

ORIGINAL

BUREAU OF MILITARY HISTORY 1913-21

BURO STAIRE MILEATA 1913-21

No. W.S. 1552

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BUREAU OF MILITARY HISTORY, 1913-21.

STATEMENT BY WITNESS.

DOCUMENT NO. W.S. 1552.

Witness

Bartholomew Flynn,
Corralstown,
Mullingar,
Co. Westmeath.

Identity.

Adjutant, 3rd Battalion, Mullingar Brigade, I.R.A.
Vice O/C, 3rd Battalion, Mullingar Brigade, I.R.A.

Subject.

Activities of Corralstown Company,
Irish Volunteers, Co. Westmeath.
1917-1921.

Conditions, if any, Stipulated by Witness.

Nil.

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S. 2873.

STATEMENT BY Mr. BARTHOLOMEW FLYNN,
Corralstown, Mullingar, County Westmeath.

I was born at Kinnity, Offaly. My father was a Sergeant in the R.I.C. and was serving there. When I was three years old I came with my parents to this locality and here I was reared and went to school. While at school I got a good grinding in Irish History from our teacher, Mr. Shanahan, who was a very sound Irishman. I should normally, I suppose, have joined the R.I.C. and followed in my father's footsteps but, right from our early days, my father impressed on me that he would sooner see me tramping the roads than to be a member of that Force. I do not know for what reason or reasons my father was so determined that I would not join that Force; but, whatever it was, it was certainly deep-rooted in him. My father had retired from the R.I.C. in 1904 and was in receipt of a pension.

Around 1917 I joined the local Company of Irish Volunteers at Corralstown. I did not then make any declaration or Oath on joining. There were about eighteen or twenty young men in the Company at this time. I think Patrick O'Hara was the Company Captain then. We had no arms of any sort in the Company. Our Captain O'Hara used to bring out a Lee Enfield Service rifle from Mullingar and, with Joseph McMahon, he gave instruction on this weapon. McMahon, who was from Clara in Offaly, worked in Mullingar and he instructed us in Drill. Another man named Ned Whelehan, also from Mullingar, used to visit us occasionally and gave us instruction also.

We made no declaration nor took any form of Oath on joining the Volunteers but we did pay a weekly subscription towards an Arms fund and other expenses. Parades of the Company were held in secret. There was no Battalion organisation at this time, but there was a

Company of Volunteers in Kinnegad and in Mullingar and other places in the county.

Things went on quietly until the early part of 1918. At this time the British Parliament passed a law giving the British Authorities in Ireland power to conscript men of military age into the British Army. This Act was opposed by the Irish Parliamentary Party; but, despite their opposition, it was passed and only awaited the King's signature to become Law. The Irish Party quit the House of Commons for the time being and came back to Ireland and joined up with Sinn Féin and the leaders of the 1916 Rebellion, who were still alive, in opposition to this measure. They jointly set up an Executive Committee for the whole country to combat this measure.

There was a great upsurge of public resentment against the Act and, led by the Clergy of the Catholic Church, the people everywhere got together in associations to resist it. Men now flocked in thousands to join the Volunteers and our Company quickly increased its strength by about three hundred per cent. Parades were now held openly and were a daily or nightly affair in an effort to shape this body of men into a disciplined force. Anti-Conscription meetings were held at which the Volunteers paraded. The Volunteers made collections for the National Anti-Conscription Fund and went around and had practically everyone sign the Anti-Conscription Pledge. All these activities were watched by the R.I.C. who offered no objection to our activities. In all probability they were as much opposed to Conscription as we were and as they were of Irish stock would be forced to conscript their own kith and kin. If this was their outlook, and I think it was, I imagine their reports to the Castle Authorities in Dublin were

well exaggerated. Our own Authorities were anxious also to demonstrate the immense proportion and resolve of the people to Conscription. We trained as best we could but the arms position was hopeless: there were none. There was a number of shot guns in the possession of farmers and others with some shotgun cartridges, and these would be available to us. There were also, I believe, plans for the destruction of all road bridges and the destruction of all communications. Other than this sort of thing, little else was done to combat the menace, and orders or plans from Headquarters in Dublin, who were expected to give a lead, were anxiously awaited.

The British Government decided that, in view of the opposition offered, the game would not be worth the candle and the King never signed the Act and so the danger gradually died down. Our big influx of Volunteers now quickly died away also and we were left with our original numbers who remained active. The monies collected to combat Conscription were now returned to the subscribers. We who were left continued to train as best we could. We still had no arms, not even a shot gun.

In the end of 1918 a General Election took place in the country - generally called the "Khaki" election as it was one of Lloyd George's political stunts to retain power while the British voters were still overcome by their victory in the first Great War. Sinn Féin, although as yet badly organised, decided to contest all the Irish seats, the majority of which were held by the Irish Parliamentary Party under the leadership of the late John Redmond, and a few by the Unionist element, particularly in the north-east of Ireland. Laurence Ginnell, who had previously been a member of the Irish Parliamentary Party, was the Sinn Féin party candidate.

The Volunteers took on the major role in the elections in canvassing on behalf of Sinn Féin and in collecting for the Election fund. They also provided parties of men for each election meeting held by Sinn Féin to protect the speakers and ensure that they were given a hearing. There was a very strong element of nationalist supporters in the area and quite a few also of the crowd known as the "Separation Women". These were the families of men who were serving or had served in the British Army and who were drawing separation money from the British War Office. These people were openly hostile to Sinn Féin and the R.I.C. deliberately closed their eyes to their activities. However, the Volunteers avoided clashes with this element or with the R.I.C. On polling day the Volunteers did duty at the polling stations to keep order and to see that the Sinn Féin supporters were allowed to record their votes freely. They also provided an escort for the voting boxes when they were being removed to the central point for counting. The R.I.C., of course, were also on duty but no clash took place. The Volunteers also personated in the voting on behalf of Ginnell who was elected at the head of the poll. The election was a great triumph for Sinn Féin and the Irish Party was practically wiped out in the country.

Early in 1919 the first Dáil assembled in Dublin and, having declared its loyalty to the Irish Republic and repudiated England's authority to govern in Ireland, set itself up as the first Irish native Government since the Act of Union. The Dáil elected a Cabinet of Ministers to administer ^{ER} the Departments of State. The Dáil now floated a National Loan to provide money for its various Departments and undertakings. Here again the Volunteers took an active part in canvassing and collecting for this Loan. It was surprising how well received by the people at large was

this adventure and the way they supported it. Every subscriber was given a temporary receipt, and later on received an official receipt from the Minister for Finance who was Michael Collins. Later on when the Irish Free State came into being this money, with interest, was paid back to the subscribers.

The Dáil next took over responsibility for the Volunteer organisation and instituted them as the Army of the Irish Republic under its Minister for Defence - Cathal Brugha. Each officer and man ^{was} ~~were~~ now required to take an Oath of Allegiance to the Dáil as the Government of the Irish Republic. From thence onwards we were known as the I.R.A. The taking of the Oath was purely a voluntary matter and any Volunteer not wishing to do so could refuse and no compulsion of any nature could be used to make him do so. A refusal meant the termination of his connection with the Volunteers. All our officers and men willingly subscribed to this Oath without even one default.

Meanwhile, there had just been a small increase in our Company strength. Patrick Murphy was now Company Commander as O'Hara had gone to the South of Ireland. He was a carpenter by trade. Ned Murphy was 1st Lieutenant and Michael Duffy was 2nd Lieutenant. At this time our Company was attached to the North Offaly Brigade. Offaly was much better organised by now than the County Westmeath, ~~was~~. I think we belonged to the 3rd Battalion, North Offaly Brigade. We still had no arms except a few revolvers of different types. We had one German Parabellum Pistol. A man named Lennon, who had served in the British Army during the War, had taken it back from France with him. He was not a Volunteer but had given it to Volunteer Jack Darcy, with about twenty rounds of ammunition.

The usual parades and training continued and the Volunteers now began to do a certain amount of police duty, but on the whole the year of 1919 was a quiet one, and there was not much activity around this area. The enemy forces had not as yet begun to show their teeth and holds-up and raids were a rare occurrence.

Sometime in 1920 the area was reorganised. Mullingar became a Brigade area. James Tormey of Moate was, I think, the first Brigade O/C. There were still only Company organisations and no Battalion staffs existed. In June, 1920, we were still attached to the North Offaly Brigade. Patrick Seery was wounded in an attack on Clara R.I.C. barracks and died from his wounds. He was buried at Meadon outside Tyrellspass and our Company paraded to his funeral. Although we expected that the R.I.C. would interfere at the funeral, they did not do so.

Around September, 1920, a general raid for arms was ordered by I.R.A. headquarters. It appears that the British forces were about to collect or take up all shotguns and other weapons in the country and we had to forestall them in this. We experienced no trouble in collecting the weapons around our area and quite a few of the people were glad to hand them up. We collected a lot of shotguns of different types quite a lot of which were unserviceable. We also got a couple of .22 rifles and two revolvers. The revolvers were small pattern type. There was also a supply of shotgun cartridges collected. We got no service weapons of any sort. The guns and other weapons were distributed amongst the Volunteers who were held responsible for their care and custody. Only in a few cases had premises to be searched to find the weapons.

Around this time a Battalion was organised in our area. John Beglin was appointed Battalion O/C., and James Lennon Vice O/C.

I was appointed Battalion Adjutant. Previous to this I had been Company Adjutant of our Company. James Murphy was the Battalion Quartermaster. Our Battalion was the 3rd Battalion, Mullingar Brigade. Patrick McCabe was then, I think, the Brigade O/C. The Companies going to make up the 3rd Battalion were - Kinnegad, Milltownpass, Corralstown, Ratharney, and Clonlost. The Company Captain of Kinnegad was James Reilly. The Captain of Milltownpass was Joseph Duffy and when he was arrested it was Joseph Ennis. Captain of Corralstown Company was Patrick Murphy. Ratharney was commanded by Patrick Lynch and Clonlost by John Coyne. All the Companies were very small in strength - roughly only about platoon size. This organisation existed until the Truce on the 11th July, 1921.

Early in 1920 the R.I.C. had evacuated Killucan Barracks and on the night of the day they left it, we went there and burned the place down. It was a type of hut which was lined inside with timber and so was easy to destroy. The Barracks in Kinnegad was retained by the R.I.C. and strengthened and fortified with sandbags, steel shutters and barbed wire. The garrison of Kinnegad R.I.C. Barracks was about thirty-five men.

The Volunteers had by now assumed responsibility for policing the country and they even did this work in the towns where the R.I.C. still were. They made a very successful job of this as they generally had the good will of the people in their work. On the whole, this was a very law-abiding area and there was very little trouble. In 1920 also elections for the Local Government Boards such as the County Council were held. Sinn Féin went all out to get control of these and again the Volunteers or I.R.A. helped them in doing so. Sinn Féin got a majority on all the Boards and from thence on the Boards only recognised the Dail Local Government Department.

In April, 1921, Kinnegad R.I.C. barracks was attacked. There was no hope of capturing the place as it was too well fortified and held and would withstand any attempt we could make with the armament available. The attack was only meant to be of a nuisance value and to give a pep up to the morale of our own men. James Reilly took charge of about twenty men and occupied a position near the barracks and opened fire on it. The roads around Kinnegad were blocked to prevent surprise by outlying enemy forces. As well as I can remember we had two Lee Enfield Service rifles which were borrowed from the Mullingar Battalion. A Volunteer who was from our locality but worked in Mullingar and who was a member of that Battalion had charge of these rifles and he gave them to us. The affair lasted about half an hour and then we withdrew, but the R.I.C. continued firing away all the night. We had no casualties and I don't think the R.I.C. had any either although it was talked of that one policeman was wounded. Next morning a large force of Military came out from Mullingar and raided a number of houses around. I don't think they arrested anyone as they were not likely to get any person at home after the attack.

The Brigade O/C., Mr. McCabe, had been arrested and Seamus McGuire of Glenedon became Brigade O/C. He was 'on the run' at this time also. Joe Beglin now became Brigade Adjutant and James Reilly became O/C of our Battalion. Soon after this the 1st Eastern Division was formed and we became the 5th Brigade of that Division. Sean Boylan of Dunboyne was the Divisional O/C.

Two of the R.I.C. from Kinnegad used to go to the bog regularly to cut turf and accompanied by a civilian. The bog was at Rosseon. The police carried revolvers but did not carry rifles. James O'Reilly, our Battalion O/C., decided to hold up

the two policemen and relieve them of their revolvers. He and two other Volunteers who were armed with shotguns and himself armed with a revolver concealed themselves and when the police arrived he, O'Reilly, called on them to put up their hands, which they did. The two Volunteers who were armed with the shotguns remained concealed. O'Reilly came forward and proceeded to disarm the police. He was wearing a mask. While he was in the act of taking the revolver from one policeman the other policeman hit him on the head with a bottle he had in his hand and in which he was taking milk or some other liquid to the bog. O'Reilly was knocked out, sustaining a nasty injury to his head. The Volunteers on seeing what had happened fired their guns over the heads of the police and when they tried to re-load, the cartridges would not extract owing to swelling from dampness. The Volunteers had no option but to run for it, as the police had revolvers, and leave the Commandant to his fate. O'Reilly was arrested and taken to a Military Hospital for treatment. He was never tried on the charge which would entail a sentence of death as ^{THE} coming _{of} into force/the Truce saved him. He was kept a prisoner until the general release of prisoners around Christmas of 1921.

In March of 1921 Seán MacEoin was taken prisoner in Mullingar and was badly wounded when trying to escape from his captors. He was taken to the hospital in Mountjoy Prison, Dublin. When he had recovered he was tried by Courtmartial in Dublin. A large number of witnesses, including some Auxiliaries and R.I.C. and Tans and some civilians, were due to travel to Dublin for this trial. MacEoin was charged with murder and several other crimes. Information had reached our Brigade that this party was travelling to Dublin on road transport on a certain day. I do not know how that information was obtained. The Brigade had orders to stop them arriving at all costs and decided to ambush the party at Griffinstown on the main Dublin

road near Kinnegad. This was a Brigade operation and Seamus Maguire personally took charge. About fifty or sixty men were mobilised from the area. We had fifteen or sixteen Service Rifles, all of which were the property of the Mullingar Battalion, and the remainder had shotguns. There was also a number of revolvers - I could not say how many - on the job. A mine was placed in the road and our men took up position behind the fence of the roadside and in the ruins of some old buildings. We were in position about 5 o'clock in the morning and awaiting the enemy to approach. The position selected was anything but a good one, but it was probably the best in that area. We depended on the surprise of the explosion of the mine and in our first rally to make the enemy surrender. If it developed into a fight we would be pinned down in our position and it would be a case of fight to the death or surrender when our ammunition gave out.

We were all in readiness when suddenly the mine went off with a terrific explosion. So loud was the explosion that it was heard in Edenderry many miles away. We were informed that the man in charge of the explosion of the mine had fallen asleep and had accidentally charged the exploder. I don't know if this is correct or not or if such could happen. The O/C. now ordered us to evacuate the position and get away for home, which we did in quick time. The explosion blew a terrific hole in the road. Each man took what arms he had with him when evacuation was ordered.

As it happened, the enemy escort and the witnesses never came that way. They had travelled via Athboy and through County Meath to Dublin, thus outflanking us on a wide scale. The day selected for the ambush was also the pay day for the R.I.C. and Tans in Kinnegad. The pay came out from Mullingar and never consisted of

more than one saloon car escorted by a tender load of Tans. Only for the explosion we would have at least got that party and they came out that day later, quite unaware that anything had happened. A party of the Kinnegad police had set out for Killucan by tender but turned back at Thomastown Cross when they heard the explosion and some of our parties, who had gone in that direction, missed them also. The Kinnegad garrison of Tans and R.I.C. made no attempt to come out to Griffinstown. The Battalion Quartermaster and I went back to Griffinstown that evening and searched around the place to see if our men had left anything after them. We found two haversacks and about four hundred rounds of .303 ammunition. The Tans with the pay from Mullingar had passed that way and, despite the huge hole in the road, they did not stop to investigate. An aeroplane circled the area after we had withdrawn but I think this had no significance and was purely incidental.

When Commandant O'Reilly was arrested James Lennon was appointed Battalion O/C, and I was now appointed Vice O/C. We raided the local mails several times but never discovered anything of any value in them. However, I do believe that these raids on the mails were a deterrent, and prevented people from sending information to the R.I.C. through this channel. We were continually obstructing communications by cutting telephone and telegraph wires around the Kinnegad area and by blocking the roads by felling trees across them. The main road, Mullingar to Dublin, was blocked several times but could, of course, be easily cleared as it was very wide. A consignment of steel shutters arrived at Hill-of-Down station for the R.I.C. barracks in Kinnegad. Commandant Reilly learned of this and with some men went to the station and took the steel shutters from the waggon and dumped them into the Canal. The British Authorities never made any attempt to recover them and, as far as I know, they are still there.

I was never officially 'on the run' although I spent a lot of my time away from home in connection with my Volunteer duties. My father, as stated, had served in the R.I.C. and they thus never suspected us or our house of being engaged in rebel activities, and the house was often used as a rest house for men 'on the run'. Sometime before the Truce Seamus Maguire and another officer were staying in the house. They were in bed asleep this morning. My mother called me and told me to bring up their breakfast to them, which I did. When I came back to her she asked me if I had told them that the R.I.C. and Tans would be there that morning and that they were not to be alarmed if they saw them. I had quite forgotten the matter. The police used to come out to the house with my father's pension money and they were due to arrive that day. I returned and told Seamus Maguire and his pal. The police arrived with my father's pension and went away again quite unaware that in the house were two of the men they were very anxious to get.

Some short while before the Truce some County Council employees told me that they had seen a man near the house in the early hours of the morning while on their way to work. They concluded that this man was watching our house. This was quickly confirmed very soon afterwards as Sergeant Conway of the R.I.C. in Kinnegad sent me a message warning me to be very careful and stating that our house was being watched. They never raided the house but on one occasion they did seize some cycles belonging to us which were in an out-office. They did not enter the house however. At this time the police were taking up all the cycles they could lay their hands on. Had not the Truce intervened I suppose they would have raided us, as apparently they had got some information that the house was being used by the I.R.A.

I became a member of the I.R.B. about the end of 1920 or early 1921. A man called Hugh Sheerin, who was organising the I.R.B. in

the Mullingar area, took me into the organisation and administered the Oath to me. A local Circle was formed of which I was Centre or Head. We had only five or six members who were all officers of the I.R.A. We held meetings monthly and paid a small subscription each month. We only held a few meetings prior to the Truce. At these meetings we discussed the local situation and made suggestions as to what could be done in the area, but nothing further ever happened. In view of the active Volunteer position I am still at a loss to understand what the objects of the organisation were other than what I was told when joining which was that there was a danger of the ordinary Volunteers getting tired and giving up the fight and we were to act as a sort of strong backbone to keep them going. After the Truce the organisation was kept going and strengthened but the split in the Army over the Treaty put an end to it.

There were no spies shot in our Battalion area and I don't think there was anyone giving information to the enemy. There was one man living in the area who was wanted by the Offaly Brigade for spying in that area. We arrested this man and handed him over to the Offaly Brigade who dealt with him.

The only munitions that were made in the area were the construction of concrete road mines and the filling of cartridges with home-made slugs.

There was the usual intelligence organisation in the Battalion Headquarters and in the Companies. These men were useful in keeping watch on local people suspected of helping the enemy forces and in detecting crime and such like. They were not very useful in the military sense but they did keep a record of and tabulated enemy patrols and so forth. They lacked training in Intelligence work but they did their best. The Post Office in Kinnegad and

the only one in the area that might be of use to us was run by an ex-R.I.C. man who was hostile to us. There was a Constable Kelly stationed in Kinnegad Barracks and he used to help us as best he could in the way of tipping us off about impending raids and round-ups and about our men who were on the 'wanted' list. Unfortunately, he was transferred out of the police area and that ended that line.

The Truce came upon us as a great surprise as we were still in the position of looking forward to active operations starting in the area when arms would become available. No one thought it would last very long and we all set about getting ready to resume the fight and no one visualised it ending up as it did.

SIGNED: Bartie Flynn

DATE: 18 12 56

WITNESS:

Michael Dwyer

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