

ORIGINAL

BUREAU OF MILITARY HISTORY 1913-21

BURO STAIRS MILITARY 1913-21

No. W.S. 1530

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COSANTA.

BUREAU OF MILITARY HISTORY, 1913-21.

STATEMENT BY WITNESS.

DOCUMENT NO. W.S. 1530.....

Witness

Christopher O'Connell,  
Post Office,  
Eyries,  
Co. Cork.

Identity.

Section Leader, Bgde. Col., Cork 111  
Bgde.; Vice O/C, Castletownbere Battn.,  
Cork V Bgde.

Subject.

Activities of Castletownbere Battn.  
& Bgde. Column, Co. Cork, 1915-1921.

Conditions, if any, Stipulated by Witness.

Nil.

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U.S. 1530

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BUREAU OF MILITARY HISTORY 1913-21

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STATEMENT BY CHRISTOPHER O'CONNELL,  
Eyries, Co. Cork.

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I was born in Eyries, Castletownbere, on September 3rd, 1896, and was educated at Eyries national school.

In November 1915, a number of men from the parish of Eyries were amongst intending emigrants to U.S.A. who were turned back at Liverpool. Emigration from the district had been going on for many years, and there was nothing abnormal in the fact that these men intended to emigrate at the time. On their way back home, two of them - Seán O'Driscoll and Pat Mullins - got in touch with Terence MacSwiney in Cork. As a result of their conversations with him, they began the organisation of a Volunteer company in Eyries as soon as they returned. I was one of the founder members of this unit.

When Terence MacSwiney paid a visit to us on New Year's Day, 1916, we had built up a company of about thirty men. There was no ex serviceman amongst us, and we had to carry on training as best we could ourselves. Parades were held once a week, and route marches and field exercises every Sunday. Officers were elected. Jim McCarthy was elected commandant, and Seán O'Driscoll, captain. They were the only officers, as far as I remember. This was not in accordance with the usual procedure, but it is what was done in the case of the Eyries company.

<sup>Dailhi</sup>  
~~Daniel~~ Barry, brigade adjutant at the time, came to Eyries and stayed with us for a while. Seán Hennessy also came for a short period. Seán O'Driscoll attended an officers' training course in Sheares Street, Cork, in January 1916. The company strength increased rapidly in the early part of 1916, and at Easter we had about a hundred men. There was no change of officers.

The arms we had at Easter 1916 consisted of one seal rifle which Joe Foley had, eight or ten shotguns and a few revolvers - some of them Colts .45. The shotguns were not owned by members of the company, but were readily available from the owners who resided in the parish. There was very little ammunition for any of the weapons.

There was a meeting in Eyries of the officers and some men from different parts of the parish on Easter Saturday night, 1916. At that meeting, the orders for Easter Sunday were given. I think we were told that Kenmare was the point to which we would march next day; at any rate, we were told we were to march into Kerry. We had no information of what was intended on Easter Sunday, and I don't think anyone knew. We were not told anything about arms coming in. We got no instructions to bring food.

About eighty of the hundred men in the company mobilised in Eyries after first Mass on Easter Sunday. A cycle patrol of five or six men, amongst whom were Joe Foley and a brother of mine, were sent in advance to Kenmare with a despatch. The remainder of the company marched, and we reached Lauragh - about twelve miles from Eyries - some time after midday. There

was no Volunteer organisation in that area or in Ardgroom through which we had passed. In fact, there was no Volunteer organisation nearer to us than Bantry on one side, and Kenmare on the other. We were in a very isolated district.

The day was very wet, and we halted at Lauragh. We had brought no food, and there was very little to be had locally, with the result that most of the men had nothing to eat. The people of the locality were quite indifferent. The church was open; we took shelter in it, and most of the company spent the night there. A few got into houses. Early next day, we straggled back home. Most of the men had nothing to eat until they got back to their own area.

As far as I know, the cycle patrol did not contact anyone in Kenmare and did not return to Eyries until the next day. No orders came to us during Sunday, and we had no information as to what was happening in other areas.

We were not mobilised again during Easter Week. We got no orders from Cork or elsewhere. A small gun boat came into the harbour during the week and kept the village under cover of its guns. The following week, a party of military came from Bere Island, surrounded the village and searched all houses. Part of this force were Munster Fusiliers. I got outside the cordon. They searched my brother's forge and another forge along the road. They did not find anything either there or in the village.

An R.I.C. party under a D.I. went to Joe Foley's, Ardaclugga, and searched his house. They demanded his

rifle. He refused to surrender it. He was arrested and, although they searched for the rifle, they did not find it; it had been safely dumped. After Joe Foley's arrest, someone, without his knowledge or consent, brought the rifle into the police, in the belief or hope that he would be released if it was surrendered. He was not released and was interned in Frongoch. A revolver which Pat Mullins had, and two shotguns - one owned by the O/C - were the only other weapons surrendered in Eyries. Joe Foley was the only one arrested. This was the only arrest in the area in 1916.

There was no Fíanna or I.R.B. organisation in Eyries before Easter 1916.

After Easter Week, we worked quietly and there were no parades or public displays. We drilled at night and on the hills on Sundays. Arms were scarce in the district; in all, we had only three revolvers and about six shotguns. We had no service rifles, and we did not know how to use them, and there was no hope of getting any from brigade headquarters.

There were no British military posts or garrison houses to raid, only the local R.I.C. barrack, and this we decided to raid. It was agreed that we should hold another parade on St. Patrick's Day, 1918, and march from Eyries to Castletownbere, a distance of five miles. Charlie Hurley, later commandant of West Cork brigade, was then employed in Castletownbere and had organised a company there. His men were to join us in the parade through the town. Our plans were that a few picked men should drop out of the ranks on the way

in, slip back to the village, get as near to the barrack as possible, watch an opportunity when the door opened, and then rush it. There were four R.I.C. members stationed in Eyries at that period - a sergeant and three constables. One of these, a man named Cahill, had just come from Drimoleague after a bomb incident there. This man, we were told by the housekeeper, was always on the alert, and he sat at his meals with a drawn gun on the table. The sergeant (Nugent), a cool, daring man, we knew would be a dangerous antagonist. However, our captain (Seán Driscoll) decided to call off the raid at the last moment, and we were very disappointed at the time, but we afterwards saw the wisdom of his decision. The route march and parade through Castletownbere was carried out, and as there was no time for food or refreshment in the town, we left immediately and returned to Eyries. On arrival, we met Joe Foley who had been interned after Easter Week. Foley was then well advanced in years and was a great inspiration to the younger men. When we told him we did not carry off the raid, he said, "It is not too late yet". The sergeant and another constable, whose name I cannot remember, had gone after us to the town and had not yet returned. On occasions like this, they usually brought reinforcements with them. There was no time to lose, as it was getting late and they should not be long more.

We mustered five men, namely, Joe Foley, Seán Driscoll, Con Dwyer, Peter O'Neill and myself. Joe and Seán each had a revolver, with five rounds between them; the revolvers were .45 Colt. I had a .32 calibre revolver, with two rounds of ammunition. The other two were unarmed. We got on hasty disguises in

our private houses, and stole quietly out the back way. Our plan this time was to knock at the front door, give a good imitation of the sergeant's voice and ask the orderly to open up. If that ruse failed, we had no alternative but await another opportunity. It was now dusk as we slipped along behind the village until we came to the barrack which was a detached building. A boreen ran down at the east gable, and there the others waited while I was sent around to the front to reconnoitre.

At the door, I came face to face with the barrack orderly whose name, I think, was Dalton. He also saw me, with my suspicious disguise, and to turn to tell the others would be fatal. I whipped out my little gun and ordered, "Hands up". In return, he swiftly pointed his right hand at me, and I pulled twice on the trigger. There were two dull clicks - my two rounds were duds. There was no shot from his side either - it was his finger he was pointing at me, thinking I would mistake it for a gun in the dark. Then he backed in quickly to slam the door, and I hurled myself at him with full force. There was a step down inside, and the force of the impact sent him reeling into the hallway. Again, I ordered, "Hands up", and this time he obeyed. It was with mixed feelings I stood there in the hall, holding up this giant R.I.C. man. I can still picture him - fair complexion, broad shoulders and deep chest, a man of splendid physique - and the light from the table-lamp in the dayroom shining through the open door. I was thrilled at having taken this symbol of British imperialism, as it were, by assault, anxious that my comrades should come to my assistance and fearful

every moment of getting a clatter from Cahill whom we expected to be there. Luckily, we learned later, he had gone out for a drink, and that was probably why Dalton had opened the door, anxious for his return before the sergeant got back.

At last, my pals, sensing there was something wrong when I did not report back, came bursting in. Joe Foley and Seán Driscoll, with revolvers drawn, took charge of Dalton. Con Dwyer, Peter O'Neill and I rushed upstairs where we expected to find the arms. It was so dark now that we could not find our way around; we had no matches; and flash lamps were unknown to us at that time. Then I thought of the table lamp in the dayroom, and ran down for it. We had lost a lot of time and, though Jim McCarthy (Store) and my brother, Dave, were on the look-out, the others would be in on us at any moment. With the lamp, I passed by Joe, Seán and the captive at the foot of the stairs, forgetting that I had given him a good chance of recognising them. With the aid of the lamp, we found the rifles, took them from the racks and rushed out into the darkness while Joe and Seán covered our retreat. Of the five men who took part in that raid, three are dead, namely, Con Dwyer, Peter O'Neill and Joe Foley (R.I.P.) Sergeant Nugent and the men who were with him that night are also dead. Seán Driscoll and I are left to tell the tale.

Two years later, we had another encounter with Nugent at Allihies mines. His own rifles barked that night, and, although his barrack was completely demolished and some of the garrison wounded (including his pet terrier), he refused to surrender. <sup>one of the garrison was killed</sup> He was a game scrapper - and may he also rest in peace!



There was a big increase in the strength of the company in the spring of 1918 when conscription was threatened by the British. At this time, the area was reorganised, and the Eyries unit was sub-divided into four companies - Eyries, Urhan, Ballycrovane and Ardgroom. It was about this time also that Castletownbere battalion was established. As far as I can recollect, the companies in the battalion were: Adrigole, Ardgroom, Ballycrovane, Urhan, Eyries, Bere Island and Castletownbere. The battalion O/C was Seán Driscoll, and the adjutant was Mick Crowley.

Normal training was continued about this period but, when the conscription scare passed, a number of the new recruits took no further part in Volunteer activities.

About August, 1918, the local R.I.C. attempted to arrest Con Dwyer - a member of Eyries company. They were obstructed by a party of Volunteers, consisting of Peter Harrington, Michael Foley, Con O'Neill, Con Dwyer and witness (Christopher O'Connell), and prevented from carrying out the arrest. As a result, a force of British military - King's Own Yorkshire Light Infantry - were moved into Eyries where they commandeered a private house. Within a week of their arrival, I was arrested, as were also Michael Foley, Peter Harrington and Seán Driscoll. We were taken to Victoria barracks, Cork. Seán Driscoll was charged with illegal drilling on St. Patrick's Day when he was in charge of a Volunteer parade to Castletownbere. He was found guilty and sentenced to a term of imprisonment. With Peter Harrington and Michael Foley, I was charged with obstructing the R.I.C. when endeavouring to arrest Con Dwyer. We were found guilty and sentenced to

eighteen months' imprisonment with hard labour.

We were then transferred to Cork prison where we refused to do hard labour, and went on strike. We were then placed in solitary confinement where we remained for nearly six months before being accorded political prisoner treatment. I was eventually released in July, 1919. When I returned home, the detachment of the King's Own Yorkshire Light Infantry were still in occupation in Eyries, and West Cork had been proclaimed a martial law area since October 1918.

While I had been in Cork prison, the members of the Eyries company had not been idle. They had carried out attacks on an R.I.C. patrol and on a military ration party operating between Castletownbere and Eyries.

Early in 1919, Cork brigade, which embraced the whole county of Cork and was organised into some twenty battalions, was divided into three brigades as follows: Cork I (city area and districts east of Bandon river); Cork II (north Cork); Cork III (west Cork). Our battalion (Castletownbere) was now the 6th battalion of Cork III brigade. The other battalions in the brigade were: Bandon, Clonakilty, Dunmanway, Bantry, Skibbereen. The first officers of Cork III brigade were, I think:-

O/C	- Tom Hales.
Vice O/C	- Hugh Thornton (I think).
Adjutant	- Pat Harte.
Quartermaster	- Pat Harte.

There was no great activity in the area beyond normal parades and training until early February, 1920,

when Allihies R.I.C. barracks was attacked by a party consisting of representatives from Eyries, Castletownbere and Bere Island companies. This operation was planned by Con O'Sullivan, Joe Foley and Christopher O'Connell (witness). About twenty men took part in the actual attack while there were, in addition, a number of men on scouting and outpost duty. The attacking party were armed - eight with rifles, and the balance with shotguns. The rifles were those (four) captured in the raid on Eyries R.I.C. barracks on St. Patrick's Day, and four more obtained by the Bere Island men from the British garrison on Bere Island. The explosives (gun cotton) used in the attack were also supplied by the men from Bere Island.

The attacking party assembled at Inches, about one mile from Eyries, at about 8 p.m. We then moved off across country to Allihies, a distance of about seven miles. Some short distance from Allihies, we removed a wooden plank (14' x 9' x 3') from a haybarn, as we required same in order to lay our charge of gun cotton.

The R.I.C. barracks - the object of our attack - was an isolated building in Allihies village. There was a stone wall enclosing the yard of the building at the <sup>front</sup> ~~rear~~, and a section of shotgunmen took up a position behind this wall. ~~to cover off the only window in the back wall of the barracks.~~ The remainder of the attacking party - shotgunmen being interspersed with riflemen - were placed in various positions at the front and rear of the barracks. While these sections were moving into position, the gun cotton slabs, which had already been tied to the wooden plank mentioned in

previous paragraph, were placed in position, a detonator and fuse being fixed to the charge. The charge was placed at the base of the rear wall, underneath the *only* window, <sup>in the wall</sup> by Con Sullivan and myself. It was then tamped with bags filled with earth. We then lighted the fuse and dashed for cover. We had barely reached cover when there was a loud explosion, and a breach, about fourteen feet wide, from the ground to the eaves of the roof, was blown in the wall. Within a few minutes, we were all to observe the result of the explosion, and then found that there were two cross walls at either end of the breach, so that the enemy garrison were still under cover, and we had now no means of dislodging them. All sections then opened heavy fire on the building but, despite repeated calls to surrender, the garrison held out. After about five hours, the attacking party withdrew as there was no prospect of success. We did not rush the breach in the wall in the first instance, being more or less surprised by the amount of damage and assuming that any of the garrison who were still alive would surrender. As far as I can recollect, some of those who took part in this operation were: Peter O'Neill, Con Sullivan, Jeremiah McAuliffe, Denis O'Neill, Jack Sullivan (Shamrock), Mort McCarthy, Jim McCarthy, Mike Walsh, Nelus O'Neill, Mike Sullivan, David O'Connell (brother) - all from Eyries and Inches companies; Christy McGrath, William O'Neill, Ned Harrington, Dan Sullivan (Castletownbere), Jim Sullivan, Florence Sullivan, Tim Harrington, Michael Sullivan (Bere Island).

Following this attack on Allihies, the R.I.C. garrisons were withdrawn from Allihies and from nearly all small posts in the area. When the order to destroy

evacuated enemy posts came to hand at Easter, 1920, the posts at Adrigole and Eyries were destroyed by explosives and fire by the members of the local units.

Normal training and parades were carried on throughout the area during the summer of 1920. On Sunday, July 25th, 1920, the coastguard station at Ballycrovane, with a garrison of about twelve marines, was attacked by a party drawn from Eyries, Ardgroom, Ballycrovane and Inches companies. This attack was carried out about midday. The attacking party, to the number of about twenty, were armed - some with revolvers and others with rifles. There were, in addition, a number of unarmed men to assist in removing any booty that might be taken. The whole party assembled in the vicinity of Eyries and moved along the seashore under cover of high cliffs until we got close to the coastguard station. The attacking party then scaled the walls surrounding the station and rushed the guards. The station was made up of a terrace of four houses, so our party was divided into four sections. Each section had instructions to rush a particular house. All sections had a hammer-man, carrying a sledge with which to burst in doors or smash other obstacles. Having scaled the walls, the attackers rushed to the houses already allocated to each section and took the garrison completely by surprise. Two of the enemy garrison in the house attacked by the party under Liam O'Dwyer resisted and were shot during the course of a short engagement. These were the only enemy casualties, and there were no casualties amongst the I.R.A. In this raid, we captured twelve Ross-Canadian rifles, about six short Webley revolvers, a large supply of

ammunition, as well as signalling equipment. Amongst those who took part in this operation were: Jack Sullivan, Michael Sheehan, James McCarthy, Jim Driscoll, Mick Sullivan, Liam O'Dwyer and Christopher O'Connell (witness). The sections were in charge of Liam O'Dwyer, Christopher O'Connell.

There was no special activity following this operation until about mid November, 1920, when selected men from the Castletownbere battalion were called up for service with the brigade flying column. On Saturday, November 20th, 1920, six men from the battalion, including Liam O'Dwyer, O/C, Tim Dwyer, Jim Sullivan, "Quinlan" Sullivan, Christopher O'Connell (witness) and Jeremiah McAuliffe, travelled to Togher where we were to meet the column. However, there was no trace of the column in the area and, as we were unable to make contact with it, we returned home. It was later learned that the assembly point was Clogher, near Dunmanway.

The brigade column, which had operated at Kilmichael, Gaggin and elsewhere, was disbanded some time before Christmas, 1920, and was not reassembled until well into January, 1921. Towards the end of January or early February, 1921, I was again called to the column. I travelled by sea from Castletownbere to Bantry, and then moved across the country to Scart where I reported to the column O/C (Tom Barry).

Within a day or two of joining the column, we moved into Drimoleague to attack the R.I.C. barracks there. This was, I think, the night of February 12th, 1921. With a number of other members of the column, I was placed in position behind a fence at the rear, about

thirty yards from the barrack. I cannot now recollect who was in charge of this section. Our party were to await the explosion of a mine by another section at the front of the barrack before taking any action. After waiting for some time, there was a loud explosion which, it was afterwards learned, did very little damage to the barrack, and all sections were then ordered to open fire on the building. Intermittent firing, to which the garrison replied, continued for about twenty minutes but, as there was no prospect of capturing the post, all sections were withdrawn to Castledonovan. All members of the party were armed with rifles.

About this period, the column was billeted in Kealkil area when I was instructed to return to Castletownbere battalion area to obtain reinforcements for it.

I left Kealkil at dusk, accompanied by Mick Driscoll and Mick Lucey, both members of Comhola company, Bantry battalion. We crossed from Kealkil to Comhola and along the old bog road that leads to the main Bantry-Glengariff road at Crosadawoher. In order to avoid the Auxiliary force stationed at Glengariff, we crossed Glengariff harbour by boat under cover of darkness, disembarking at Fircaol. We now followed an old mountain road which led between the Gyl<sup>l</sup>s (Sugar Loaf) mountain to the east end of Adrigole to Tureenag<sup>re</sup>ine where we arrived at dawn.

We breakfasted at Harrington's, Tureenagreine, where Mick Driscoll and Mick Lucey remained while I continued along the old road which led to Mass mountain. I then travelled across country to the Kerry Pass (now

known as Healy Pass - to Lauragh in Kerry, and on to Eyries. This trip was performed on foot in less than twenty-four hours constant travel. I now contacted the battalion O/C (Peter O'Neill), and the next day about twelve men were mobilised.

While the party to reinforce the column was being collected and equipped, I went into Castletownbere with Liam O'Dwyer on the night following my trip, with the intention of shooting any Black and Tans who might be on the streets. We were armed with revolvers. We contacted Ned Harrington, a member of Castletownbere company, but failed to find any enemy forces.

Before leaving Castletownbere that night, plans were laid for a visit by a stronger party next night. It was proposed to send two riflemen to engage the garrison of the R.I.C. and Tan barracks, while a revolver section would seek out some Tans who were usually drinking in a public house in the town. This operation was attempted but, when the I.R.A. sections approached the town, they were warned that the military had thrown a cordon around the area. The I.R.A. party had, in the circumstances, to withdraw without an engagement.

The enemy action, on this occasion, would appear to have been due to a leakage of information regarding the proposed attack, but the source of the leakage was never traced.

When the I.R.A. party moved into Castletownbere on the second occasion, I moved out from Eyries with the reinforcements for the column. With my party, I retraced the route I had taken over the Healy Pass and Mass mountain, along the old Adrigole road into Leitrim,



east of Adrigole. Here, we picked up some men from the Adrigole area (Matt Sullivan, Christy Sullivan and Micheál Óg O'Sullivan) and our two scouts - Mick Driscoll and Mick Lucey - who were awaiting my return. We continued on the route over the "Gyl<sup>É</sup>s" to Coomerhane, above Glengariff, where we had a meal at Paddy ~~Brown's~~ <sup>"Bawn's"</sup> just after midnight.

We then moved along the mountains above Glengariff until we were halted by a mountain stream. As we had no means of knowing the depth of the river or stream - the night being pitch dark - we halted here and slept beside the river until dawn.

At daybreak, we continued on across the Tunnel road and moved into billets where we were unable to get any food, as the people were poor and food was scarce. We continued on our way along the mountain to Caolamine, near Comhola where we obtained some food about noon. We slept here until dusk when we travelled through Comhola to Kealkil. We then followed the old Bantry-Cork road through Coosaun Gap where we halted at Gleannacarney. After a meal here, we moved on to Coppeen where we made contact with the column. We then moved to Kinneigh where the whole column was assembled.

It was addressed that night by the column O/C (Tom Barry). He informed us that arms were to be dumped for the moment and the column demobbed. Our members were instructed to return to their own areas and to reassemble on March 12th, 1921.

Amongst the men who travelled with me from Eyries to reinforce the column were: Sean Driscoll, Paddy Sullivan, John Sheehan, Dan Sullivan (battalion

quartermaster), Dick Spencer, Tom Sullivan, Jeremiah McCarthy. There may have been one or two others, but I have no recollection of any other names. The men from Adrigole, who joined us on our way, were Micheál Óg O'Sullivan, Matt Sullivan, Christy Sullivan. All were armed with rifles.

Our section from Castletownbere area returned to the home area. It must have been about the end of February, 1921. We reassembled as instructed in the vicinity of Coppeen on March 12, 1921.

The strength of the column was now about one hundred. All were armed with rifles. The column was now divided into seven sections of fourteen men each - the following being appointed section leaders: Seán Hales, Peter Kearney, Mick Crowley, Tom Kelliher, Denis Lordan, John Lordan and Christopher O'Connell (witness).

It was now early March, 1921, and the column were moving around the area until the night of March 16th when we were in the vicinity of Shippool, on the road between Kinsale and Innishannon. Information was received that an enemy convoy was to travel from Kinsale to Bandon on March 17th (St. Patrick's Day), and it was decided to take up ambush positions at Shippool on the Kinsale-Innishannon road. The column took up positions inside a wall adjoining the road in the early morning of St. Patrick's Day, 1921. They were extended over a distance of about a thousand yards. Although the column remained in position throughout the day, there was no appearance by the enemy convoy. While we were in this position, an enemy aeroplane flew over, and we had to take special precautions to avoid discovery. All sections withdrew to billets in the area at nightfall.

On the night of March 18th, 1921, the column moved across the Cork-Bandon road to Ballyhandle area where we billeted.

I was detailed to take my section to billets in Harold's farmhouse. "Spud" Murphy, who was deputising for, I think, Seán Hales, who was at column headquarters (O'Leary's) was to take up billets for his men in Beasley's. The two houses adjoined. When the two sections had moved into billets, we discovered that the sections were billeted in the wrong houses. My section was in Beasley's, and "Spud" Murphy's in Harold's. Knowing what a stickler for detail Tom Barry was, we decided to adhere strictly to instructions. We immediately set about changing billets. While this was being done, Mr. Beasley - the father of the Beasley family - escaped. He was being held prisoner with his son and daughter.

Before making any further move, Mr. Beasley had to be found. After searching several fields, he was eventually found hiding in a hedge.

The two sections now returned to the allotted billets. We had only reached our billets when an order for the column to assemble at column headquarters was received. I then moved my section to headquarters where all the other sections were also assembled. It was now about 2.30 a.m.

The column was now addressed by the O/C (Tom Barry), and we were informed that large enemy forces were moving in on our position from several directions, and that it was proposed to take up positions with a view to ambushing some of these forces. Positions were selected north of the old Cork-Bandon road at Crossbarry where the road ran east to west for a distance of approximately six hundred

yards. The sections under Seán Hales, John Lordan, Peter Kearney and Mick Crowley took up positions from west to east behind the roadside fence, and in Harold's and Beasley's farmyards. Each section numbered about a dozen men. All were armed with rifles. I should have mentioned that two mines - one at each end of the section of the road covered by the four sections mentioned above - were laid before the men moved into position.

With my section, I took up a position on the western flank. We were in position on high ground, about sixty yards west, and slightly to the rear of Seán Hales' section, at the western end of the main position. We were under cover of a stone-faced fence and were facing west.

About 8 a.m., I observed a long line of lorries moving along the road from the west, in the direction of the main ambush position. When the third or fourth lorry in this convoy had passed from our view into the main position, fire was opened on them, and the following lorries halted immediately. From our position, my section now opened fire on a number of the lorries on the road below us, but, in order to do so, we had to leave the cover of the fence and move out into the open. The enemy returned our fire for a few minutes, but then the occupants of the lorries within our view disappeared. When the engagement had gone on for about ten minutes, the order to cease fire was given by the column O/C (Tom Barry), but I remained with my section on the western flank. The mine which had been laid at the western end failed to explode.

I should have mentioned that, when the attack opened, Florrie Begley began to play Irish marches on the bagpipes and continued to do so until the Cease Fire. He was, I think, in position in Harold's farmyard, beside the headquarters of the column O/C.

The occupants of the enemy lorries, who had not been killed by the opening burst of fire from the main body, had now retreated to the south. The lorries within the main position were now burned, while a Lewis gun, a good supply of ammunition and a number of rifles were captured.

The destruction of the enemy transport and the collection of the spoils had hardly been completed by the men of John Lordan's and Seán Hales' sections when firing broke out to the south of the road on the eastern flank. A section under Denis Lordan was acting in a similar capacity to mine on this flank. When firing had continued there for a few minutes, the engagement was broken off by the enemy.

The next phase of the engagement took place on my front when a small enemy party - to the number of about twenty - made its appearance in the fields, about two hundred yards or so away. I ordered my section to open fire. The enemy were apparently taken completely by surprise by this attack and disappeared hurriedly without endeavouring to reply to the fire of my section.

The next enemy attack came from the north where a section under Tom Kelliher were engaged on protection duty. When this section was attacked, reinforcements were sent to support it, but the enemy had been driven off before the reinforcements reached the position.

All sections, with the exception of mine, were now called in, and the main body withdrew in a north-westerly direction. When Tom Kelleher's section, which had been the last in action, had been withdrawn from the Castle Field, my section rejoined the main body.

The column was now formed into columns of sections, flankers were thrown out, and we moved off across country to Gurraneveigh where we billeted that night. We had marched about sixteen miles from Crossbarry. Shortly after we began our march, a small body of the enemy troops was observed in the distance. The column was now halted, and the order was given to fire three rounds per man. This scattered the enemy and completed the operation.

The enemy casualties in this engagement were never known, but they must have been fairly heavy. Our casualties were: three killed (Peter Monahan, Jeremiah O'Leary, Con Daly) and two seriously wounded (Dan Corcoran and Jim Crowley).

The column remained in Gurrane<sup>ER</sup>veigh until the evening of March 20th, 1921, when we marched through the night to Clogagh church, a distance of over twenty miles. Here, the body of Charlie Hurley (Brigade O/C), who had been killed in an effort to break through a ring of enemy forces which surrounded his billet, on the morning of the fight at Crossbarry, was awaiting burial. We reached Clogagh about 2 a.m. The local priest was called, guards were posted and the coffin was removed from the church. With arms reversed, we marched to the graveside where three volleys were fired over the grave.

When the burial of our brigade O/C (Charlie Hurley) had been completed, the column moved away to Anichill which we reached about 7 a.m. Next morning, we took up positions on the Courtmacsherry-Ballinascorthy railway line to ambush a party of military which was expected to travel to Clonakilty. Positions were taken up along the railway embankment before daylight. When we had been in position

for some hours, information was received that the enemy party had travelled by road, so we withdrew from the position and moved to the west.

We were moving round the area until the end of the month without making contact with any enemy troops. About this time, I was ordered by the column O/C (Tom Barry) to raid the mails at Leap. Accompanied by Bob Hales, I drove in a commandeered pony and trap to the vicinity of Leap where I held up the mail van and seized all the mails. As far as I can recollect, several items of information which led to the discovery of spies in the area were obtained in this raid.

The column was in Benduff area on March 30th, 1921. It was snowing heavily. Strict instructions were issued to section commanders to ensure that all men were confined to their billets throughout the day. This was an unusual procedure, and seemed to indicate that some big job was in the offing. We were not to be long in ignorance of our next move, for we were paraded at 9 p.m. when we were informed that it was proposed to attack Roscarbery R.I.C. barracks that night. The column was now divided into sections as follows:-

- (1) A storming party of ten men to lay a mine and rush the breach it was expected to make in the barrack door;
- (2) A section of ten men carrying torches. These men were to light their torches and rush to the breach when the first party had broken in to the barracks;
- (3) Three groups of five men each to cut communications and block all roads;

- (4) A section of twelve to take up covering positions around the side and rear of the building, to prevent the garrison from breaking out;
- (5) Ten riflemen to act as a reserve.
- (6) Three groups of four men each to hold the roads in the vicinity of the town.

I was a member of the storming party at (1). The other members were: Tom Barry (column O/C), Mick Crowley, Ted O'Sullivan (brigade vice O/C), Denis Lordan, Pete Kearney, Tim O'Donoghue, Tom Kelleher, Jack Corkerry and Jim Hurley.

The barracks was a strongly fortified building at the eastern end of the town. The area around the building was filled with barbed wire entanglements except for a narrow pathway which led from the footpath on the street to the barrack door.

All sections had moved into their positions about 1 a.m. Sections (1) and (2), carrying the mine and torches, had travelled in their stockinged feet a distance of about two miles before reaching their position at a corner near the post office, about thirty yards from the barrack. Tom Barry (column O/C) now advanced towards the enemy post and ascertained that the gate leading to the doorway of the barrack was not locked. He returned to our position. The mine, mounted on a platform, was now raised on to the shoulders of Jack Corkerry, Tom Kelleher, Peter Kearney and Christy O'Connell (witness). The two fuses were lighted by, I think, Denis Lordan and we started off at a trot for the barrack door. The mine was kept in position on our shoulders by Tim O'Donoghue and Ted O'Sullivan. Tom Barry moved ahead to open the gate, and we carried the mine to the barrack door against which



we laid it, standing on end. Mick Crowley placed a chip beneath the outside edge to prevent it from falling outwards. We then dashed back around the corner, and took cover to await the blast. I should have mentioned that, while moving to place the mine in position, our party carried our rifles slung across our backs. While awaiting the explosion, we fixed bayonets as did the other members of the storming party.

Within a matter of seconds, the mine exploded with a deafening roar, knocking slates off the eaves of the roof of the post office where we were sheltering behind the gable. Led by Tom Barry (column O/C), our storming party and the second section of torch bearers dashed towards the barrack. By the light of a torch, we saw that the mine had not breached the barrack as expected, so our storming party were unable to go into action. The door of the barrack had been holed, and the steel shutters had been blown from two windows. The examination of the damage had not been completed before the garrison were shooting through the door and windows. Our section replied to this fire, and the sections covering the side and rear of the building also opened fire. Some Mills bombs and canister bombs were thrown through the hole in the door. The garrison replied with similar weapons; but eventually, after about two hours, we succeeded in forcing them to evacuate the ground-floor.

It was now decided to set fire to the barracks and, while the men of the storming party and the other covering sections kept up a steady fire at any available target, the section with the torches were detailed to obtain a supply of paraffin oil from the shop nearby. This supply of oil was carried in cans and buckets by a human chain from the shop to the besieged building, where it was

thrown through the hole in the door by the column O/C (Tom Barry). The first lot having been set on fire, a steady supply was maintained and, in a short time, the stairway leading to the upper floor of the building was on fire. The fight went on for about four hours when the garrison were forced to evacuate the barracks. They did not, however, surrender their arms, as they threw them all down the burning stairway. Two members of the garrison were killed, and nine were wounded. We had no casualties. It was now about 5 a.m. All outposts and operating sections were now called in. The column was assembled on the Square and, after some time, we moved off towards the west. After travelling three or four miles, we turned north and, a short time later, moved east to Rossmore area where we billeted for the day. We moved that night, under cover of darkness, across country to Newcestown in Bandon area.

During the early part of April, the column was moving around the area without making contact with the enemy. Sometime towards the end of the month, we took up a position at Ballylickey on the Bantry-Glengariff road to await a convoy of Auxiliaries, but the enemy did not turn up. When we withdrew from this position, the column was divided. The men from the western battalions - Bantry, Schull and Castletownbere - moved into their own areas where they operated as independent units.

On the division of the column, I returned with the men from Castletownbere area to our home district via the route already outlined. On the morning following my arrival home, I was taken prisoner by a party of the King's Own Scottish Borderers who were engaged in a big round-up. They had established their headquarters in a farmhouse in the vicinity, and the prisoners were detained in an

outhouse. During the course of my first day as a prisoner, I managed to escape. I immediately resumed my activities.

When the general order to shoot up enemy forces as a reprisal for the execution of I.R.A. prisoners was received, arrangements were made to visit Castletownbere for this operation. A party of eight or nine men moved into position at Toormore, about a quarter of a mile from Castletownbere, on the road to Eyries, about noon on May 14th, 1921. They sent scouts into the town to see if any Tans or R.I.C. were moving round. Before the scouts returned, another messenger arrived to tell us that the enemy were aware of our presence and that the military at Furious pier were moving out to cut off our retreat at Bealnalappa on the main Eyries coastroad. Six or seven of the party under the battalion O/C (Peter O'Neill) withdrew after exchanging shots with some Tans who had moved outside the town (Castletownbere) while, with Liam O'Dwyer, I moved towards Bealnapappa to intercept the military from Furious pier. This latter force did not put in an appearance, so we had no engagement. Some of those who undertook this operation were: Liam O'Dwyer, Tim O'Dwyer, Peter O'Neill, Murt McCarthy, Jim Sullivan, Christy O'Connell (witness). All were armed with rifles. I cannot recollect the names of the others.

While we were endeavouring to engage the Castletownbere garrison on this occasion, the men from Rossmacowen company under Micheál Óg O'Sullivan attacked a patrol of military at Furious pier where they killed three and wounded two of the patrol.

During the remainder of the month of May 1921, I was engaged in raiding the mails, cutting enemy lines of

communication, demolishing bridges and burning Dunboy Castle as a reprisal for the destruction of the homes of I.R.A. men or sympathisers in the area. Amongst the homes of I.R.A. men burned in the area at this time were those of Liam O'Dwyer and Jerh. O'Connor in Ardgroom area on May 25th, 1921, and the homes of Micheál Óg O'Sullivan and Tim Spillane (Rosnacowen area) on May 26th, 1921.

The month of June and early July 1921 were spent in sniping enemy posts, moving round the area with the other men back from the column, and endeavouring to make contact with enemy patrols or convoys, and in training the members of the local companies.

Just prior to the Truce, Cork III brigade was divided into two brigades. The battalions at the western end of the old brigade - Bantry, Castletownbere, Schull and Skibbereen, together with a new battalion organised in Drimoleague area - formed the new brigade. The first officers of the new brigade were:-

O/C	- Gibbs Ross.
Vice O/C	- Ted O'Sullivan.
Adjutant	- Mick Crowley.
Quartermaster	- Murt O'Sullivan.

The officers of Castletownbere battalion now were:-

O/C	- Liam O'Dwyer.
Vice O/C	- Chris. O'Connell (witness)
Adjutant	- Mark Sullivan.
Quartermaster	- Dan Sullivan.

My rank at the Truce - Vice O/C, Castletownbere Battalion, Cork V Brigade, I.R.A.

The strength of the battalion was approximately 700.

SIGNED: Christopher D. Donnell  
DATE: November 10<sup>th</sup> 1956

WITNESS

P. Donnell

