battalion flying column. About 20 selected men went into training at Farnanes. We stayed in a shed alongside a farmhouse. For about a fortnight, we had an intensive course in the use and handling of the rifle. When the course was over we proceeded towards Ballincollig in extended formation with Leo Murphy in charge. On the way we halted at a farmhouse for tea. We were more dry than hungry. As I took out a bucket of tea to the column who were waiting around outside, one of the column, who was examining his rifle, accidentally discharged a shot which shot the vice O/C. James Foley through the stomach. He died next morning and was later buried with military honours. I was then appointed battalion vice O/C. in his place. Tim O'Keefe of Ballincollig was appointed battalion Q.M. in my place. Leo Murphy had intended to attack an R.I.C. patrol in the neighbourhood of Ballincollig, but had to abandon the idea for the time being, as the death of James Foley had upset his plans.

About a fortnight after Foley's death, we decided to attack a foot patrol of about ten R.I.C. and Tans from Ballincollig Barracks and took up ambush positions on a hill overlooking Inniscarra Bridge between Ballincollig R.I.C. barracks and Cloroe. We had been informed by our scouts that the patrol had already left on their usual route, so we decided to attack them on their return, but, to our surprise, they did not return by their usual route. It was surmised at the time that they had been informed that we were waiting for them. A few nights later, however, we approached the R.I.C. barracks and carried out a sniping attack which lasted about one hour. The garrison did not reply to our fire. This attack together with the fact that the garrison in the R.I.C. barracks were

aware that we were armed with rifles had the effect of keeping the patrol within the barracks, as they never again ventured out on foot as a patrol. I should have mentioned that, in addition to the R.I.C. barracks, Ballinacollig also had a military barracks, in which were stationed between 2,000 and 3,000 troops of the Manchester and Yorkshire Regiments. Shortly after the sniping attack on Ballinacollig R.I.C. barracks we had to return the fifteen borrowed rifles to the Macroom Battalion, which left us with only five or six rifles.

Small foot or cycle patrols of R.I.C. and Tans now were seldom seen on the roads. Instead, the enemy forces went around in large convoys or columns several hundred strong. In the month of March 1921, a large mule column of about 400 military, assisted by armoured cars, camped for a week in the Aherla Company area and carried out a large scale round-up of the countryside. In this round-up several Volunteers were arrested including ~~including~~ seven or eight members of Aherla Company. From then to the Truce our activities consisted of occasional sniping attacks on Ballinacollig R.I.C. Barracks or just simply avoiding the many large-scale round up searches by the enemy.

On 27th June, Leo Murphy, Sean Murray, Dick O'Keefe, Jerry O'Sullivan and a civilian named Ned Magner spent the best part of the day at Killumney and then proceeded to Waterfall around 3 p.m. while Magner returned to his home in Ballinacollig. Magner lived directly opposite the R.I.C. Barracks. He was a butcher and held a contract for the supply of meat to the military barracks. The four I.R.A. men had gone to Waterfall to attend a meeting of the local company. A bowling match had been held in Waterfall the same evening, at which a big crowd attended. When the company meeting was over, the four I.R.A. men went into a local pub for a drink. They were armed with

two rifles and two revolvers which they left behind a door of the porch leading into the pub. The pub was full of customers after the bowling match. I happened to be sitting on Ovens Bridge awaiting some members of the local company and as I sat there two Ford cars full of men dressed in civilian clothes - all military officers - suddenly appeared. They came so quickly that I just had time to throw myself backwards across the low wall upon which I was sitting. They continued on their way and entered a passage way leading through some fields to Killumney. When they arrived at Killumney they rushed into a pub there and inquired for Leo Murphy. When they discovered that Murphy and his companions had left, they proceeded to Waterfall where they surrounded the pub where Murphy and his companions were located. When Murphy saw he was trapped, he rushed for a rifle and forced his way past a guard on the door; in a second or two he was shot dead through the head. Sean Murray, Dick O'Keeffe, Jerry O'Sullivan, some local Volunteers and several civilians were arrested. One of the Ford cars was sent for reinforcements and two or three lorries arrived. An R.I.C. man named Sullivan identified Leo Murphy's body, after which each of the prisoners was made to walk on the body as they were being loaded into the lorries. Some of the civilians were released next day. The Volunteers were detained in Ballincollig for about a week and were later sent to internment camps. Leo Murphy's body was handed over next day to his relatives and, after some days, he was buried in the republican plot in St. Finbar's cemetery in Cork City. It will be observed that it was immediately after the arrival of Ned Magner in Ballincollig that the two Ford carloads of military arrived in Killumney and that they had been informed of Leo Murphy's presence there.

After Leo Murphy's death I was appointed battalion commandant by the brigade staff. Mick Foley (a brother of James Foley) was appointed vice-commandant. About three days

before the Truce, in the course of a big round up most of A/Company were arrested and interned. I managed to escape.

About a fortnight after the Truce, Sullivan the R.I.C. man, who had identified Leo Murphy's body, attended a rugby match in Cork City accompanied by a Tan named Malif. While both of them were proceeding down Washington St., Cork, two Cork City I.R.A. men and myself opened fire on them. They were badly wounded but managed to survive.

Some three weeks after the Truce, a brigade training camp was established at Gougane Barra, which was attended by two officers from each battalion staff in the brigade as well as the company officers of each company. They numbered about 90 men. Sean Hegarty, the brigade O/C., was in charge. I represented the Ovens Battalion. We had an intensive course of training for a fortnight in the use of the rifle. Sean Murray was instructor. When I returned to my own battalion area I started a battalion training camp at Riordan's of Farnanes. Later, I started a second training camp at Walsh's of Farane, a third camp at Hayes's of Cloughdivo, and a fourth camp at Kennelly's of Aherla. In each case the course lasted for a week. Sean Hayes of Farane Company was training officer and Sean Murray, the brigade training officer, visited each camp in turn. In the meantime, we received hundreds of shotguns and carbines from brigade H.Q. in the city. Later, a battalion flying column was formed and received a course of special training. I was instrumental in obtaining six Lewis guns and one Vickers machine gun from Ballincollig military barracks which were paid for out of brigade funds. I was in touch with a Lieutenant Simmons who sold them to me. I actually drove a car into the barracks and collected the Vickers gun from the officers' mess.

In the month of March, with ten men, I took over the R.I.C. Barracks at Ballincollig from the R.I.C. and, later, I drove a lorry to Ballycotton and collected a load of rifles and ammunition which had been seized from a ship as it was about to depart for England.

In May, I marched the first company of Irish troops into Ballincollig military barracks which I took over from the British military.

Signed: Michael O'Regan

Date: 1st November 1956.

Witness: John J. Daly

