

ROINN  COSANTA.

BUREAU OF MILITARY HISTORY, 1913-21.

STATEMENT BY WITNESS

DOCUMENT NO. W.S. 467

Witness

Eugene Bratton,
Mucknagh,
Killoe,
Co. Longford.

Identity

Constable, R.I.C.,
Co. Meath, 1916-1921.

Subject

- (a) Battle of Ashbourne, Easter Week 1916;
- (b) Attacks by I.R.A. on R.I.C. Barracks, Co. Meath,
1919-1921.
- (c) Shooting of Mr. Hodgett, Postmaster, Navan,
February 1921.

Conditions, if any, stipulated by Witness

Nil

File No. **S.1626**

ORIGINAL

BUREAU OF MILITARY HISTORY 1913-21

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STATEMENT BY MR. EUGENE BRATTON (R.I.C. Retired),

MUCKNAGH, KILLOE, CO. LONGFORD.

I joined the R.I.C. on 15th June 1898 and did my training at the R.I.C. Depot in the Phoenix Park, Dublin. The period of training there was six months. We received instruction in drill up to battalion standard. We were taught police duties and received instruction on the Service rifle or police carbine. We had firing practice with this weapon on the rifle range at Dollymount. We were not taught the use of the revolver at this stage. That took place much later on. We also received instruction on detective duties. There was no instruction given to us on intelligence work or on political duties. We received a tough grueling, particularly in gymnasium work, which made us very fit. All our instructors were R.I.C. men. They did not use ex-British army instructors. The standard height for admission to the R.I.C. at this time was 5'9", or 5'8" for the son of a policeman. One had to be perfectly fit in every way before being accepted.

On completing my training I was posted to Bayurafea, Co. Kilkenny. This was my first station. After about a year there I was transferred to the Collieries, Castlecomer. My next station was Streamstown, Co. Westmeath. I was in several other stations before I was finally posted to Navan, Co. Meath, about the year 1910 or 1911. During that time things were very peaceful in the country as a whole and life was generally pleasant. During the Home Rule movement the police were generally disinterested, and I would say that the majority of them were in favour of Home Rule.

Right from the start of the Irish Volunteers a close watch was kept on them. When meetings were held we were instructed to have a pencil and notebook under our capes and to make notes of what had been said. Police were detailed to attend all

parades of the Volunteers and to record who was present when they returned to their barracks. In some cases the police actually assisted in the training of the Volunteers for a short period, but not for long.

When the Rebellion broke out on Easter Monday 1916, I was on duty at Fairyhouse Races. There had been no special instruction issued to us prior to this about rounding up or arresting Volunteers. A large number of people walked on that day along the railway line from Dublin to Fairyhouse, as they could not get a train. It was those people who told us what was happening in the city. Those people were very frightened. I returned to Navan that evening. Nothing of note happened until the Friday of that week. By this time we had a good idea of what was happening in Dublin.

On Friday morning a force of police were assembled in Slane under the command of Co. Inspector Gray and District Inspector Smith. All the police except myself carried rifles. I was in civilian attire as I was driving a car. I think each policeman who was armed carried twenty rounds of ammunition. I would say there was about sixty police all told. We acquired a number of cars belonging to the 'gentry' of the surrounding areas. Cars at that time were only to be found in the possession of the very well-to-do, and had not come into general use as they are today. The cars acquired were driven by civilian drivers who were employed by their owners.

We knew what we were about and did not consider it was going to be an easy task. The Marchioness of Conyngham, who lived in Slane Castle, was afraid the rebels were going to attack Slane and it was, as far as I know, she who forced the Co. Inspector to go towards Dublin to meet them.

I think it was in the afternoon we left Slane en route for Ashbourne. The Co. Inspector was in the front car. I was

driving the District Inspector in my car which was the last of the convoy. On reaching a point above Kilmoon we pulled up and the D.I. spoke to a man on the road. This man pointed with his hand and said: "They" (meaning the rebels) "are all along that road". We started again immediately and did our best to get up to the Co. Inspector to warn him, but the other drivers in front would not give way to us and I could not get up to the front. When we approached the barracks at Ashbourne all the cars stopped; the men jumped out and took cover. There was no shooting at this time and this did not start until a brief space of time had elapsed. Sergeant Shanaher was the first man to fall; he was shot through the heart. He had taken cover at this time. There was a feeling afterwards that this sergeant was shot by one of his own men. He was a bad one and had been very tough on the men. He was never satisfied and was always cribbing and grumbling at them. Firing was continuous and general by now. I was not armed and in civilian clothes. After some time I moved back towards Kilmoon and after travelling about two hundred yards I was held up by a party of rebels who were behind the road ditch in our rear. Just at this moment a volley was fired in our direction. The rebels ducked for cover and I ducked too and out of that position, showing them a clean pair of heels. I kept going towards Kilmoon and, after travelling some distance I got out on to the road. I secured a bicycle from a house there and cycled to Balrath barracks and from there I 'phoned Navan and Drogheda R.I.C. Barracks and told them what had happened. I then made my way towards Ashbourne again, but not in too much of a hurry. The police at Kilmoon had a barricade across the road.

When I arrived back at the scene of the fighting, the first thing I saw was the D.I.'s. whistle on the road. I knew then that all was up with him. The next thing I saw was the

dead bodies of seven of our men on the side of the road. I went further down and I saw Tom Ashe. He had a revolver in his hand and had his men under control. The wounded constables who numbered, I think, about thirteen, were being attended to by Dr. Hayes, who was a member of Tom Ashe's party. Our cars were still in the same position, but were badly shot up except perhaps the one I was driving.

I told Tom Ashe I wanted to bring home the D.I's. body and he agreed and made arrangements for me to do so. My car was undamaged. It was a "T" model Ford and belonged to ^{ICER's 60B} Spence's of Navan. The remainder of the police were prisoners at this time. I got the D.I's. body into the car and travelled back to his house outside Navan with it, where I handed it over to his unfortunate wife. As far as I can remember, Mrs. Smith had no previous knowledge of the death of her husband until I arrived. A policeman's wife came out with me to Mrs. Smith's house.

Subsequent to the Battle of Ashbourne I was brought to Buckingham Palace and decorated by the King for my actions. I resented this, but I had no alternative.

After the Rising had died down there was nothing of note took place until the Conscription Act for Ireland was passed in the English House of Commons. As far as I can remember, the police resented this to a man and I believe that had an attempt been made to enforce it, the police would not have done it.

I did not do much police duty. The Co. Inspector and D.I. both had cars and I was most of the time looking after and driving those cars. After the ambush at Knocklong Station, the brothers Egan came to the Meath police district. One was County Inspector and the other two were District Inspectors.

Lismullen and Ballivor Barracks were attacked by the I.R.A. on the same night, 2nd November 1919. Ballivor was taken and

one policeman, Constable Egan, was shot dead and another policeman wounded. Lismullen was not taken, but Sergeant Matthews was wounded in the head and, I think, lost an eye. I drove Head Constable Noble to Lismullen that night and afterwards we went to Robinstown. Noble subsequently retired on pension. This was the first time we realised that the I.R.A. were strong and organised in the area.

Trim R.I.C. Barracks was captured by the I.R.A. on 26th September 1920. They were helped from inside, a door which leads on to the Fair Green being left open for them. Constable Meehan, now a superintendent in the Civic Guards, at Granard, was responsible for this. This took place on a Sunday morning and on that night the Tans from Gormanston burned the town of Trim. This was a purely Black and Tan job. The following day I drove D.I. Roland to Trim to visit the scene. The fires had now died down but were still smouldering. It was a horrible sight to see. Constable Gray, who was with us, when he saw it, said: "To hell with this". That day he resigned.

Meehan was suspect for his part in the raid on the barracks and had a narrow escape from being shot. County Inspector Egan, D.I. Egan and a Ten from Gormanston took Meehan out of his lodgings one night and, only for the County Inspector's bodyguard interfered, he would have been shot.

The Tans, who had now arrived in force in the country, were sent out to the various stations. We received a party of them in Navan as reinforcements. Amongst this party there was one decent man and he was mangled by a bomb, thrown by one of his own comrades - purposely - later on. There was another man who was all right. As for the rest, they were a low-down lot of scoundrels, and it was believed that they were mostly jailbirds and men of bad repute. One fellow called Richards was a right desperado. He was a Scotsman. Davis,

who drove the Crossley lorry - commonly known as Crossley tenders - was a decent man. He was English. He had rigged up a sort of box set into the floor of the tender in which he always carried about a dozen bombs. One day Richards and he had a row, or should I say, a serious difference of opinion. That night the tender was out on patrol and on arriving back at barracks, had just entered back into the yard. I was holding a stable lantern at the gate to give them light to enter. The entrance was a bad one from the barrack lane. The tender had stopped in the yard and the occupants, except Richards, had jumped off and moved away. Richards took one of the bombs out of the box and, drawing the pin from it, let it fall at the driver's feet (Davis) in the front of the tender. It exploded, destroying both of Davis's legs. I was very lucky that I did not receive some of the splinters. It was only the woodwork on the front of the tender that saved me. The following morning Richards was brought up before the Court, Inspector in his office. He was paid off and sent back to Scotland. That was the only disciplinary action that was taken against him.

As far as I know, there could be nothing done about Navan by the I.R.A. on account of spies. There was at least one. I had reasonably good grounds for suspecting one man and I sent word to General Boylan of the I.R.A. about him. I believe that it was through his father he was passing the information. I was in touch with the I.R.A. in Navan through Pat O'Brien and Paddy Dunne, who worked in the Post Office.

There was a serious leakage of police messages from the Post Office in Navan. Paddy Dunne worked in the Post Office and he was able to decipher all messages going through. He let me see one of those messages one day, which he had deciphered. To counteract this, Head Constable Cuccenan's daughter was put into the Post Office without any entrance

*Change this to card D. Jones
not known*

examination or anything else. One day the Postmaster, Mr. Hodgett, pulled her up and chastised her for something she was doing. She became impertinent and said she would tell her daddy. A couple of nights afterwards Mr. Hodgett was taken from his house by three armed men in civilian clothes and shot and thrown into the river. The three men who shot him were the Co. Inspector Egan, his brother D.I. Egan and a Tan from Gormanston. Hodgett was not a Roman Catholic and took no part in politics. He was probably an upholder of the existing regime. It was a dastardly act and it was farcical to see Egan investigating this affair, scraping blood from the footpath into a box and so forth. He did his best to pin the crime on the I.R.A.

I took the matter up, secretly of course, I saw a herring bone pattern overcoat hanging in the District Inspector's office from the night, and for some days after, the crime. I knew the coat belonged to D.I. Egan of Drogheda. I gave that information to the I.R.A. through Faddy Dunne. An order came from Dublin Castle for that particular coat to be sent up there I conveyed it to the Castle and the next morning the Divisional Commissioner of Police arrived in Navan having in the back of his car a number of overcoats. He stopped at Mrs. Hodgett's door and called her out. He asked her if she would know any of the overcoats. She lifted up this particular herring-bone overcoat from amongst the others and said: "That coat was worn by the man with the big teeth". The Commissioner said that was all he wanted to know. The matter ended there, however; no action being taken against the Egans, and they served on without change. All the Egans had very prominent teeth.

The County Inspector's clerk, Sergeant McCarthy, conveyed to me that a courtmartial had been held on me by the County Inspector, the D.I. and a third officer, in my absence, and that I had been sentenced to death. From that on I always

carried a small revolver in my sleeve as well as my Service Webley in my belt. A week passed by and one night the County Inspector Egan brought a few of the Tans into the canteen and set them drunk. I was in a bedroom over the canteen. I could hear the voices underneath me and hear my name being mentioned. After a few minutes I heard footsteps coming up the passage to my room. I took up my revolver and fully cocked it. One of the Tans opened the door and just entered the room with his Webley revolver in his hand swinging by his thigh. I had my gun up and covering him. When the Tan saw this he turned away. They did not try it again.

About a year before the Truce I wanted to resign from the Force, but General Boylan of the I.R.A. would not allow me. He sent word to me that I was to stay on, that I was more useful where I was; so I remained.

Towards the middle of March 1920, I was sent from the Depot with a transport car to Clonmel. While I was there I was sounded about going on to do a shooting job in Cork. I sensed that it was McCurtain who was to be done in. It was Sergeant Stephenson who approached me on the matter. He was stationed in Clonmel. I refused to have anything to do with the affair. A few days afterwards I saw where McCurtain was shot.

Some time during the 1914-18 War the police Union was initiated by Sergeant McElligott. Most of the members of the R.I.C. joined this Union. The Union had a legitimate purpose to look after the welfare of its members. McElligott was head of the Union; he wanted to put the Force on a par with the English Police. The government refused all our applications and beat us down on all our demands. This was the cause of making the Force disloyal in the first instance. After McElligott resigned from the Force I often called to see him in Dublin and conveyed items of information to him for trans-

transferring to Mick Collins or the I.R.A. I cannot remember now what this information was.

Sergeant Keighery was stationed in Navan and was a good sort. I believe at the time that permits had to be obtained to use a car, Keighery used to steal into the Co. Inspector's office and remove some of the permit forms and, having put the official stamp on them, hand them out to the I.R.A. On the night of 1st December 1920, I was in the Dayroom in the barracks. Sergeant Johns came into the Dayroom. He inquired for driver Davis and said there was a military dispatch rider broken down at Kilcarne and that we would have to bring him in. It struck me as rather peculiar why we should have to do this, as the military were stationed at the other end of the town. Davis was not there and I volunteered to drive my car. Johns said he did not want me. They looked up Driver Davis and found him. Sergeant Johns then sent a message to Sergeant Keighery, who was out on town duty, to report to barracks and take charge of the Tender. Johns travelled on the tender himself, and also Constable Martin and others. There did not seem to be any reason why Sergeant Keighery should be especially called in and detailed for this job. When they arrived at Kilcarne there was no dispatch rider there. In the meantime two military lorries came out from Navan and stopped. Johns and Martin stepped out into the glare of the headlights of the lorries and Johns fired a shot in the air from his revolver. The military immediately opened fire on Sergeant Keighery who was standing at the Post Office door, shooting him dead. I believe this was a frame-up with the military - if they were military at all - to dispose of Keighery. I suspect Head Constable Queenan had a hand in this too. Johns was subsequently shot and wounded by the I.R.A. at Boyerstown Races outside the town. He did not die, however, and, on recovery, rejoined for duty.

On a date I cannot now remember I left my house in Flower Hill, Navan, for the barracks, to see what duty I would be detailed for. On my way to the barracks I observed a crowd of young men on Blackwater Bridge. I did not know what they were there for. I went to the barrack door which was locked (this never was the case before). I could not get in for a long time. They evidently knew the ambush was there, I was questioned for a length of time before I was admitted. The door was opened on the chain and the Head Constable asked if there was anyone with me. He locked both sides to make sure and when he was satisfied there was no one I was let in. I was still questioned was there no ambush on my way down. I answered: "I did meet a number of people, but nothing more than would be seen on a Sunday evening." I came to the conclusion that they had first-hand information concerning the ambush from a spy or an informer. I was asked by the Head Constable if there were any people on the bridge. I said there was nothing more than you would expect on a Sunday evening. When I stayed there awhile and smoked I returned home. I found out afterwards that the order they had that night was to shoot the first policeman who passed along, in order to draw the police from barracks. When I was approaching the ambush, Paddy O'Brien had his head out Walsh's window and he said: "Here is Bratten coming", with the result that I passed through^{TC} the barracks

When Chandler's of Robinstown was looted by the Auxies I was the only policeman to stand his ground and watch what was going on. The other police went in through the fields by the way they were looking for dumps of arms. Incidentally this raid was responsible for the resignation of General Crozier. I had to attend the subsequent identification parade of those Auxies and gave evidence at their courtmartial in Dublin. I could only identify two of them. Five of the other Auxies also identified the ones who did the looting. I believe some of them, including their commanding officer, were found guilty, he getting 18 months' imprisonment. They smashed up Chandler's house and business premises and looted it. Constable Martin's wife and Chandler's wife were on bad terms. Martin planted ammunition in Chandler's house for the Auxies to find. This drove the Auxies frantic. I knew the ammunition when I saw it. I had seen it with Constable Martin previously. They arrested Mr. Chandler and brought him to Trim with them. County Inspector Egan subsequently got Chandler out of prison. Mr. Chandler, who was a Protestant and, I understand, a loyalist, did not take any open part, at least, in politics. He would probably be a supporter of the British regime.

Lord Dunsany, who lived in Dunsany Castle, was arrested and brought before a military court for possession of arms. Dunsany, who had served as an officer in the British army during the 1914-18 War, was the official prosecutor for the British. He was not liked by the police, especially the officers, as he was wont to give them a rough time of it when they came up for cross-examination as witnesses. One day, while discussing game shooting at the Kildare St. Club, he made a foolish statement that he could always go shooting, as the I.R.A. provided a protection party for him. This was reported, and Dunsany Castle was raided and a number of sporting rifles and shotguns were found there for which he had not a permit. Lord Dunsany was arrested and fined £5 by

a military court, being then released. It was never even suggested that he had any contact with the I.R.A. He was wounded and made a prisoner by the rebels in the Four Courts during the 1916 Rising.

When the Truce came, the officers of the R.I.C. were almost crying. They realised that their good days were over and they had good days before the trouble began. They were kings in their own areas. The ordinary rank and file of the R.I.C. were generally pleased that Ireland at last had succeeded in getting somewhere. As far as the Black and Tans were concerned, they did not give a damn, they were soldiers of fortune.

Signed: Eugene Bratton

Date: 11-1-51

Witness:

Matthew Barry Bondt

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