

ORIGINAL

BUREAU OF MILITARY HISTORY 1913-21
BURO STAIRÉ MILÉATA 1913-21
No. W.S. 1597

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BUREAU OF MILITARY HISTORY, 1913-21

STATEMENT BY WITNESS.

DOCUMENT NO. W.S. 1597.

Witness

Thomas P. Waters,
5, Harbour Hill,
Cobh,
Co. CORK.

Identity.

Captain, Bantry (Co. Cork) Company;
1st Lieut., 'B' Coy., Belfast Battn.;
Member of 1st Tipperary Brigade Flying Column.

Subject.

Bantry Coy., I. Vols., Co. Cork, 1914-17.
'B' Coy., Belfast Battn., Irish Vols., 1918-20.
Tipperary Brigade Flying Column, 1920-21.

Conditions, if any, Stipulated by Witness.

Nil.

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STATEMENT BY THOMAS P. WATERS,

5, Harbour Hill, Cobh. Co. Cork.

I am a native of Bantry, Co. Cork. Sometime early in the year 1914 I happened to be attending a G.A.A. meeting in a hall known as The Grianáin in Cork City, when I got into conversation with two men from Cork who were discussing the formation of the Volunteers in the city. One of these men was Seán O'Sullivan, Adjutant of the Cork City Battalion, Irish Volunteers. As a result of the convention, I decided to get a Volunteer company in Bantry, and on returning there I commenced to get to work on the job.

At this time, Co. Cork was in the hands of two national factions. In West Cork, William O'Brien had a very large following, while the Redmondites (supporters of John Redmond, the leader of the Irish Party in the British House of Commons), who opposed the O'Brienites, were treated in a most hateful fashion similar to that which we read was being handed out at that time to the Jews in other countries. Arthur Griffith saved a few of us in Bantry from this scourge of factionism, mainly through the columns of his newspaper, "Nationality". When I think back on the work of Griffith during this period, all I can say is that he showed us we had a country worth fighting for and that the factionism by which we were surrounded was not nationality at all.

I organised a Volunteer company in Bantry. It could scarcely be called a company. A section would, perhaps, be a better description, seeing that our numerical strength was only about a dozen men. I was in

charge. We had very little arms - a few shotguns at the most - but we felt capable of carrying out Eoin MacNeill's instructions "to take charge of the local R.I.C." when the occasion arose.

When the Great War broke out in 1914, we saw all the so-called respectable people of the town lining up on the side of England. In the eyes of these people, we of the Volunteers could not be considered respectable. After all, our sisters did not knit socks or collect eggs for the "boys" from the locality who joined the British army, lured on by the tale that they were fighting for the freedom of small nations. Even some of the clergy joined in a recruiting campaign with the local landlord, Leigh White, whose ancestors achieved fame by their active opposition to the French military force which landed in Ireland in 1798.

This was the situation in Bantry town during the early years of the 1914-18 war, and, I might add, the country people were very little better. They, too, were impressed by the loyal respectable shopkeepers. As an example of the lack of national spirit in the people at this time, I remember one day talking to a young farmer and explaining to him why he should join the Volunteers. I pointed out that the war, in which England was then in the throes, would give us a chance to strike a blow for freedom. The young farmer listened very attentively to what I had to say and, when I had finished, put to me this question:- "I wonder, Tom, will this war affect the price of oats?" This fairly typifies the general attitude of the country man to things national prior to the 1916 Rising.

In West Cork, the nearest Volunteer companies were in Ballingeary, about twenty miles to the north, and in Dunmanway, eighteen miles south west. Practically all West Cork was dead, so far as Ireland was concerned, except for the factionism to which I have already referred.

The training activities of our small company in Bantry consisted chiefly in drilling and practice with a .22 rifle. We usually met about twice a week. The chief, and indeed the most pleasant activity was our attendance at British army recruiting meetings, heckling the speakers and asking awkward (for them) questions regarding the rights of small nations, for which Britain was supposed to be so solicitous at that particular time. It might not be out of place to record an amusing incident which occurred at one of these recruiting meetings. Home on leave from the British army was a young man from Inchigeela in West Cork by the name of Mike O'Leary. He had been awarded the Victoria Cross in recognition of his valour in action against the Germans and was being used by the British as bait to encourage other young men to join the British forces, hence his appearance on recruiting platforms. At the meeting in question, Mike O'Leary's father was on the platform, and when the poor man was put forward to speak he did his best to warn his listeners of the terrible consequences which would befall Ireland if the Germans were victorious. He concluded his remarks by telling us that if the Germans came to Ireland, they would do here what the British did in days gone by. Doubtless he was pleased with the terrific cheer which greeted this faux pas, of which he was blissfully unaware.

It was, I think, late in the year 1915 when we attended a Volunteer parade in Cork City. There we were addressed by Seán MacDermott, as well as by some others. He made a great impression on us. He was so different in appearance and in what he had to say when compared with those old fogies who claimed to be Ireland's leaders. We returned home happy at having seen and heard that great little man MacDermott. It was just the tonic we needed.

Easter, 1916:

On Easter Sunday, 1916, I mobilised the following men for whatever duty we were called upon to perform: - Ralph Keyes, Michael (Sonny) O'Donovan, Mick Hurley, John O'Sullivan (cooper), Dan MacSwiney, Mark O'Sullivan, Christy Walsh, Dan O'Regan, Alec McCarthy, Murt, John and Patsy O'Sullivan, three brothers from Pearsonsbridge. I was in charge of the party. My instructions were to contact the men from Ballingeary, who were in charge of Seán O'Hegarty, later O/C of Cork No. 1 Brigade.

We left Bantry on bicycles before noon. We were badly armed, having only a .32 revolvers and a few shotguns. We reached the village of Kealkil about seven or eight miles north east of Bantry, where we met up with O'Hegarty and his party. Seán told me to take my men back to Bantry, as there was nothing doing. I did so, and for the remainder of that fateful Easter Week received no further instructions as to what action we should take.

I would like to state here that we would have been proud to have soldiered with O'Hegarty as leader. We knew him to have an outstanding national outlook and to have already suffered from British oppression even at that early stage in the struggle for freedom.

On our return to Bantry, we had to put up with a great deal of insults from those people who considered themselves respectable. District Inspector Cruise of the R.I.C., who was in charge in the Bantry district, made no arrests. We were simply ignored and insulted.

Following the Rising, when the leaders were shot in Dublin, a great wave of what I would call hysteria swept the district. The Volunteer section (it was no more than that) became a strong company and, strangely enough, elected none of the pre 1916 members as officers. The showmen, with grand green uniforms, were now in charge. I remember being in the ranks one day with my friend Ralph Keyes and remarking to him that war would soon put these showmen in their place. How true my words turned out to be subsequently.

I left Bantry late in 1917 to work at my trade as an electrician in Passage Docks in Passage West, Cork. I started at once to organise the Volunteers in Rochestown, Passage West, Shanbally and Carrigaline in South East Cork. This district was dead nationally speaking, and if the 1916 Rising was heard of at all (which, of course, it was), very little heed was taken of the sacrifices made and the objects for which those who fought in the Rising gave their lives. The few sections I got together here and there were attached to the 2nd Battalion in Cork City. The Battalion O/C at the time was, to the best of my recollection, a man named Scanlan who worked in the wholesale firm of Ogilvie and Moore in Cork.

I continued like this for some months, and one day in the course of my work I happened to be in the house of Mr. Craig, sub-manager Passage Docks, when along came the

local sergeant of the R.I.C., a man named Storey. He asked me to account for my movements since I left Bantry. I refused to tell him anything, and asked him was I a ticket-of-leave man. I was sacked the following day. The management weren't going to make it easy for me to continue organising something they hated. The electrical trades union, of which I was a member, never raised a murmur at my unjust dismissal but proceeded instead to fill my job by another member. Some of these union officials became very republican in their outlook afterwards.

If I wanted to continue in the district as an unpaid Volunteer organiser, I had to get a job of some sort there. I did get fixed up as a labourer and worked (and organised) for some months until I got tipped off that I was to be arrested by the R.I.C. for illegal drilling. As things were getting hot, I decided to get out of Co. Cork, so I made my way to Belfast, where I arrived early in the year 1918. In my lodgings there, I met a Cork man who got me a job as a navvy building the Aldergrove aerodrome outside Belfast.

I wasn't very long in Belfast until I made contact with O'Donovan Rossa hurling and football club. This club was founded by Seán O'Sullivan of Kealkil, Bantry, and was the centre of all Volunteer activities in Belfast. Soon I became a member of "B" Company of the Belfast Battalion, where I met as fine a lot of lads as could be found in Ireland. Aloysius ("Wish") Fox was the Company Captain in charge of from forty to fifty men. Amongst the members was another West Cork man named Jerry Hurley, then, like myself, working in Belfast. Hurley returned later to East Cork, where he was in charge of the active service unit in

that area and carried out many very successful attacks on British forces and R.I.C. barracks. He was killed in action early in 1921 near Middleton, Co. Cork. After some months in 'B' Company, I was appointed one of the Lieutenants.

While in Belfast I learned that revolvers could be bought from Italian ice cream merchants in the city. I cannot be sure where these men got the guns, but I rather think they got them from sailors off boats coming in to Belfast. At any rate, I was able to purchase some and had the pleasure of handing them over to Tadhg Manly, an East Cork Volunteer and now a member of Dáil Éireann. Possibly Jerry Hurley, who was a great friend of Tadhg, told him that he could get some guns in Belfast. However, Tadhg returned to Cork with about half a dozen precious revolvers and ammunition. The guns were later used by Manly and Hurley (with others) in the first successful barrack attack in Ireland, viz. the attack on Carrigtwohill, Co. Cork, R.I.C. barracks, which was taken by assault by men of the 4th Battalion (East Cork), Cork No. 1 Brigade, early in January, 1920.

I had got a job in the famous shipping yard of Harland and Wolfe, Belfast, and during my work I became friendly with an Orangemen there. He was a native of Hollywood, Co. Down. After much beating around the bush, he promised to get me some Steyr rifles at a certain price. These rifles were dumped in Hollywood after being imported from Germany some years previously by Edward Carson, the Ulster Volunteer leader and politician. The few rifles I was able to get, I sent them by Jackie O'Leary of Donoughmore, Co. Cork, to the Cork No. 1 Brigade. He, too, was working at Harland and Wolfe's then. Jackie was

afterwards a Battalion O/C in West Cork and had charge of the Dripsey ambush - where a number of our men were captured.

A Mrs. Lindsay and her chauffeur were executed by the I.R.A. for their part in giving information to the British of the whereabouts of our lads on the occasion in question.

The burning of income tax offices in Belfast kept us busy for a while until some time early in 1920, when I went with Commandant Joe McKelvey to help the Co. Down men in an attack on Crossgar Barracks.

Attack on R.I.C. barracks at Crossgar, Co. Down:

Crossgar is about eighteen miles south of Belfast. The barracks was in the middle of a row of houses in the village street. It was a two-storied building with a slated roof and had a garrison of eight or ten R.I.C. men. The plan of attack was to enter the two houses adjoining the barracks and, having removed the occupants to a place of safety, explode a charge of gelignite against the dividing walls. We hoped to effect an entry into the barracks from both sides through the holes made by the explosions.

I left Belfast at night in a motor driven by Seán Leonard, a Sligo man. With me in the car were Aloysius ("Wish" Fox, Joe McKelvey, Roger McCorley, - O'Brien and Andy Furlong a Wexford man. Near Crossgar we met the Co. Down men. These men were armed with rifles or shotguns and were placed in houses overlooking the R.I.C. barracks.

It was very late at night when we entered the village and proceeded to evacuate the inhabitants of the two houses already mentioned. This was no easy job, as care had to be taken not to alert the R.I.C. to what was happening. In fact, the police did 'get wise' before we tried to breach the walls, and they proceeded to throw grenades out into the street and to send up Verey lights. We proceeded with the job of exploding the gelignite, and when the dust had cleared we discovered that the hole in the wall on the side of which I was was not big enough to allow us into the barrack building even one at a time. On the far side of the barracks to us the explosion was also insufficient to allow any of our lads in through the small hole made. We now decided to throw bottles of paraffin in through the aperture and tried to set fire to the barracks. This also was not a success. Unfortunately, we had not a ladder available to help us get on to the roof, where we could have removed slates and fired the barracks from that position.

Meanwhile, our men across the street kept up a steady fire on the barracks. The R.I.C. replied vigorously with rifles and grenades. I understand that two R.I.C. men were shot in these exchanges. It was now fairly evident that our chances of taking the barracks by assault were negligible. Upwards of three hours had passed since we first entered the village, and we were in grave danger of meeting up with enemy reinforcements, with whom we could not possibly cope as our ammunition was practically exhausted. Daybreak was approaching when Joe McKelvey ordered a general retirement from the village. As I got on to the street with those men in the house, we had to run the gauntlet of grenades being thrown out by the R.I.C. garrison. We escaped injury

and McKelvey, Fox, McCorley, O'Brien and Furlong and I set out on foot for Belfast, eighteen miles distant, which we reached safely.

Here I must pay tribute to Leonard, who drove us from Belfast. When we got to Crossgar, I told him to go back immediately to Belfast in case he would be missed and suspected of being engaged in the Crossgar attack. He refused to do so, saying he would remain on "until the fun started". Later on in the year he was captured and sentenced to death in connection with the shooting of District Inspector Swanzy of the R.I.C. in Lisburn. Swanzy was the man who led the R.I.C. gang who murdered Lord Mayor Tomás McCurtain in Cork in March, 1920. Luckily for Leonard, the truce of July, 1921, saved him from execution. I believe he is now alive and well in his native Co. Sligo. He was a brave man.

Attempt to raid Kilroot Military Camp:

My next venture with the Belfast men was in an attempted raid for arms on Kilroot military camp outside Ballymena, Co. Antrim. Joe McKelvey was in charge of our party, which was armed with revolvers. A local soldier told us that the camp would be easy to capture, and offered to act as our guide.

We went in two motor cars at night to Kilroot. I immediately climbed a telegraph pole and cut the wires, and when I got to the ground McKelvey told me that our soldier guide was backing out of his promise to us. Some members of the garrison, including the officer in charge, had meanwhile been held prisoners by our lads, who caught the soldiers as they were returning to camp. From these we learned that there was more than the guard on duty and that we would have no hope of taking the place

by surprise. In view of this information, but more particularly because of the defection of our soldier guide, it was decided to call off the job. We then returned by motor to Belfast, bringing the camp O/C with us. We tied him up and left him in a ditch near Belfast, where he was found next day unharmed. I remember that the newspapers next day reported the affair as being a schoolboy prank. It would never do to admit that they were very near to losing an armed camp.

The police in Belfast were now very active on my track, so I decided to accept an invitation from Ned O'Leary of Nenagh, Adjutant of the Tipperary No. 1 Brigade, to take up a job in Nenagh, Co. Tipperary. I went to Nenagh about June or July, 1920, and obtained a position as electrician with the Urban District Council, who were then installing electric light in Nenagh for the first time. I was to spread the light in another sense too. I did my best to act the part of a hard-working, respectable man by day, when under the eyes of the R.I.C. At night, of course, I had the usual Volunteer work to do.

In October, 1920, when Terry MacSwiney of Cork died on hunger-strike in Brixton gaol, we decided that some of the local R.I.C. should pay the penalty too. An R.I.C. man from Cork - McCarthy by name - was shot at and wounded in Nenagh one night, and late on the night of the shooting the Black and Tan murder gang raided my digs looking for me. I was actually on my way to my digs at the time, when the prayers of someone directed me elsewhere and saved me from certain death. The murder gang were strangers in Nenagh and did not know the son of the house, who happened to be the same build as myself. They took him out to shoot him, but his British war service medals (he was an ex-soldier) saved him.

After this, I could no longer act the respectable citizen, and as the active service unit was then being formed (about October, 1920) I became a member.

Ned O'Leary of Nenagh was O/C of the A.S.U. It comprised about thirty men armed with rifles and revolvers. The names of the column, as it was called, were, so far as I can now remember, as follows: - Ned O'Leary, O/C, Jack O'Leary, Nenagh, (a Killarney man) who died of wounds received in action, Eddie John Ryan, Nenagh, Joe Starr and Pat Starr (killed in action in Limerick) of Nenagh, Paddy Ryan Lacken, later a T.D. who refused to enter the Dáil with de Valera and went to the U.S.A. in 1932, Mick Kennedy and Tom McGrath from Newport, Co. Tipperary, Mick Vaughan, Killaloe, Paddy O'Brien, Silvermines, Jack Harty, Toomevara, Hugh Kelly, Joe Liffey, Jack Collison, Jer Larkin, Tim Gleeson, Paddy Kennedy, Joe Mannion, all from Moneygall, Mick Brophy, Ned Quinlan, Robert Powell, Ned Maher, all from Roscrea, Ned Davoren, Mick Joyce, Lorrha, Seán Glennon, Lorrha, Jim Devaney, Toomevara (killed in action), and myself.

We moved from place to place, billeting in the houses of the country people. To me it seemed a lot of useless trotting around. We never seemed to make contact with the enemy. I attributed this chiefly to our poor intelligence service, but as time went on I learned that a few of our intelligence officers were inclined to give us misleading information on the movement of enemy forces in our area. I ascertained that the reason for this was the desire on the part of some of the intelligence officers to remove the probable scene of action from districts in which relatives of theirs resided and who might be the subject of drastic reprisals by the enemy if he was attacked by us in those particular districts.

Ambush at Latteragh, Co. Tipperary:

Our first ambush was at Latteragh, a district between Borrissleigh and Nenagh. The period was before Christmas, 1920. We had been lying in wait many times in the hope of engaging lorries of British soldiers coming from or going to the town of Nenagh. One evening as dusk was falling, two lorries with military approached our position behind hedges on the roadside. We opened fire with rifles and shotguns. The soldiers replied to our fire with rifles and machine-guns. Unfortunately we weren't lucky enough to get the drivers of the lorries, with the result that the convoy got safely through with but a few casualties.

Ned O'Leary was in charge of this affair. His object was to capture arms and ammunition rather than inflict casualties, but as the enemy force had come on us unexpectedly we had no time to prepare road-blocks to halt the lorries, which would enable us to do a much better job.

Ambush at Kilcommon, Co. Tipperary:

It was, I think, late in the month of December, 1920, when the column was in the district of Kilcommon, about four or five miles north of Upperchurch and close to the border of Co. Limerick. The weather was intensely cold, with heavy frost and ice everywhere. We lay in ambush for long periods awaiting a patrol of Black and Tans which occasionally left the barracks at Kilcommon. As this patrol invariably went by different roads, the column was divided on this particular morning, one section taking up a position on a mountain road, whilst I, with about eight men, plus a few local Volunteers, went on to the main road, where we took cover behind the ditches lining the road. We spent a perishing morning there, in frost and ice, and were numb

with the cold when scouts reported that the enemy patrol was approaching our position. I had previous to this detailed two of the column men, Larkin and Meagher, with two local men, to a position near a house up the road, with instructions to allow the patrol to pass them and come on into the ambush position which I and the others held. In the event of the Tans trying to return back the road when they came under fire from my section, it would be the duty of Larkin and Meagher to prevent this.

Eventually the patrol came along, to the number of about six or eight so far as I remember. When it reached my position, we opened fire with rifles at about twenty or thirty yards range and knocked out at least half the party. The others scattered into the adjoining fields. We crept up by the ditch and got on to the road where the Tans lay, some wounded, some dead. We collected about six rifles and a large quantity of ammunition. I had a first-aid outfit and tended to the wounded Tans as best I could, bandaging up their wounds and pouring in iodine. A Constable Bundy, who was badly wounded, had a considerable sum of money on him when I searched him. He appealed to me not to take the money. I had no notion of doing so, and told him that. I took his gun and ammunition, and also a pair of handcuffs he had with him. The latter I still have as a souvenir of the occasion. As regards the money, we had orders later on to take any we found on captured soldiers or police, as in many of their raids on homes of people they robbed money and valuables.

The ambush at Kilcommon gave us some nice rifles and much needed ammunition, and after this I got to know that these lads of the Tipperary No. 1 Brigade Flying Column were as fine a bunch of lads as could be found anywhere.

One of them, Paddy Ryan (Lacken), was an outstanding man. The Brigade Staff were, however, what might be termed very careful men, too careful (over cautious) for the type of work which we had to do. Indeed, they gave the column very little help or guidance.

In the spring of 1921, I was asked by Mick McCormack to join the staff of the Division which was then being formed. I declined, as I could not see any point in becoming a staff officer and just looking wise when there was so much other work of a more active nature to be done.

In late March, 1921, we were in the Moneygall district and I had made an appointment with a dentist in Moneygall for Seán O'Leary from our column who was suffering badly from a toothache at the time. The appointment was for Easter Sunday, 27th March, 1921. Five of us - Joe Mangan, Eddie John Ryan, - Ryan (Kilmallock), Seán O'Leary and myself set out for Moneygall. I remember telling O'Leary that Moneygall was a busy spot for Tans and military and, for that reason, we would not go armed into the village in case we might create trouble for the dentist or his family if, perhaps, we were seen going to his house and would have to shoot it out if the enemy attempted to capture any of us. We therefore walked unarmed along the road towards Moneygall, when suddenly we walked right into a couple of lorries of Auxiliaries. Three of the lads jumped the ditch on the right-hand side of the road and got away, whilst Seán O'Leary and I got over the ditch on the left-hand side and made across a field. Fire was opened on us and I fell, shot in the hip. O'Leary also fell, badly wounded. The Auxies came up on us and some of them wanted to finish us off. If they had found what I had in my pocket, they certainly would have finished

me off. Some time previously I was down near the Shannon in a disused house. Pulling out a drawer, I found several sets of artificial teeth. I had these with me to take to the dentist in Moneygall in case he might be able to use them on Seán O'Leary. If the Auxies had found them, they might easily have thought I had taken them from the bodies of their comrades killed in Kilcommon.

To give the devil his due, the Auxies gave us first-aid treatment and put us in one of their lorries. I was in terrible agony. I remember poor O'Leary saying to me, "I am worse than you, don't be moaning". Both of us were bleeding profusely. We were driven to Nenagh R.I.C. barracks, where the lorries halted. One R.I.C. man, a Wexford man named Kane, when he saw us said, "You b-----s, we got you at last". We were then taken to Nenagh Workhouse hospital, where a nun named Sister Elizabeth took us over. She ordered the soldiers out of the ward and then sent for Dr. Courtney of Nenagh, who dressed our wounds. Seán O'Leary died from his wounds and then I heard I was to be moved to Limerick. However, Dr. Courtney explained to the military officer that I couldn't be moved because of my condition. In fact, there was no hope of my living.

After some days I noticed that an R.I.C. sergeant named Flannery, a native of Mayo I think, called to see how I was getting on. I think he had to report on my condition daily, with a view to my transfer to Limerick if I showed signs of improvement. I must pay tribute to this man by stating that he continued to report that my condition was bad when, in fact, I was making progress slowly.

While I was in the hospital, I was delighted to receive a visit one day from the late Most Reverend Dr. Fogarty, Bisnop of Killaloe. I remember asking him, "Will I die?", and his reply, "No, Tom, you won't". The Bishop's visit and his words of encouragement bucked me up tremendously and I continued to improve.

I was transferred to Dublin after the Truce of July, 1921, where after several operations I had three inches taken off my leg and found myself on crutches. My hurling and football days were over and I was unable to work.

To conclude, I would like to refer to the attitude of our native government to its wounded soldiers. No attempt was made to train men disabled as I was for sustable employment, and their pension scheme is in the Patrick Sheehan scale (a Crimean war veteran who, according to an old ballad, was awarded a disablement pension of a penny a day). It would appear that the number of casualties in our ranks were too few to concern the different political factions. Such is the gratitude of all governments to their wounded soldiers. All I can claim for my long service is that I did my best, and no man can do more. I thank God to be alive still.

Signed *Thomas Waters*

Date: 20th March 1927

Witness:

A. Brown
(Investigator)

BUREAU OF MILITARY HISTORY 1913-21
BURO STAIGE MILE TA 1913 21
NO. W.S. 1,597