

ORIGINAL

BUREAU OF MILITARY HISTORY 1913-21
BURO STAIRE MILEATA 1913-21
NO. W.S. 1596

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BUREAU OF MILITARY HISTORY, 1913-21.

STATEMENT BY WITNESS.

DOCUMENT NO. W.S. 1596.

Witness

Henry McGowan,
Navany,
Ballybofey,
Co. Donegal.

Identity.

Company Captain; Vice O/C 4th Donegal Bde.;
Acting O/C, 4th Donegal Brigade.

Subject.

Activities of Ballybofey Company,
Irish Volunteers, Co. Donegal,
1917 - 21.

Conditions, if any, Stipulated by Witness.

Nil.

File No. S.2916.

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NO. W.S. 1,596

STATEMENT BY HENRY McGOWAN,

Navany, Ballybofey, Co. Donegal.

I was born at Navany, Ballybofey, County Donegal, in the year 1892, and received my primary education at Knock National School, a short distance from my home.

In my young days I was very keen on soldiering and having no other outlet, I joined the British Army in 1911. By the spring of 1914 I found that I had enough of Barrack Square and peace-time soldiering. Availing of the opportunity then pertaining, I bought myself out for the sum of £18. At that time there was no indication that World War 1. was imminent. Had I remained for another four months I would not get the opportunity of leaving.

I returned home and settled down for two years or more. I developed a great admiration for the men who took part in the Rebellion of 1916. Sometime later I became acquainted with a man named Dan Kelly, who had been arrested after Easter 1916, and served a term of imprisonment in Frongoch. Prior to his arrest, Kelly was a stationmaster on the Derry-Lough Swilly Railway, but lost his job on account of his Sinn Féin activities. After his release he set up in business in Ballybofey. He then organised a Sinn Féin Club in Ballybofey; I believe it was the first organised in Donegal. Kelly then organised a Company of the Irish Volunteers, most of the members being young men already attached to the Sinn Féin Club. I was appointed O/C. of the Company, probably due to my experience in the British Army. At this time the Companies operated on an independent parish basis. It was two years later that they were organised into Battalions and Brigades.

In 1918 the Company was busily engaged preparing for the General Election. Shortly before the election, Sinn Féin decided to support E.J. Kelly, the Nationalist candidate in this constituency, so as not to split the vote and thereby prevent the Unionist candidate from gaining the seat. It was agreed that the Nationalists would not contest the seat in Derry, where Eoin McNeill was going forward as candidate.

County and District Council elections were held some time afterwards. I was elected a member and appointed Chairman of the District Council. By virtue of that I automatically became a member of the County Council. Shortly after my election I attended a meeting of the County Council, presided over by P. J. Ward, later Brigade O/C in South Donegal and a member of Dáil Éireann. At that meeting it was decided to withhold all monies from the Local Government Board, the County Council to be responsible for the financial administration within the County.

After the elections were over the men in the Company were principally engaged in training, parades, route marches etc. We collected all shotguns in the area; in most cases they were handed up willingly. We got a few rifles in the collection, one a good Service Lee Enfield, the property of a member of the British Army who had deserted. We also got a Mauser rifle but only a few rounds of suitable ammunition for it.

In 1919 Companies were organised into Battalions and Brigades. Ernie O'Malley visited the area and carried out the organisation. Sam O'Flaherty, who up until then had been a student in the National University, was appointed Brigade O/C., and I was appointed Vice-O/C. A number of arrests of Staff Officers from time to time led to

numerous changes on the Battalion and Brigade Staffs.

Acting on instructions received in Easter 1920, the following vacated R.I.C. barracks were burned :- Convoy, Brockagh and Killeter. One vacant barracks in the Ballybofey district was by this time occupied by civilians and was left untouched. The barracks at Castlefin, evacuated at a later date, was not burned for the same reason.

In August, 1920, Sam O'Flaherty summoned a meeting of the Battalion Staff and Battalion Commanders. He informed us that he had information from a man named Tom Johnston, who had recently resigned from the R.I.C., that the R.I.C. barrack in Drumquinn, County Tyrone, would be an easy target, as the R.I.C. garrison there were a careless lot.

After discussion it was decided that a daylight attack was more likely to be successful. August the 25th, which was called 'fair day' in Drumquinn, was the date selected, as a party of strangers collecting in the town on fair day was unlikely to arouse suspicion. Men from Letterkenny, Castlefinn, Clady and Ballybofey Companies were instructed to travel by car to a point near Drumquinn where final instructions would be issued. Each man was to be armed with a revolver, carry a stick and dress in such a way as would make him resemble a cattle buyer. Each party arrived at the appointed place. Johnston, the ex-R.I.C. man met Sam O'Flaherty there and gave him any information he could collect about the location of the R.I.C. at that particular time. Unfortunately, O'Flaherty did not transmit this information in detail to each member of his party, which led to confusion later.

The general outline of the plan of attack was :- The party to move into the town and, under the pretext of buying cattle, the main attacking force to get as near as possible to the R.I.C. barracks. More men were detailed to move through the town and hold up and disarm any R.I.C. who might be on patrol or, more likely, to be found in licenced premises. Another party was detailed to cut 'phone and telegraph wires.

We were a bit early moving into the town; the fair was only beginning to gather. As a result, there was some delay before we could put our plan into effect. While waiting for the signal to move, I met an unarmed policeman who remarked "There is a lot of you buyers in town today". I replied "Cattle have got a big raise in price and we have a big order to supply." He seemed satisfied with my statement and moved off.

When sufficient cattle had arrived in the fair we pretended to buy and moved with the cattle until we got into position outside the barrack. James Curran and myself were detailed to hold up an R.I.C. Constable standing at the barrack door. Our intention was to quietly order him to put up his hands, disarm and take him away. Just then, James McMonagle, from Letterkenny, rushed over to him and shouted "Hands Up". The R.I.C. man turned suddenly and made a move as if he was about to grapple with McMonagle who immediately shot him through the head, and he fell dead in the doorway. The sound of the shot had the effect of alerting the R.I.C. inside. By the time we got into the day-room there were no R.I.C. there. I dashed into the kitchen, which was empty. I then searched the cells thinking that I would find a quantity of grenades stored there, but found none. Coming back to the day-room I got three rifles and a large quantity of ammunition which I

collected. On reaching the front hall I found that the R.I.C. had taken up positions upstairs and were firing down into the hall. Next a grenade was tossed down, exploding in the hall and filling the place with fumes and dust. I got no instructions to rush the stairs at any time; neither did I fire any shots as I saw no target to fire at.

Sam O'Flaherty then ordered us to withdraw, return to the cars and get away. In the rush to get away, Michael Doherty, Liscooley, Castlefin, O/C. of the 1st Battalion, who was on outpost duty in the town, was left behind. His absence was not discovered for some time afterwards. He eventually travelled home by train by a circuitous route. O'Flaherty had issued instructions that our cars would leave Drumquin via the Newtownstewart road, turn left on to a bye-road and get out at Victoria Bridge, near Sion Mills. This route would take us to Clady and so avoid passing any R.I.C. barrack on the way. The cars conveying the Letterkenny party travelled by the direct route, passing through Castlederg, where there was an R.I.C. station. The cars were easily traced afterwards and the British forces had good information as to the identity of some of the Volunteers in the attack.

I travelled back with Sam O'Flaherty in a car owned and driven by John McGroarty from Killygordon. On arriving at a point near Killygordon O'Flaherty and I left the car and, taking the captured rifles and ammunition with us, we moved, under cover of some hedges, in the direction of McGroarty's home. McGroarty went ahead with the car and put it in his garage. We had only reached a garden attached to McGroarty's when his sister came out and told us that the local R.I.C. Sergeant was about to

call at the house. I thought and felt at the time that it was foolish and cowardly for two armed men to be hiding from one R.I.C. man and said so to Sam Flaherty. He replied that we could not very well shoot an unarmed man in "cold blood"; that we could not take him prisoner as we could not hold him and, in addition, any such action would attract attention to McGroarty and be responsible for having his home burned.

It transpired that the Sergeant had called to pay an account for car hire, due to John McGroarty. When he enquired where John was, Miss McGroarty told him he was working at the flax crop. The Sergeant then left saying that he would see him later. McGroarty called at the barrack later in the evening and collected his money. There the Sergeant told him about the raid on Drumquin barrack. He also told him that he had instructions to check on all cars in his district and added that it was an easy task as McGroarty's was the only car in the district and he had seen it in the garage that day when he called at his home.

Some short time after this Sam O'Flaherty went to Dublin to take up a position there. He left me in charge of the Brigade. Soon after a detachment of British troops from the Rifle Brigade, about 50 strong, came to Ballybofey and were billeted in the Butt Hall. I got an idea that it might be possible to attack and capture the place. I got in touch with an ex-soldier from the British Army who lived in Ballybofey. This man did odd jobs around the hall and had free access to the place. From him I got information about the defences around the place. I also discovered that on Wednesday night, that

being pay day for the troops, defence precautions were a bit lax. I then made plans to attack the place on the following Wednesday night, but to my chagrin, the British forces evacuated the post on Tuesday, the day before which I had made plans for attack. They moved from the hall to Drumboe Castle, a short distance away. This they occupied in full Company strength, which ruled out any attempt at attack.

At the end of November or early December, 1920, I got instructions from General Headquarters, Dublin, to inform the officers in my Brigade that it was suspected that the British authorities had a list of their names. I was also instructed to advise them to "go on the run", so as to avoid arrest. A number of my officers chose to ignore my advice and were arrested in a large-scale round-up by British forces in December, 1920.

Due to the location of a strong garrison in Ballybofey and a scarcity of officers, resulting from arrests, I found it impossible to carry out any attack on British forces in my area. I suggested to the Divisional staff and the Brigade Commanders of adjoining Brigades that they would carry out attacks on Falcarragh and Glenties R.I.C. barracks, so as to relieve pressure on our area. I offered all rifles in my Brigade also any men required. The rifles were collected and later sent to Burtonport but were not returned to me.

I eventually got tired waiting for the return of the rifles and decided to collect them. At that time motor cars were very scarce. The only car around was a hackney car owned by a man named Johnston, from Stranorlar. I sent Johnston a wire, signed 'Mrs. Boyle', a customer of his, to come to her immediately. We held up Johnston on his way, took his car, leaving him on the roadside,

and drove to Burtonport. We left the car at Divisional Headquarters there, collected our rifles and conveyed them across country back to my Brigade area. The same car was captured by British forces when they landed by sea at Burtonport and captured Frank Carney, then O/C., 1st Northern Division, together with some officers of his staff. Joe Sweeney (Major General) managed to escape during the raid. He was later appointed O/C. of the Division. The British forces returned the car to its owner. A popular ballad was composed about the car known as "Johnston's Motor Car".

I made plans for an attack on Castlederg, County Tyrone R.I.C. Barracks, the date fixed being 21st March, 1921. We had no explosives to enable us to effect an entrance to the barracks so decided to procure a long ladder, place it at the gable end, when a few men could climb up and smash in a hole in the roof. The intention was to pour in petrol and oil and set it alight.

I mobilised a strong party of Volunteers from Killygordon and Ballybofey Companies. I took along more men than I actually required as I was anxious to get them accustomed to active service conditions. I had detailed men for their positions in various parts of the village and outpost duty on the roads and got back to the barracks to direct operations there when suddenly a shot rang out. It was fired by a Volunteer posted in the town. I was beside the barrack window at the time and through a small slit in the shutter I could see R.I.C. men rushing to take up their defensive positions. It was now impossible to put my plan into effect. The gable-end of the barracks was loop-holed so as to allow grenades to be thrown out, making it impossible to hoist or ascend the ladder. I was, therefore, obliged to abandon the attempt. On investigation, the man responsible for firing the rifle shot told

me that it was accidental, due to a defective safety catch.

I was, and am still, doubtful about this, as he had no order to have a round in the breach.

Now I organised a raid on the residence of Captain Rickey, about five miles from Ballybofey. I expected that he would report the raid and a party of R.I.C. would come out to investigate. I had selected a good ambush position along the route and hoped to lure the R.I.C. along on receipt of a report of the raid. After carrying out the raid we occupied the position and remained there for thirty-six hours without result. For some reason, best known to himself, Captain Rickey did not report the raid.

Shortly afterwards I again attempted to lure the R.I.C. into an ambush position by raiding the Post Office at Meenglass, which I knew would be reported. After the raid I took up a position along the road which the R.I.C. would be sure to travel. I sent a party of men under Sam O'Flaherty, who was then back in the Brigade area, to occupy the Post Office and adjoining buildings. My instructions to this party were to quietly enter the house and shepherd the occupants into a safe place, then occupy positions where they would have a good field of fire. My orders were not properly carried out. Only two Volunteers entered the house and called on the occupants to put up their hands. The owner of the house and his brother-in-law, both in Postmen's uniform and very strong men, turned and commenced a struggle with the two Volunteers which eventually carried them out on the roadside. Some Volunteers, seeing the struggle and mistaking the postman's uniform for R.I.C., opened fire. Fortunately their aim was poor as nobody was hit. From my position at this stage, I could see the R.I.C. coming along at a distance of about seven or eight hundred yards.

On hearing the sound of rifle fire the R.I.C. halted and took cover. One member made back towards Ballybofey and in a short time a large force of military and R.I.C. had surrounded the area. Our position had become untenable and we had retreated from the area before it was surrounded.

The British forces in Ballybofey had a railway locomotive and tender attached, fitted with armoured plating, making it safe to travel by rail through Donegal. I got in touch with a man who worked in the pits in Scotland and had good experience in the use of explosives. We got into the locomotive shed and placed three charges of gelignite in the train. The resultant explosion damaged it to such an extent that it was useless afterwards.

At the end of May, 1921, two officers from Ballintra Company called on me and asked permission to raid the estate office of Captain Hamilton who, they informed me, was collecting money from the tenants and forwarding it to the Trustees of Trinity College, Dublin. What claim they had on the estate I cannot recollect. The officers from Ballintra asked for two Volunteers who would be strangers in the district to carry out the raid so as to avoid identification afterwards. I decided on carrying out the raid myself. Taking a Volunteer named Smith along, I went to Ballintra and entered the office, but all the cash we got there was £5. I learned later that, as we entered, Miss Hamilton was on her way to the Bank with a big lodgement of cash.

The above raid had unfortunate repercussions in a short while afterwards. During my absence in Ballintra, James McCarron, Company Captain in Ballybofey, who had only been released a few days earlier from Ballykinlar Internment Camp, decided to ambush Captain McGregor and a party of three or four soldiers on their way to fish

in Trusk Lake a few miles south-east of Ballybofey. McGreggor occasionally fished in the lake, always taking a military escort with him, who acted as scouts. It was my intention to attack this party when a suitable opportunity arose. On the morning of the 2nd June, McCarron got information that Captain McGreggor had left for the lake travelling by car; heretofore he travelled there in a Crossley tender.

McCarron collected a party of three Volunteers and moved out in the direction of Trusk and occupied an ambush position. McGreggor had arrived earlier and posted his sentries. One of these, equipped with field glasses, observed McCarron and his men and reported to Captain McGreggor who took his men under cover of a ditch running parallel to the road, where they outflanked McCarron's party and opened fire on them. McCarron received two bullet wounds, one through the head and the other through the stomach, which proved fatal. At the same time Volunteer McAteer was wounded in the thigh but managed to crawl to cover. The British force then returned to Ballybofey for reinforcements. This gave an opportunity to the other two Volunteers to withdraw, taking their wounded comrade with them.

British forces then arrived in strength from Drumboe and surrounded the area. One young man, on observing the approach of the troops, panicked and ran. They fired on him and shot him dead. He was scarcely twenty years old and was not a Volunteer.

McAteer was conveyed across country to a spot near Kelly's Bridge, where I had a dugout. On his arrival there I got a Doctor out from Donegal town to dress his wound. Shortly after the

Doctor's visit, on the 10th June to be exact, the whole countryside around Kelly's Bridge was surrounded by British forces, who eventually discovered our hide-out, although we had the place well camouflaged. I think it was a spade that was left lying around that finally attracted attention. I am of the opinion that it was the Doctor's driver that supplied the information to the British forces about our location.

McAteer, two other Volunteers and myself, were captured and taken to Drumboe. The following morning we were taken to Erlington barracks, Derry, to await our trial. My brother, who was arrested in April of that year, was a prisoner in Derry when I arrived and was about to be transferred to Ballykinlar Camp. Fearing that I would be identified as having taken part in the raid on Drumquin barrack and, as a result, having a murder charge preferred against me, I arranged with my brother to exchange identities. This plan, I hoped, would delay my trial. The ruse worked and I was sent to Ballykinlar, where I was known as Paddy McGowan, that being my brother's name.

On arrival in Ballykinlar I reported the circumstances to Joe McGrath, our Camp Commandant, who informed me that he would arrange to lose me if a capital charge was preferred. Losing a prisoner in the camp meant: Selecting a prisoner from another hut who would resemble the man to be lost. This man would change huts and answer the other man's name at roll call etc. Sometimes prisoners resorted to shaving their heads, growing beards and other means that would make identification difficult.

Sometime later my brother was charged, as Henry McGowan with being in possession of firearms. At his trial an R.I.C. man was

called to give evidence. He immediately testified as to Paddy's identity and the charge was ruled out. At the same time influence was being brought to bear from outside to have Paddy (me) released from Ballykinlar. When I was instructed to report to the Prison Staff I thought the ruse had worked but was told that they had discovered my proper identity and I was being sent back to Derry to stand my trial.

I was charged with being in possession of firearms and sentenced to 15 years imprisonment. Two of the men arrested with me were tried on a similar charge and sentenced to ten years each. The third man, McAteer, was tried on a charge of shooting with intent to kill and was sentenced to 25 years imprisonment. We were detained in Derry Jail. Myself and the two men sentenced on the charge of possession of firearms were released in January 1922.

Sometime before the general release of prisoners, an attempt was made to escape by four prisoners named :- McShea, Leonard, Johnston and Barney Sweeney. They overpowered a Constable on duty and chloroformed him, with ^{FATAL} perfect results, but failed to escape. McAteer was charged as being one of the persons concerned in the attack on the Constable and was sentenced to a further term of imprisonment, although he had nothing to do with it. On hearing of McAteer's sentence the prisoners started a riot, breaking up furniture and fittings in the jail. We were then put in solitary confinement. As a protest, we went on hunger strike. At the end of five days we were released from solitary confinement and previous concessions, such as letters and parcels from our friends, were restored. McAteer was detained for some weeks after the general release of sentenced prisoners.

SIGNED:

Henry M. Cowan

DATE: 16th March 1957.

WITNESS:

JAMES CONNELL

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