

ORIGINAL

BUREAU OF MILITARY HISTORY 1913-21
BURO STAIRÉ MILEATA 1913-21
No. **W.S.** 1.617

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BUREAU OF MILITARY HISTORY, 1913-21.

STATEMENT BY WITNESS.

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Witness

James Hayes,
Kildalton,
Piltown,
Co. Kilkenny.

Identity.

O/C Portarlinton Coy., 2nd Leix Brigade.
O/C Offaly No. 1 Brigade.

Subject.

Irish Volunteer activities Leix & Offaly
Brigades, 1917-1921.

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Nil.

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No. W.S. 1,617

STATEMENT BY Mr. JAMES HAYES,
Kildalton, Piltown, Co. Kilkenny.

Formerly O/C., Offaly No. 1. Brigade.

I was born on 25th May, 1888 in Killucan, County Westmeath. Having completed my education at the local schools, I served my time to the stone-mason trade to my father who had learned that trade in his native place, Mallow, County Cork.

My first connection with the National Movement was, as well as I can remember, in the year of 1910 or 1911 when I helped to organise a branch of the Gaelic League in Killucan village. President of the Gaelic League branch was Mr. T. Murray, N.T. Mr. B.J. Carroll and Mr. C. O'Connor were Secretary and Treasurer respectively and our Irish teacher was Mr. Peadar Donnelly.

About the year of 1912 I became a member of the Ancient Order of Hibernians. Our branch in Killucan was titled 1077 Division of the A.O.H. and its President was Mr. T. O'Reilly of Killucan.

I joined the National Volunteers when they were formed in Killucan and remained a member until some time after a county inspection, reviewed by Colonel Maurice Moore, was held in Mullingar. That was probably in the early autumn of 1914, for shortly afterwards, when it was suggested that we should join the British Army, approximately 50% of the members, including myself, withdrew from the ranks.

In August, 1914, I left home for the first time and took up employment with the firm of Messrs. Sweeney Brothers who were then

engaged building an extension to Portarlinton R.C. Church. When that job was finished I branched out on my own and took a contract from the Land Commission to build eight dwelling houses at Ceashill. I commenced work on this contract in January 1916.

On Easter Sunday of 1916 I went by request to Clogran, Mullingar, to take part in a rebel play (Pike O'Callaghan) and returned on the following day to resume work.

In the early part of 1917 six other men and myself - we were not yet Volunteers - started a campaign of propaganda in Portarlinton. This we did by printing Sinn Féin slogans and painting the Republican colours on the doors and walls of hostile houses. On several occasions we erected tricolour flags on all six chimney stacks of Arlington School. By the way, Arlington School is said to be the school in which Sir Edward Carson was educated. It was in 1917 occupied by Red Cross workers who worked there daily, making clothes and comforts for the British troops in France. We destroyed their products on several occasions. Arlington School was later occupied by British military.

We next set about forming a Company of Volunteers and did so with success at Killinard. Killinard was chosen rather than Portarlinton for at that time there was a strong Irish Parliamentary Party element in Portarlinton and the majority of the people there were then anti-Sinn Féin and anti-Irish Volunteer. Young men from both Portarlinton and Killinard were enrolled and we soon had a good-sized Company. On the advice of Mr. Patrick Ramsbottom, who later became O/C. of the Leix Brigade, I affiliated the Company to G.H.Q. by sending the affiliation fee to Michael Collins at 22 Bachelors Walk, Dublin. I was then appointed O/C. of the Company with Peter Finlay as its 1st Lieutenant.

In a short time the Killinard Company became very strong in numbers and, as the people of Portarlinton were coming around to our way of thinking, we considered it advisable to form a separate Company in the town and to let the Killinard men carry on, on their own. By that time the Leix Brigade had been formed with Patrick Ramsbottom as its Commandant and I affiliated the new Company, of which I had been elected O/C., with him. We became the Portarlinton Company, 2nd Leix Brigade. Peter Finlay too had joined this Company and was appointed its 1st Lieutenant.

We carried on with the usual training, propaganda and occasional raids for arms. One November night in 1917, a party of British W.A.A.C's (Womens Army Auxiliary Corps) arrived in Portarlinton to hold a recruiting meeting. Finlay and myself got a long length of rope and with it snared the electric and telegraph wires leading to the town. When we pulled on the rope the wires snapped, thus cutting off the light and communications, with the result that the recruiting meeting had to be abandoned.

Next I would say came the anti-conscription meetings during the summer of 1918 when all units of the Volunteers marched in protest and attended the meetings. Each Company, including my own, trebled its original numerical strength during that period, but I am sorry to say the big numbers fell away again as the danger of conscription disappeared.

Following the excitement of the conscription scare we were back again to normal. To improve our scanty arms supply we raided two gunsmiths' shops in Portarlinton on the same night. In the first one, Prices, we got a small quantity of revolver and rifle cartridges.

The other one, Granges, proved more fruitful. There we got about three or four cwt. of stuff, including some hundreds of sporting-gun cartridge cases, four filling machines, some sacks of buckshot, felt wads, percussion caps, fuse and two muzzle loading pistols. We removed the lot by horse and cart to my residence at Geashill which was then unoccupied, and later we removed it to Ballydowan where each night for a fortnight Volunteers were busy filling cartridges and preparing them for use.

On 10th November, 1918, the pro-British element in Portarlington prepared to celebrate the Armistice which brought the 1914-1918 Great War to an end on the following day, November 11th. That night we painted the Republican colours on their houses. Dr. Rice, the leading pro-Britisher in the town and who lived opposite to the R.I.C. barracks, borrowed for the occasion a large 10' silk Union Jack from Lord Portarlington of Emo Park and flew it from one of his top windows. Peter Finlay and myself cast a line, to which was attached some cotton material saturated in petrol, on to the flag and set it on fire. The Doctor, in his excitement and eagerness to save the flag, hauled it back through the window with the result that in addition to the flag his curtains and blind were burned.

During the General Election campaign in December 1918, the Company supplied escorts for the Sinn Féin speakers and candidates. On one occasion after escorting Harry Boland and Kevin O'Higgins to Welsh Island, I learned that the R.I.C. were seeking to arrest me on a charge of unlawful assembly and I was compelled to go 'on the run' for some time.

Early in 1919 I received orders from Thomas Brady, who was then the Brigade O/C., to collect as much lead as possible as it was

was required for the manufacture of munitions. With six members of the Cloneygowan Company, who had received similar instructions, I raided an unoccupied mansion called 'Annilla House' and removed about 10 cwt. of lead from the roof. We conveyed it to Ard Bog where I believe it lies buried to the present day for we received no further instructions about it.

Sometime later Ernie O'Malley and George Plunkett, who were organising in the Offaly Brigade area, made an appointment to meet me at Raheen Catholic Church. They arrived in due time and we had a long talk concerning local Volunteer matters. They asked me if I would like them to inspect the Portarlinton Company on parade. I said I would be delighted but as I could not myself go into the town in safety I gave them Peter Finlay's address. The full Company paraded on the Square in the heart of the town at 4 p.m., were inspected and dismissed, and O'Malley and Plunkett had gone to the railway station and boarded a Dublin bound train before the R.I.C. arrived to investigate what was happening.

Another public parade of the Company was held in March of that year when, accompanied by members of Cumann na mBan, we marched to the railway station to pay our respects to the late Pierce McCann whose remains were being taken home to his native Dualla after his death in Gloucester Prison.

Sometime later in that same year (1919) three members of the Offaly Brigade and myself boarded the mail train as it was leaving Geashill station for Tullamore. Three miles out from Geashill we stopped the train, held up the crew and took away two bags of mails. The mails contained some documents of importance which we sent to

Michael Collins. Four weeks later, with Peter Finlay and four members of the Portarlinton Company, I held up the postal staff at Portarlinton railway station and took away the night mails. They contained a good deal of enemy correspondence - all in cipher - which we sent to G.H.Q.

In or about the same time I was sworn in as a member of the Cloneygowan circle of the I.R.B. I became centre later and in 1921 I was appointed Vice-Chairman of the County Offaly centre of the I.R.B.

Until the early months of 1920 there were two R.I.C. barracks in Portarlinton, one in the County Offaly portion of the town and the other in the Main Street or County Leix portion. Then the R.I.C. vacated the one on the County Offaly side and its garrison was transferred to reinforce the one in Main Street. About Easter of 1920 we demolished the evacuated barracks with explosives. The R.I.C. garrisons were withdrawn from Geashill and Cloneygowan - both places in Offaly No. 1, Brigade area - at that period too. With members of the Cloneygowan Company I burned down Geashill barracks and later Cloneygowan barracks and Courthouse.

In or about that period Peter Finlay and I were appointed to the Battalion staff. My appointment was that of Vice O/C. of Engineers. We still continued to parade with and train the Portarlinton Company and to collect arms wherever possible. Finlay was arrested and sentenced to a term of imprisonment which he served in Wormwood Scrubbs prison. To avoid arrest I was obliged to keep out in the country and as I was very familiar with the district around Cloneygowan in County Offaly I generally stayed in that neighbourhood.

On 1st November, 1920, I received orders from Headquarters of the Leix Brigade to mobilise the Portarlinton Company at full strength and to arm and equip each man as best I could. Briefly, the position was as follows: The Brigade Staff intended to execute an R.I.C. man, who had a very bad record, by shooting him at his home in the town that morning. The Company was to 'stand to' in readiness to take up positions to attack a party of military which, it was expected, would be sent to the town immediately after the shooting. At the time I was in touch with Peadar Bracken of the Offaly Brigade who, with his Active Service Unit, was then in billets about three miles from Portarlinton. I acquainted him of the position and he and his men took up a position at Raheen with a view to helping us in the attack.

I mobilised the Company in the new cemetery and detailed the men to the positions they were to occupy. We remained in waiting until 4 p.m. when a member of the Battalion Staff came along and said the operation had been cancelled. This was a big disappointment to the members of the Company some of whom had forfeited their jobs in factories to attend the mobilisation.

I went to Raheen, informed Bracken of what had happened and remained there with him until 12th November, 1920. On that day Bracken's A.S.U. and myself had a brief encounter with a party of Crown forces in which two R.I.C. men were wounded. The ambush position was at Raheen, near Geashill. We were expecting a cycle patrol and therefore did not block the road, but the police party - about twenty strong - came along in one lorry. Our fire failed to halt the lorry which continued on its journey. There were no casualties on our side.

On 22nd February, 1921, Patrick Quin, Commandant of the 2nd Battalion of Offaly No. 1 Brigade, and myself, with a section of men from the Walsh Island Company and a section from the Clonygowan Company, occupied an ambush position at Mount Lucas near Edenderry. It had been reported to us that a cycle patrol of R.I.C. men passed that way almost every day. We saw no cycle patrol but during the morning a lorry load of R.I.C. men, including District Inspector Magnier, passed going towards Tullamore. We decided to remain in the position and prepared to attack them on their return journey by building up positions above the level of the wall so as to give us a better view of the road.

Some hours later the lorry returned and we opened fire on the R.I.C. as the lorry passed through the ambush position. We had hoped to halt the lorry by shooting the driver in the first volley but failed to do so and it (the lorry) continued on until it reached a point about half a mile further on where it stopped. With the exception of myself, who carried a rifle, all our men were armed with either shotguns or revolvers and as we were not in a position to engage the police at long range it was decided to retire at once from the area. It was later reported that five R.I.C. men, including the driver, were severely wounded.

On or about the last day of February, 1921, I was summoned to attend a Brigade Council meeting of Offaly No. 1 Brigade. The meeting was held in Geashill and the Brigade Commandant, Seán Kelly, produced a document which stated that I had been appointed by G.H.Q. to the position of Vice O/C. of Offaly No. 1. Brigade. The other Brigade officers then were Andrew Gallagher, Adjutant, and James Kelly, Quartermaster.

I took up my new duties with the Brigade Staff immediately. We inspected the whole Brigade area and reorganised each Battalion and Company. Whilst engaged on this work we were notified that a troop train was expected to pass through the area on its way from Galway to The Curragh. We made arrangements for an attack on it at Newtown Bridge but the troop train failed to come. I would like to mention that I was told at the time about a troop train which passed on a previous occasion and that failure to attack it had led to some trouble between G.H.Q. and officers of the Offaly Brigades.

On the 1st April, 1921, an engagement took place between a party of R.I.C. men, including some Black and Tans, and members of the local Company in Tullamore. One R.I.C. man was wounded. Next morning Matthew Keane, one of the local I.R.A. men who had taken part in the attack, was found shot dead outside the town. His nephew, John Conroy, had been wounded in the fight on the previous night.

On 5th April, 1921, a Brigade Council meeting was held in Geashill at which all present were notified to attend a special meeting next day in Ballycomon House at which Simon Donnelly, an organiser from G.H.Q., would be present. After the meeting in Geashill, Sean Kelly the Brigade O/C., and his brother James Kelly the Brigade Quartermaster, parted with us for the night saying they wished to go to Tullamore as they were anxious about the welfare of Conroy, the wounded man. They promised to meet us again outside Geashill at 12 o'clock next day.

About mid-day next day a dispatch rider arrived at Geashill and informed me that the two Kellys had been captured during the night

by Crown forces who were out searching for young Conroy.

All the other members of the Brigade Council were present at Ballycoman House at the appointed time. Simon Donnelly was there too and I reported to him the fate of the Brigade Commandant and Quartermaster. He gave us a strong lecture on the desirability of avoiding arrest and keeping out of prison as every man, especially officers, were needed to carry on the work. Simon Donnelly presided at the meeting and it was decided to fill the vacancy created by Sean Kelly's arrest. A vote was taken with the result that I was appointed Brigade O/C. Thomas Dunne was elected Brigade Vice O/C., and it was agreed that the Brigade Staff appoint a Quartermaster at a later date. I accompanied Simon Donnelly to Walsh Island where we both stayed that night at the home of Mrs. Milliner.

I parted from Donnelly on the following morning and returned to Killinmore to meet the Brigade Adjutant and some other members of the Brigade Council. Amongst those present that morning was Thomas Mullens, N.T., Tullamore. As a result of the attack on the R.I.C. in Tullamore he had been compelled to leave his position as a teacher and throw in his lot with others who were 'on the run'. The Brigade Adjutant knew Mullens well and suggested that he would be a very suitable man for the position of Brigade Quartermaster. I agreed and had no hesitation about giving him the appointment. I mention this specifically for the simple reason that The Military Service Pensions Board subsequently refused to accept my statement that Mullens at any stage held the rank of Brigade Quartermaster. I maintained and firmly believe that he held the rank for a period of approximately one month, that was until the date of his arrest which took place on or about the 12th May, 1921,

and after all I was the one who was there and in a position to know.

About 10th April, 1921, the Brigade Adjutant and myself went to the townland of Ard about five miles from Killinmore where we met approximately twenty members of the 1st (Tullamore) Battalion who, for safety reasons, had cleared out of the town and gone 'on the run'. We there and then formed these men into an Active Service Unit and appointed Edward (Ned) Brennan of Tullamore as O/C. of the Unit and Michael Galvin as its Quartermaster. We remained at Ard for about six days until equipment suitable for camping out was procured for the Unit who then moved to Ballymacrossan. The Brigade Adjutant and myself set up a Brigade Headquarters at Kilcooney. That location suited the Brigade Vice O/C. admirably for he was partially disabled and was not equal to much travelling.

About that time we received a consignment of six Lee Enfield Service rifles, four revolvers, several hundred rounds of ammunition, explosives, fuse and detonators from G.H.Q. The consignment came by rail to Geashill bearing a covering address. A Volunteer named Dunne and myself took possession of it at the Railway Station and conveyed it to Ballycrystall where Ned Brennan assembled the rifles and distributed them to the Active Service Unit.

Road blocking and road trenching was at that time a feature of our activities. I assisted the Cloneygowan Company to blast a large crater in the bridge over the railway at Cloneygowan which left the road impassible to traffic. In the same district a British military lorry crashed into a deep wide trench which had been cut in the road. The lorry had to be abandoned and the road was subsequently remade over it by military forces.

The A.S.U. visited the Company areas and with the local Companies carried out a general blockade of roads. They frequently sniped the enemy posts and sniped enemy convoys whenever the opportunity to do so came their way.

Meanwhile the question of attacking Clonbollogue R.I.C. barracks was receiving the attention of the Brigade Staff. Tom Mullens the Brigade Quartermaster, and Seán Barry, Captain of the Tullamore Company, were sent to Brackna to collect all possible information regarding the barracks at Clonbollogue.

From the information which they brought back, a plan of attack on the following lines was prepared. I proposed to take possession of a house which was situated about twelve or fourteen feet from the barracks and with the assistance of Peter Geraty, O/C., of the 3rd Battalion, to break through the chimney in an upper room at the end of the house and at a point higher than the barrack roof. With the assistance of a long gun-metal pipe which had been specially prepared by a Volunteer named Denis Hyland I intended to rip slates of the barrack roof and to pour petrol through the pipe on to the ceiling and woodwork. Then, by the aid of a long wire and the gunmetal pipe, to set it ablaze by placing pieces of burning material on the stripped portion of the roof. The members of the A.S.U. and selected Volunteers, armed with rifles and shotguns, were to occupy positions around the barracks and from which the main attack would be launched. Arrangements were also made to block all roads and to destroy all lines of communication throughout the area on the night of the attack.

The reader may be tempted to ask why, at such a critical period and in an area of flat level countryside unsuited for guerilla warfare and where there were no mountains or secure hiding-

places into which to retreat, I was prepared to take the risk of involving so many men in an attack on a post fortified as was Clonbollogue barracks. The answer is this. I had received orders from G.H.Q. to keep my armed men active, for to permit them to move around aimlessly would have a most demoralising effect on them. Watching on the roads for the enemy was a most uncertain business and there was little hope of bringing off operations in the big towns. Clonbollogue was one of the few isolated barracks left in the area.

On, I think, 10th May, 1921, we were all set for the attack on Clonbollogue. Arms were distributed and all units were detailed as regards their positions and duties. The Brigade Adjutant, myself, and some members of the 3rd Battalion were assembled at Bawnmore when a dispatch rider arrived to warn us that a large force of British cavalry accompanied by R.I.C. men were raiding in the Tullamore area, that they had arrested several Volunteers, including the O/C. of Offaly No. 2 Brigade, and that they were moving cross-country in our direction. The Adjutant and myself left immediately for the Walsh Island district and warned Ned Brennan and his unit who were assembling there. That night the enemy force, consisting of approximately 1,200 cavalry and between 200 and 300 R.I.C. men, camped on a site beside the Tullamore-Portarlinton road. They had advanced cross-country on a front approximately two miles wide and were keeping their line straight by signalling flags.

I decided to get to their rear while they were encamped for the night. Local scouts located unguarded breaches in the encampment and with the aid of the scouts our party of over forty men advanced through the enemy ranks to safety and then on to Killenmore.

P. Quinn, the O/C. of the 2nd Battalion, went to his home and took shelter in a draw-well where he was found by the military and arrested. Tom Mullens and Seán Barry did not come with us but went on in the line of the enemy's advance and were overtaken and captured. As there was a danger of this big enemy force turning and retracing its steps we decided to cancel the proposed operation at Clonbollogue for the time being, at any rate.

Next came the formation of the 3rd Southern Division. Captain Michael McCormack and Augustus McCurtain called on me at Killenmore and told me that the Offaly, Leix and North Tipperary Brigades were or were being formed into a Division - to be known as the 3rd Southern Division. McCormack, whom I had known previously when he organised and trained Volunteers in County Leix, had been appointed O/C of the Division and McCurtain had been appointed Divisional Adjutant. I told them of my intention to carry out the attack on Clonbollogue Barracks, but they advised me not to undertake any major operation for the present as it was the intention, when the Division was organised, to form one large Flying Column which would operate throughout the whole area. They gave me the date and venue of a Divisional Council meeting which would be held at Camoras, Co. Leix, in a few weeks time.

That meeting at Camoras was held about the middle of June, 1921. At it, I received orders to report with eight specially picked men to the Divisional Headquarters on 11th July, 1921, for service with the proposed new Column. I was also instructed to procure telephone apparatus and a copying press for the Divisional Headquarters. This I did by having Geashill, Dangan and Cloneygowan Post Offices raided for the telephone apparatus and a raid on the Technical School, Tullamore, provided the copying press.

The eight selected men and myself reported at Camoras on 11th July, 1921, which date coincided with the coming into operation of the Truce. An Officers' Training Camp was set up at Camoras with Sean Collison and Paddy Mulcahy as instructors. I remained at the Camp until the end of July when I returned to Tullamore and set up a Brigade Training Camp at Tinnycross. The Brigade Headquarters was transferred from Kilcooney to a premises in Tullamore where the Adjutant and myself worked the round of the clock.

In September I attended a meeting of the Brigade officers of the Leix and Offaly Brigades which was held at Lenane House, Roscrea. Dick Mulcahy, the Chief of Staff, was present and listened to our problems. Mine was an economic one. I had no personal income, I was not in receipt of any remuneration from either G.H.Q. or the Brigade and in common decency I felt that I could not continue to live on the generosity of my friends. Mulcahy promised to have the matter looked into.

Later Sean Gaynor, the Divisional Quartermaster, called on me and suggested a solution to my problem. His proposal was that Andrew Gallagher, the Brigade Adjutant, who resided with his people, should take over as Brigade O/C., and that I should accept appointment as Brigade Vice Commandant.

The duties of the latter post were concerned mainly with inspection of training camps and Gaynor was of the opinion that this work could be done in my spare time and that thus I would be free to resume my normal vocation. I agreed, and was quite willing to accept the new arrangement for, as I have said, I felt I could not continue to intrude on the goodness of my friends. The suggestion,

however, never went beyond the proposal stage, and when Mr. Thomas Going offered me a contract to build a dwelling house for him at Dangan I accepted it and, without any formality whatsoever, I terminated my association with the I.R.A. and commenced work on the job in Dangan. That, I would say, was on or about 10th October, 1921.

SIGNED: James Hayes

DATE: 21st May 1957

WITNESS: Grace

