

ORIGINAL

BUREAU OF MILITARY HISTORY 1913-21

BURO STAIRÉ MILEATA 1913-21

No. W.S. 1,663

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BUREAU OF MILITARY HISTORY, 1913-21.

STATEMENT BY WITNESS.

DOCUMENT NO. W.S. 1663

Witness

Francis Connell,
Tanderagee,
Bailieboro',
Co. Cavan

Identity.

Commandant, 2nd (Bailieboro') Battalion,
Cavan Brigade

Subject.

Bailieboro' Company, Irish Volunteers,
Co. Cavan

1913-21

Conditions, if any, Stipulated by Witness.

Nil

File No S.2976

Form B.S.M. 2

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STATEMENT OF FRANCIS CONNELL

Tanderagee, Bailieboro, Co. Cavan

I was born in Bailieboro in the year 1896. I attended the local National School until I was 14 years of age. When I left school I started work with a local farmer.

A company of the Irish National Volunteers was formed in Bailieboro in the year 1913. With all the young men of the town I joined at the start. Our strength was about 200 and we were drilled by ex-British soldiers. After the start of World War I, John Redmond advised the Volunteers of Ireland to join the British army. For this purpose, recruiting meetings were held in Bailieboro and other towns in Co. Cavan. Those meetings were addressed by members of the Irish Nationalist Party and influential people who exhorted the young men to "join up and fight for the rights of small nationalities". Most of the employers in Bailieboro, who were of the pro-British type, exerted a kind of pressure on their employees to join, with the result that many of them did join.

Around this time, John Redmond held a review of the Volunteers in the Phoenix Park, Dublin. With other members of the Bailieboro Company I attended this review. Soon afterwards the company in Bailieboro ceased to exist, but the recruiting meetings continued. A group of us got together and discussed the position. We decided that we would never join the British army and organised ourselves into an opposition force to attend all recruiting meetings for the purpose of heckling the speakers. We succeeded in breaking up many of those meetings.

A short time after the Rebellion, Jack Reilly, Terence Reilly, Michael King and myself were accepted into the I.R.B. at Ballinagh, Cavan, by a man named Sexton from Carrigallen,

Co. Cavan. We attended regular meetings of the I.R.B. circle in the town of Cavan. Nothing ever came of those meetings. In early 1917 a Sinn Fein club was started in Bailieboro. From among its members a company of Irish Volunteers was established in September of the same year. We numbered only ten men. No officers were appointed for a while, but, as well as I can remember, a man named Kirby took charge. We met once a week for drill and marched in military formation to Knockbride, Moynalty and other places where public meetings were being held to establish Sinn Fein clubs.

In early 1918, company officers were appointed. James Kelly became captain, Charles Cook 1st Lieutenant, Thomas Smith 2nd Lieutenant, Matthew Smith adjutant, and Owen McPhillips Q.M. Our activities at this time consisted chiefly of drill parades, instruction in the use of arms and route marches.

During the conscription crisis our strength went up to 100. The Sinn Fein club in Bailieboro organised protest meetings outside the different churches at the time. Speakers on the platforms were guarded by the Volunteers who were heckled and often attacked by members of the Orange Lodge and Ulster Volunteers who were in some strength in the town at the time. When the crisis was over, all of our new recruits left, which reduced our strength once again to 10 or 12 members.

Previous to and during the East Cavan by-election campaign in July 1918, the Bailieboro Company, as well as other companies in the area, were on continuous duty. The area in which we worked was very hostile to the Volunteers and to Sinn Fein. Not only were we up against the open enemy, but we had to deal with the Ulster Volunteers, the Unionists, Hibernians and even our own friends. It fell on the shoulders of the Volunteers to attend all meetings, keep order, canvas for votes and protect speakers. While on guard duty around the platforms of the Sinn Fein speakers we were armed with revolver and in some cases with shotguns which we carried openly.

During the campaign, a company of about 30 Leitrim Volunteers arrived in the area to take part, some of whom carried revolvers. The military had arrived in Bailieboro earlier the same day and were on duty in the town. When the Leitrim men heard that they were in town, they left their revolvers in the house of a man named Johnston outside the town. Johnston was a Unionist and a member of the Ulster Volunteers. As soon as the Leitrim men reached the town they were halted and searched by the military. It was Owen McPhillips, our Q.M., who had warned the Leitrim men of the presence of the military and it was he who subsequently collected the revolvers from Johnston who had them in safe custody. It is now well-known that the Sinn Fein candidate - Arthur Griffith - was elected by a good majority.

During the General Election in December 1918, the Bailieboro Company were on duty again. This time in South Armagh, South Monaghan, Co. Louth and North Meath. As Arthur Griffith had been elected unopposed, we had no contest in East Cavan, I was with a group of about 40 Volunteers escorting two motor cars containing our speakers and election agents, returning from Rockchapel to Carrickmacross on the night of the election. Some of our men carried revolvers, others carried shotguns. Rockchapel is about three miles from Carrickmacross. About halfway we were attacked by a mob of Hibernians, Unionists, Orangemen and Ulster Volunteers armed with stones, bottles, scythes and pitchforks. Our men with the revolvers opened fire over their heads after which we were allowed to proceed to Carrickmacross. Most of our escort was made up of Carrickmacross Volunteers who had come to Rockchapel to meet us. Nearing the town, the arms were handed over to members of the local Cumann na mBan. When we got into town, the military were lined up but did not interfere. After we got the "Dismiss" we dispersed.

That night we returned to Bailieboro in an old brake which had taken us to Carrickmacross that morning.

Early in the year 1919, the Volunteers became known as the I.R.A., or the official army of the Irish Republic. Subsequent to the meeting of the First Dáil in January 1919, the members of Bailieboro Company were administered the oath.

During the hunger strike in Mountjoy Jail in February 1919, we, on behalf of the Sinn Fein Executive, ordered all shops in our area to close in sympathy with the prisoners. In cases where the order was ignored, we compelled the owners to close, with the result that all work ceased in the area.

Apart from routine drill and parades during the year, activities of the company included a period of several months investigating the case of a motor bicycle and a motor lorry which were taken from the garage of a Mr. Thomas Rogers of Bailieboro without payment. We traced the men concerned, recovered the motor cycle and lorry and compelled the payment of compensation. At the latter end of the year, we raided all houses in the area, including those of the Ulster Volunteers, for arms.

In the Spring of 1920, Bailieboro Company and the adjoining companies of Kingscourt and Knockbride were formed into a battalion by M. O'Hanlon (now Dr. O'Hanlon of the National Army). I was appointed battalion commandant, Jack Reilly, vice-commandant, Michael McGovern, adjutant, Michael King, Q.M., John Clarke, Engineer, Owen Farrell, I.O. and Terence Reilly, police officer. We became known as the 2nd (or Bailieboro) Battalion, Cavan Brigade.

During the year 1920, the Dáil Éireann Loan was floated and Bailieboro Company together with Kingscourt and Knockbride Companies took an active part canvassing and collecting for it. During this period, trouble arose in the area over the

possession of a hall known as Killagriffe Hall, which had been taken possession of by Bailieboro and Tierworker Sinn Fein Clubs. Proceedings were instituted in the British Courts against prominent members of both clubs. Members of Bailieboro Company visited several of the individuals concerned and compelled them to withdraw proceedings. In one case, the individual concerned opened fire on members of the company with a shotgun.

County Council elections were held during the year. In Co. Cavan the issue lay between Unionists, Hibernians and Sinn Fein. Here again, the Volunteers in the battalion area were called upon to do duty under the same difficult circumstances as at the general election. During this period several robberies took place in the area. Terence Reilly, battalion police officer, with the help of the Volunteers, had a busy time investigating these robberies. In one case a number of pigs were stolen from a yard in Bailieboro. They were the property of a man named John Dowd. In another case, cattle were stolen from a farmer in the Carnalstown area. In both cases the animals were recovered and restored to their owners, the thieves were arrested and tried in the local Sinn Fein Courts.

About this time Terence Reilly, accompanied by M.J. Lynch of William St., Bailieboro, visited G.H.Q., Dublin, and succeeded in obtaining a quantity of rifle and revolver ammunition, a mould for making buckshot and a cartridge filler

In this same year, the boycott of Belfast goods was strictly enforced in this area, in the course of which a motor car, the property of a Belfast commercial traveller named Mills, was burned at the Market House, Bailieboro. This building was adjacent to the R.I.C. Barracks. John Clarke and Owen Farrell, battalion officers, assisted by three

other Volunteers, took part in this operation. All Belfast goods coming into the area were destroyed. In some cases where we discovered stocks of Belfast goods in the shops, we compelled the owner to return them. All offenders' names were blacklisted and posted up throughout the town and county. In all cases, the offenders were fined. This duty entailed an enormous amount of work for the Volunteers both night and day.

Following the death of Terence McSwiney on hunger strike, the closing of all shops and business premises in the area was ordered by G.H.Q. as a mark of respect to the dead patriot. I had this order enforced by all Volunteers, and all shops and business premises complied with the order. The Ulster Volunteers, however, intervened in the town of Bailieboro and ordered the Unionist section to open up again, which they did. We compelled them to close again and to remain closed until we gave them permission to open.

During this period Republican or Sinn Fein Courts were functioning throughout the battalion area and Volunteers ran enormous risks attending these Courts and carrying out all decrees issued. At the latter end of the year we received word that two R.I.C. barracks in Ballyjamesduff, Co. Cavan, and Nobber in Co. Meath, were about to be attacked. We were asked to block and trench all roads in our area in anticipation of those attacks, the roads were made impassable, as requested, for a long period. The attack on Nobber came off, but, through a misunderstanding, the attack on Ballyjamesduff did not. They were both outside our area.

Enemy activity at this time increased considerably. The homes of officers and men of the battalion were being raided day and night, with the result that few of us could sleep at home. We, in our turn, raided the homes of both Protestant

and Catholic parents whose sons had joined, or were about to join, the Ulster Specials. We told their parents that drastic action would be taken against them if their sons did not resign or if they did not prevail on their boys not to join the enemy forces. In several of those raids the Volunteers were attacked by the occupants with shotgun or revolver fire.

It was at this period that Peadar McMahon, a representative from G.H.Q. and afterwards Chief of Staff, was in our area giving us instructions and directions in the blocking and trenching of roads.

On 8th December, Battalion Officer John Clarke, while on his way to his lodgings in Thomas St., was halted by Sergeant Orr, R.I.C. and a party of Black and Tans. After being searched, he was released. Before being halted, the Tans had fired several shots in his direction but did not hit him.

Early in the new year, I received a report that a bale of tweed was stolen from the premises of Mr. Thomas Kelly, Bailieboro. Investigations were immediately instituted. John Clarke, Owen McPhillips, Joe Sheridan and Matt Smith visited the house of William McAdam of Gartenane, who came under suspicion. He was a Unionist and gave our men a very hostile reception, saying that he would shoot them before he would allow them to search his house. Our men carried out the search but did not discover the tweed. About this time, with Owen McPhillips and Jack Reilly, I commandeered a pony and trap and went to the Mullagh Company area where I collected a quantity of shotgun ammunition.

About the month of March 1921, following a reorganisation of the area into divisions, Bailieboro Battalion was transferred from the 5th Northern Division to the 1st Eastern Division. We then became the 4th Battalion of No. 3 Brigade. There were nine brigades in the 1st Eastern Division, and our battalion was one of six comprising the No. 3 Brigade.

Shortly after our transfer, with John Clarke, battalion engineer, I attended a Brigade Council meeting in a disused house near Moynalty. We had decided to carry out an attack on Bailieboro R.I.C. barracks and wanted the approval of the Brigade Staff. A long discussion took place on the proposal. We produced a plan of the barracks and discussed the plan of attack at some length. We had decided that the attack would take place on the day of the March Fair when a number of Tans would be engaged on patrol duty.

Our battalion engineer, John Clarke, was a lorry driver for Messrs. Thomas Carroll and Sons at the time and had to attend the barracks every morning to have his permit signed by the then District Inspector. He had volunteered to present himself as usual at the barracks on the morning selected. As soon as the door was opened, he and other Volunteers were to draw revolvers and rush the barracks while being covered by other Volunteers who were to take up positions in houses opposite. While this was happening, other Volunteers would be detailed to hold up and disarm the Tan patrol in the town. Divisional Q.M. Patrick Clinton, later a Chief Superintendent in the Garda Síochána, was present at the brigade meeting. At the end of a long discussion it was decided by the Brigade Staff that the attack should not be carried out, the reason given being that the Divisional Engineer, the late Eamon Cullen, later Deputy Commissioner of the Garda Síochána, was working in the brigade area.

Enemy activity around this period became more intense, but, notwithstanding this, each company in the battalion carried out the routine orders of the period, such as dispatch work, occasional raids for arms, blocking and trenching of roads, attendance at the Republican Courts and the execution of their decrees. The full work of those Courts fell solely on the Volunteers and, only for the help given by the Volunteers, the

activities of the Courts would have fallen through and their decrees would have become a farce. The Belfast boycott was still being enforced by the Volunteers at this period.

About the month of May, the brigade staff decided to ambush a patrol of Tans at Ardlow, midway between Virginia and Bailieboro. The patrol passed through the area a couple of times a week. Several members of a flying column which had, a short time previously, been set up, took up ambush positions for the attack. When the patrol did not put in an appearance after a couple of hours wait, the column withdrew. Two members of Bailieboro Company - Owen McPhillips and Joseph Sheridan - were on outpost duty for this proposed attack. Next day, with Owen McPhillips, I was arrested in the town of Bailieboro by the R.I.C. but was released the following day.

Some days after my release, I received information that Sergeant Orr, who was stationed in Ballyconnell, was to attend a Petty Sessions Court in Bailieboro in a day or two. This sergeant had been stationed in Bailieboro and had been transferred to Ballyconnell some time earlier. While in Bailieboro, he became notorious for his activities against the I.R.A. He was in charge of all raiding parties throughout the area. It was he who pointed out prominent I.R.A. men to the Tans who, in turn, halted and searched anybody with I.R.A. sympathies, or members of the I.R.A. when going about their normal duties. His activities became so intense that he was marked down for shooting before he was transferred. I immediately made arrangements to ambush him on his way to Bailieboro. With other members of Bailieboro Company I took up an ambush position on the Cootehill-Bailieboro road about two miles from the town, as I was informed that he was coming that way. Unfortunately, this information was not correct. He arrived in Bailieboro via Virginia and so the ambush did not come off.

At a meeting of the battalion staff a week previous to the Truce, it was decided to ambush, on 10th July 1921, a party of Tans on the outskirts of the town of Bailieboro. Arrangements were made with the company captain of Knockbride to send in six men to take part. On 9th July, the terms of the Truce were published and a meeting of the battalion staff was summoned to consider the merits of the proposed ambush. After some discussion it was decided to call it off. The captain of Knockbride Company was immediately informed of the decision. On the afternoon of 10th July, I received a dispatch from Brigade H.Q. to attack Bailieboro R.I.C. Barracks. It appears that Brigade H.Q. had made arrangements to attack several R.I.C. barracks in the brigade area that night, and the purpose of our attack was to confine the enemy in Bailieboro. I immediately mobilised the battalion staff. We discussed the order and decided to mobilise all available men in the three companies. Messengers were sent to the captains of Kingscourt and Knockbride to bring all available men and arms to Bailieboro at a certain time that night. The three companies met outside the town about 10 p.m.

About 30 men were selected for the actual attack, while about 15 were detailed for outpost duty. We were all armed with shotguns. When we reached the town we took up sniping positions near the barracks and had just opened fire when we received word that a motor patrol of Tans were approaching the town from Virginia. We immediately retreated down Henry St keeping under cover of walls on either side. A running fight now ensued in which three of our men were wounded, two of whom were captured. Two of the enemy forces were wounded. The enemy did not pursue us further than the outskirts of the town. By the time we reached open country, all our ammunition was exhausted.

A short time prior to the Truce, Battalion Engineer John

Clarke, on the orders of the Divisional O/C., took a six-ton lorry load of sand from Kingscourt to Denzille Place, Dublin. It was for the manufacture of hand grenades. John Clarke was accompanied by Brigade Police Officer Peter O'Reilly on the occasion. On the lorry with them they had a prisoner who had been courtmartialled for the burning of a haggard. He had been sentenced to deportation and was deported from the North Wall that night. John Clarke had previously delivered a furnace, which was to be used in the manufacture of the hand grenades to Denzille Place (now Fenian Place). It had been in use in Kingscourt.

Signed: Frank Connolly

Date: 28th August 1957

Witness: John J. Daly

