

ORIGINAL

BUREAU OF MILITARY HISTORY 1913-21

BURO STAIRE MILEATA 1913-21

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BUREAU OF MILITARY HISTORY, 1913-21.

STATEMENT BY WITNESS.

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Witness

Martin Bernard McGowan, N.T.,
Aughamore,
Kinlough,
Co. Leitrim.

Identity.

Quartermaster, 2nd Battalion, Sligo Brigade.
O/C, 2nd Battalion, Sligo Brigade.

Subject.

Activities of Grange Company, 2nd Battalion,
Sligo Brigade, and Brigade Flying Column,
1917 - 1921.

Conditions, if any, Stipulated by Witness.

Nil.

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STATEMENT BY MARTIN BERNARD MCGOWAN, N.T.,
Aughamore, Kinlough, County Leitrim.

I was born here at Aughamore in November 1890. My father was a National School Teacher here and I received my primary education from him. I then attended Summerhill College, Sligo. From there I went to Waterford where I went to College conducted by the De La Salle Brothers. I was later called to training in the Training College, Waterford, where I passed my final examinations and qualified as a National Teacher in 1914. During my time in Waterford I became acquainted with a number of students who took an active part in the fight for freedom, at a later date.

I returned home in 1914 and was appointed National Teacher in my father's school; he had reached retiring age just then. My father was always a great admirer and strong supporter of the Fenian Movement. My uncle, also a National Teacher, was at one stage a leader in the Fenian organisation and, as a result of his activities, he was obliged to give up his job and emigrate to America, where he spent the remainder of his life.

I first joined the Ancient Order of Hibernians in 1914. A Company of the National Volunteers was in existence in this area at that time.

In 1914 Pierce Beasley came to the area and organised a Company of the Irish Volunteers. The officers appointed were members of the A.O.H. and let the organisation fall through or succeeded in breaking it up. At this period the A.C.H. organisation was very antagonistic towards Sinn Féin and they issued an order that any of their members who contributed to or supported the Sinn Féin organisation in any way would be expelled.

A Sinn Féin Club was organised in the area in 1917. My brother was President of the Club until his death, caused by Flu in 1919. Shortly after the Club was organised, Seamus Devins from Grange, County Sligo, attended a meeting and asked some of the members to join the Irish Volunteers. A number joined that night but some of the older men never turned up on parade. About fourteen or fifteen young men from the half parish of Ballintrillick joined and remained in the organisation until the Truce.

Before and during the General Election in 1918 the Volunteers were kept busy organising, checking voters' lists and supplying protection at Sinn Féin election meetings where, on some occasions, the A.O.H. made an attempt to break them up.

On the eve of the election I was notified that I was appointed Poll Clerk in the polling booth in Tullaghan. On arrival there I found that the Presiding Officer, acting for the first time in that capacity, had no idea what his duties were. That suited me very well as he was politically opposed to Sinn Féin. By the end of the day he had spoiled, in error, all the votes polled for the Nationalist candidate; at the same time I took care that he did not spoil any votes cast in favour of the Sinn Féin candidate.

In 1919 the Company were organised into Battalions and the Sligo Brigade was organised under the command of Billy Pilkington. The 2nd Battalion was organised with Headquarters at Grange and comprised the following Companies :- Grange, Maherow, Ballintrillick, Rosses Point, Drumcliffe and Glenade. Cliffoney Company was included in this Battalion at a late date. Seamus Devins, Grange, was appointed O/C. of the Battalion, Jim Rooney-Vice O/C., Edward Bofin-Adjutant, and I was Quartermaster.

Shortly after my appointment as Battalion Quartermaster, I made

arrangements for the collection of all the shotguns in the area. On one occasion, during the course of collecting these guns, Volunteers from Ballintrillick called on a gamekeeper named Rooney and ordered him to hand up his guns. This he refused to do. He barricaded himself in his home and opened fire on our men, wounding the Company Captain of Ballintrick Company. We placed a guard around Rooney's house until the following evening when we captured him as he was about to leave. We then collected his guns.

The home of another gamekeeper was raided and a gun taken. As far as I know this raid was unofficial and was carried out by some men in the immediate locality. By way of a practical joke, these men, at a later date, sent an anonymous letter to the British forces that Mitchell was armed and had strong Sinn Féin sympathies. Acting on this information two lorry-loads of British forces surrounded his house some nights later. Mitchell, who was pro-British, thinking that it was the Volunteers who had come to raid, opened fire on the party, wounding two British soldiers. Intermittent fire was kept up by both sides throughout the night. When morning broke Mitchell realised his mistake. He still refused to surrender until his employer was brought on the scene. He was then taken into custody and got a short term of imprisonment. The whole story was hushed up and got no publicity.

In 1919 we raided the Gleniffe Spar Mines and obtained a quantity of gelignite, stored there for the purpose of blasting the rock. The raid was carried out in daylight. A sheer cliff wall had to be ascended to reach the store of gelignite and one false step would mean death; consequently, it was a dangerous operation to attempt in the darkness. Some of the mine workers were Volunteers and assisted in the job. Following the raid the Mines' Manager was not allowed to keep a supply of gelignite in his store.

Whenever a certain number of holes were bored in the rock an escort of R.I.C. took up the required amount of gelignite and waited to see that it was used up.

Knowing all this and having information that an escort of R.I.C. was expected to come up with the necessary explosives, it was decided to ambush them. It was the custom of the R.I.C. to travel to the mountain early in the morning. A party of Volunteers took up ambush positions before dawn and waited until 1 p.m., but no escort turned up. We got no further opportunity of carrying out a similar ambush as boring operations ceased in the mine for some time.

In 1919 J.J. ("Ginger") O'Connell conducted an Officers' training course in Sligo. During the winter of that year James Devins, Patrick Farrell, Tom Joe Feeney and myself cycled to these classes on one night each week. Some of us resided a distance of over twenty miles from Sligo.

Sinn Féin Courts were set up in the area in 1919. P.J. Rooney, Patrick McGloin and Larry Rooney were members. The Volunteers were often called upon to supply protection for the Courts and occasionally to take charge of prisoners.

In 1919 an order was issued by our G.H.Q. to destroy all vacated R.I.C. barracks throughout Ireland. Acting on these instructions, Glenade, only unoccupied R.I.C. barracks in the Battalion area, was destroyed by fire.

A member of the Special Constabulary, named Henry, stationed in Northern Ireland, was on a visit to his father, who had purchased a landlord's house and demense at Glenade. Captain McGloin and some members of his Company carried out a daylight raid on his home and arrested the Special. A .32 revolver and a shotgun were seized.

The Constable was ordered to clear out and not return. He promptly complied with the order.

In 1920 special "Dug-outs" were constructed throughout the Battalion area. These were capable of holding arms and equipment and were so concealed that they were difficult to locate. I had a hiding place over the ceiling of my school which could only be entered through the skylight in the roof.

The Vice O/C. of the Brigade, Frank Carty, was arrested in February, 1920 and interned in Sligo gaol. Plans were made for his rescue. "Billy" (now Revd. William) Pilkington, Brigade O/C., organised and took charge of the rescue party, most of which was drawn from North and South Sligo so as to avoid possible identification at a later date. We mobilised at Sligo town cemetery where the O/C. detailed men to cross the prison wall. The positions to be taken up inside the prison were then explained. With a number of other Volunteers I crossed the prison wall by means of an extension ladder on the outside and a rope ladder dropped down on the inside. A party of the rescue force was detailed to guard the prison Governor's residence within the gaol. Another party, having captured and trussed a prison warder and secured keys of the cells, opened Carty's cell door and released him. The operation was carried out quietly and in short time.

Early in October, 1920, the Brigade O/C., who was also in charge of the "Flying Column", called a Battalion Council meeting and told us that he was making plans to attack an R.I.C. cycle patrol that regularly travelled on the main road between Cliffoney and Grange. Large convoys of British Military travelled this road, at intervals, between Finner Camp and Sligo town. It was, therefore, necessary to provide good protection on either flank of the ambush position

to guard against surprise. The Battalion O/C. was ordered to pick a number of men from the Ballintrillick and Glenade Companies for this duty. The remainder of the men from these Companies were ordered to take up a position at the Spar Mines and to be prepared to remain on duty for forty-eight hours. Their task was :- (1) to protect the Column Headquarters which was over a mile back in the Gleniffe glen. (2) In the event of the ambush taking place it was expected that an attempt would be made by British forces to burn Ballintrillick Creamery by way of reprisals, and any such attempt was to be resisted by our men.

The ambush was carried out, as planned, on the 25th October, 1920. An R.I.C. patrol from Cliffooney cycled into the ambush position early in the day. They were immediately engaged by the Column. One Sergeant and four Constables were killed and two Constables were wounded. The survivors were disarmed and all rifles, equipment and bicycles captured. The Column then retired to Gleniffe Glen. The roads were then blocked by the two Companies on protection duty.

When the Column had got two days rest and no attempt was made by the British forces to invade the area, the Brigade O/C. ordered the Column and Glenade and Ballintrillick Companies to proceed to Glenade and prepare and carry out an ambush on the Glenade-Manorhamilton road. An ambush position was selected at Loughmarron. The plan was: Some Volunteers from the local Company were instructed to hold up and go through the form of searching the mail car and then allow the driver to proceed on his way. It was expected that he would report the matter to the R.I.C. in Kinlough, who would normally come out to investigate. The mail car was held up about a half mile to the south of the ambush position in the forenoon.

The Volunteers remained all the day in position; the British Forces did not turn up and the Column retired westwards to the Sligo mountains. It was later learned that a party of British military travelled from Manorhamilton to within a mile and a half on the south side of the ambush position and then turned back. At about the same time a patrol of R.I.C. left Kinlough Barracks and travelled to within 2½ miles of the north side of the position and then returned to Kinlough.

During the time our men were waiting in ambush at Glenade, British forces from Sligo and Finner Camp came out and burned the Creamery at Ballintrillick in daylight by way of reprisal. A number of houses were burned in Grange and Cliffoney areas.

The rifles captured in the ambush at Grange were handed over to the 2nd Battalion and we hoped to be in a position to carry out some successful attacks on the British Forces in the area. Shortly afterwards I received an order from the Brigade O/C. to have the rifles, twelve all told, transferred to South Sligo where they were needed for a large scale engagement contemplated there. They were moved by motor cars but, unfortunately, they were all captured by British forces on the road outside Sligo town. The occupants of the cars, Seamus Devins, Andrew Conway, Eugene Kilbride and Nurse Linda Kearns, were all taken into custody.

After Seamus Devins, Battalion O/C., was arrested, I was appointed to that position. It was only then my troubles commenced. The Creamery Manager in Ballintrillick, T.F.Hunt, together with some members of the committee, applied for permission to rebuild the burned Creamery. Permission, having been granted; the Manager and some members of the committee decided to employ non-Union labour only. The mine workers and employees in the Creamery, all

Volunteers and Union members, resented this action. At the same time a number of small farmers, also Volunteers but not members of any trades union, were anxious to obtain employment at the re-building of the Creamery. The dispute had the effect of causing a split in the Volunteer force in the Battalion area. To make matters more difficult, my Vice O/C. sided with the non-Union Members. I was kept very busy trying to settle disputes and keep the force intact. Eventually, Hunt left the area and went to reside with his sister in Belfast.

On 7th January, 1921, I found it necessary to go to Belfast to try and arrange an interview with Devins, Conway, Kilbride and Nurse Kearns, who were captured with the rifles on the Sligo road and were interned in Belfast gaol while awaiting trial. I was anxious to obtain the following information :- (a) What charges were being preferred against them. (b) What arrangements were being made for their defence. (c) What were the possibilities of an attempt to arrange their escape. On my arrival in Belfast I contacted Michael Leonard from Cliffoney, who was working in Belfast and was a member of the Volunteer force there. He later went to Liverpool and was captured after burning a farm house at Little Crosby, and was sentenced to five years' penal servitude.

Leonard put me in touch with members of Cumann na mBan who were able to arrange visits for me. During my stay in Belfast I was going under the name of Bernard McGeehan.

I had visited the prisoners and got the required information from them. I was walking along the street when I was accosted by an R.I.C. man who, I discovered, was a distant relation. I told him I was going under the assumed name of McGeehan but did not tell him my business. He invited me out to his house for tea.

I had no excuse to refuse the invitation and called that evening. This man's wife was the daughter of an Inspector in the R.I.C. and may have talked, perhaps innocently, about my presence in the house. On the following day a member of the Cumann na mBan looked me up and informed me that the police had my description and were looking for me. Unfortunately, I was wearing a black overcoat and hat and would be easily recognised. Realising this, I went to a drapery establishment and purchased a light-coloured overcoat and cap. I then had my old coat and hat parcelled and posted to my home address. After that I proceeded to the Railway Station to make my way home. While waiting for my train to pull in I spent some time at the book stall. While there I met Hunt, our former Creamery Manager. I deliberately passed by him on a couple of occasions on the platform but he showed no sign of recognition. At this time there was a police patrol on the station platform, but they made no attempt to question me.

When the train pulled in I noticed that Hunt was travelling on it. When we were some distance on our way I walked along the corridor and found Hunt in a carriage. He seemed very frightened and told me that the police had asked him a lot of questions while he was waiting at the station. He explained that his refusal to recognise me earlier was, his fear that he would draw police attention to me if they saw me speak to him. He looked in such a nervous state, and knowing that he did not enjoy good health for some time, I gave him some whiskey which I carried and advised him to go to the toilet and drink it. This he did and I did not see him any more on the journey.

During my absence from my Battalion, while on duty in Belfast, a large scale 'round-up' was made by British forces in the Glenade and Ballintrillick mountains. British forces converged on the

area from Sligo, Manorhamilton and Finner Camp. A large number of men - some of them were Volunteers - were arrested and badly beaten up. Four were detained and later interned until after the Truce. A small party of armed Volunteers had a narrow escape. They had just got clear of the enemy cordon when they were spotted and fired on. They returned the fire as they retreated towards the mountain. Due to their knowledge of the mountainside they were able to outdistance the enemy and made good their escape.

A parade of the Ballintrillick Company was ordered for Hugh Ward's of Ballintrillick. I had instructed the Company officers from Glenade to attend on the same date at Ward's house. Just as dusk was falling a report was received by John McGloin, O.C., of Glenade Company, that a party of R.I.C. travelling in two lorries was after raiding his house. McGloin was 'on the run' at this time. He got in touch with me immediately. After contacting J. Clancy, O/C., of Ballintrillick Company, it was decided to ambush the two lorries at Cruckadenna Mill at Leelasser, Sligo. A Volunteer was instructed to return to Ward's and have the Company assembled there, bring up the shot guns and ammunition to the position on the hill. We moved on in advance and selected the positions. The hill had a sod fence running at right angles to the road, where suitable fire positions were available. Some Volunteers had reported at the hill but the men with the shot guns had not got there when the two lorries arrived. One lorry was going badly and back firing, creating a lot of noise. All the arms we possessed at this time were two .32 revolvers and one .45 'Bulldog'. As the first lorry, the noisy one, came into the ambush position, fire was opened on it. Due to the noise created by the lorry the enemy did not appear to hear our shots as the

fire was not returned. The two lorries passed on and were gone out of range before the shot guns were brought up to the position.

John McGloin, O/C., Glenade Company, had instructions to raid the mail car passing through his Company area. The raid was intended to divert the enemy's attention from the activities on the main Sligo-Bundoran road. McGloin and his men took up position. Four scouts were detailed to watch the Manorhamilton road and two to watch the Bundoran road. When the mail car arrived about 10 a.m. the driver was held up. He was an old man named Gavigan and he asked the Company Captain, very earnestly, to let him go immediately. He stated that there were lorry loads of British troops raiding houses about two miles back on the road which he had travelled and there was a possibility that they would come along any moment. Gavigan was not believed but, in a few minutes, a signal from the Scouts warned the men on the road to be on the alert. The noise of approaching lorries could then be heard distinctly. The Volunteers hurriedly collected the mail bags and made off westwards to contact the scouts. Three men were sent off towards the mountain with the mail bags. McGloin with four men waited behind a fence on the hillside when they saw three lorry-loads of British forces dash into view. Having only one rifle in his party, McGloin decided that it would be foolhardy to open fire and he withdrew his men under cover and followed after the men gone ahead with the mail bags. After crossing the Duff river, one of his party sighted two cyclists coming from the West along an old road. The road was winding and sheltered and it was impossible, at the distance, to distinguish the cyclists. After proceeding a short distance a number of cyclists were seen to dismount at Conway bridge about three hundred yards distant. The Volunteers then realised that it was an R.I.C. patrol and were greatly surprised as the British forces had never

travelled that road before, and a 'round-up' was suspected. The R.I.C., by this time, had spotted McGloin and his party and had opened fire on them. The Volunteers had good cover and could only hear the sound of the shots. Fire was returned with the only rifle in the party. This had the effect of compelling the R.I.C. to run for cover and the Volunteers made good their retreat. In a short time they fell in with the men gone ahead with the mail bags. The whole party remained on the mountain until night-fall.

In June, 1921, plans were made for an attack on an R.I.C. patrol at Creevykeel on the main Bundoran-Sligo road. M. Leonard, I.O., supplied information that a patrol would pass from Cliffoney into Creevykeel and on to Mullaghmore. A vacant house on the roadside near Creevykeel crossroads was chosen as headquarters and main position. Scouts were sent to Cliffoney to observe the departure of the R.I.C. patrol. If it took a different route from the one expected we were to be informed immediately. Outposts were placed to protect our rear and right flank. The patrol was sighted leaving the barracks and coming in our direction. It consisted of eleven men. When the patrol reached a bridge some three hundred yards from our position it stopped.

All the members of the patrol, with the exception of a fairly aged Constable named Clarke, waited to talk to a girl they had met on the road. After talking to the girl for some minutes the R.I.C. reformed ranks and moved in our direction. By that time Clarke was some two hundred yards ahead and coming near our position. When he came in line with our position some of our men opened fire without orders. All we could do was to dash out

and open fire on the remainder of the patrol who were beyond shot gun range, which was our principal armament. Clarke was shot dead. The other members of the patrol made good their escape back to barracks, taking advantage of the cover of stone walls and houses on the way.

Plans were made for a further attack on the R.I.C. stationed in Cliffoney a few days before the Truce on the 11th July. The Brigade O/C. sent us instructions to withdraw our men and not engage in any further activities pending definite orders from him.

SIGNED: Martin B. McGovern

DATE: 14th December 1956

WITNESS: J. Conway

