

W.S. 661.
ORIGINAL

BUREAU OF MILITARY HISTORY 1913-21
BURO STAIRÉ MILEATA 1913-21
NO. W.S. 661

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BUREAU OF MILITARY HISTORY, 1913-21.

STATEMENT BY WITNESS

DOCUMENT NO. W.S. 661

Witness

Luke Duffy,
Clooncagh,
Strokestown,
Co. Roscommon.

Identity.

Member of 'E' Company, 3rd Battalion,
South Roscommon Brigade, 1917 - ;

Later Vice-Commandant do.

Subject.

- (a) National activities, Co. Roscommon, 1917-1921;
- (b) Military activities, Co. Roscommon, 1918-1921.

Conditions, if any, Stipulated by Witness.

Nil

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STATEMENT BY MR. LUKE DUFFY,

CLONCAGH, STROKESTOWN, CO. ROSCOMMON.

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Clooncagh, Strokestown, Co. Roscommon.

Early contact with the Volunteers and Sinn Fein.

I joined the Irish Volunteers in the Spring of 1917. I joined the Kilgeffin Company which was afterwards known as E/Company, 3rd Battalion, South Roscommon Brigade. The Company Commander was the late Patrick Madden, R.I.P. Dan Madden was the 1st Lieutenant and Frank Simons was the 2nd Lieutenant. The company had only been started a short while at this time. The strength of the company was about eighteen or twenty all ranks. We had two old pattern Service rifles. One was a long barreled Lee Enfield and the other was a carbine or cavalry type Lee Enfield. We also had some shotguns and cartridges, but only about 20 rounds of .303 service ammunition was available for the service rifles. We had no revolvers or grenades then. Pat Madden with the aid of books did most of the instruction or training that was then imparted. Most of the men in the company had been in the old National Volunteers and had some experience of training from that source. No battalion organisation existed at this time - just companies of Volunteers in the different areas.

At the end of 1917 or early 1918 Pat Madden went to work in Dublin and was arrested in York St. while drilling in a hall there and did a period of imprisonment in Belfast jail for this. Madden came home after his release and he was then appointed O/C. of the local battalion which was being organised now. During 1917 we continued our training and recruiting. In the Spring of that year a parliamentary election was held in North Roscommon and the Volunteers were actively engaged in such work as canvassing votes, protecting and guarding speakers, both at the meetings and in their hotels, guarding the ballot boxes and so forth. In April 1917, the Longford election took place

The Conscription crisis.

The next event of importance was the conscription threat. Our ranks swelled now and the strength of our company went up to about 65. When the crisis was over our strength soon dwindled back again to our original number. During the time of this crisis we constructed a number of dug-outs which we furnished with bedding from a disused mansion in the area. We constructed one dug-out for every two villages. It was intended to take up our abode in these if conscription was enforced. The dug-outs were made in the face of hills and in the face of turf banks and so forth. One dug-out constructed at Cloonshee near Ballagh Church was capable of holding 20 men. The dug-outs in question came in useful afterwards during the terror period for accommodating men of the active service column and men on the run, but on the whole were very unhealthy and uncomfortable places to spend any time in.

Organisation of the 3rd Battalion, South Roscommon Brigade.

Prior to the general election of 1918, the local companies of Volunteers were organised into a battalion, and Pat Madden was appointed O/C. and Frank Simons was appointed adjutant. The companies were Kilgeffin, of which I was company commander; Kiltreevan Company - company commander Jack Brennan; Kilbride - company commander John Joseph Doorley; Athleague - company commander John Kelly. Another company was formed at Cloontuskert towards the end of 1918. The company commander there was John Connor. The companies were of course small, numbering usually 20 to 30 men. Kiltreevan and Kilbride were the strongest, and Cloontuskert the smallest. Regarding armament, there was very little. The only two rifles in the battalion were the ones we had in our company area. Around the conscription period we had collected most of the arms in the company area. The greater portion of these were handed up voluntarily and were nearly all shotguns and cartridges. We

The General Election, 1918.

During the General Election at the end of 1918 we were all again busily engaged in canvassing and doing duty on the polling booths and so forth. We also mounted guards on the ballot boxes prior to the counting of the votes. There was no serious trouble in the area. A slight disturbance took place at Ballagh school, but this was quickly got under control by the Volunteers.

The first meeting of the Dáil - The I.R.A. and the Dáil Loan.

Early in 1919 the first Dáil met and took over responsibility for the Volunteers and their actions. The Volunteers now became the army of the Republic and henceforth were known as the I.R.A. Each member was now required to take an oath of allegiance. All our members subscribed to this and there were no defections in this respect. However, during 1919 a number of our members became inactive. The Dáil now floated a loan and we collected a large sum of money for this. This money was lodged with Father Finan, who was the Parish Priest in Kiltewan, and who acted as the local agent for the loan. Towards the end of 1919 or early 1920 a levy was made on all property owners and others to raise funds to purchase arms for the I.R.A. This charge was based on the Poor Law Valuation and was subscribed to generously. This money was lodged with the Brigade O/C.

Organisation of the South Roscommon Brigade.

A Brigade organisation had come into being in South Roscommon during 1918. Dan O'Rourke was appointed Brigade O/C. and Matt Davis was Brigade Q.M. The 1st Battalion with James Quigley as O/C. comprised roughly the areas of Ballintubber and Cloverhill. The 2nd Battalion with James Brehony as O/C. the areas of St. John's and Knockerochery. The 3rd Battalion ~~and the 4th Battalion~~ which was our area with Patk. Madden as O/C., and the 4th Battalion, the Castlerea area,

with Paddy Glynn as O/C. Glynn was killed later on while burning a police barrack at Ballinlough. Gerald O'Connor succeeded him as O/C. of the battalion.

Destruction of vacated R.I.C. barracks.

There were two R.I.C. barracks in our battalion area - Beechwood and Athleague. Both barracks were vacated by the R.I.C. and were destroyed by us on Easter Saturday 1919. This was a general operation throughout the county and indicated to us the extent of the I.R.A. organisation when we read it in the daily papers. We blew the gable end out of the Beechwood Barracks with gelignite and also set it on fire. We used the gelignite to get experience in the use of explosives.

The Sinn Fein Courts.

The battalion organisation remained the same. Our strength had increased somewhat by the addition of some recruits. I was now vice/Comdt. of the battalion and James Tiernan was now company captain. There was no increase in our armament. We did fill quite a number of cartridges for the shotguns with buckshot. No other armament was made in the area. When the R.I.C. vacated all the smaller stations in the country and concentrated on the towns, the duty of policing the country developed on the I.R.A. They had to do patrols, make arrests and detentions in what came to be generally "unknown destinations". The Sinn Fein Courts were now functioning and the I.R.A. had to give effect to their decrees. The Sinn Fein organisation and the I.R.A. were to all purposes identical as the same people were generally members of both organisations. There were of course a number of purely civilians, so to speak, also members of Sinn Fein. Therefore, the Courts were really military courts and particularly so when things became hot and the civilians were reluctant to act.

we had a number of ex British army men in our ranks and they were very useful for training. By now Pat Madden was on the run as were a few others also.

The ambush at Mooneen.

There was nothing of any importance until the early part of 1920 when the Mooneen ambush took place. This took place on 11th July 1920. Pat Madden, the O/C. of the battalion, and I met at Ballagh Chapel on the night of the 10th and he told me that two R.I.C. men would be travelling on cycles on the following day from Lanesboro to Roscommon. They were to be members of a guard of honour to meet the Judge at the opening of the Assize Courts which was due to sit in Roscommon the following days. Madden said he was going to hold them up at Mooneen and disarm them. We decided to bring Madden's brother, Henry Compton, Frank Simons, Jerry Davis, and Paddy Tiernan with us on the job. That, as far as I can remember, were the men selected for job. John Connor was to act as scout. He was to go into Lanesboro and do some shopping there by the way. His task was to keep a watch on the police barracks and, when the police started out, he was to cycle on in front of them and inform us that they were coming.

We met the following morning as arranged at Mr. Lennon's at Ballagh and started across country to the selected spot. We carried the two service rifles previously mentioned and the rest of the party were armed with shotguns. Pat Madden who was in charge had a .32 automatic pistol. We had no hand grenades. On arrival at the selected spot we took up position inside the ditch on the roadside and remained there for several hours. No road block was put down. The day became very wet and we left our positions and took shelter in an old disused house on the roadside. We were inside this house when our scout, O'Connor, arrived and informed us that the two policemen were coming. We left the house and took up our

positions again. We remained there a considerable time, but the policemen did not turn up. O'Connor had remained with us. We concluded that they must have turned back owing to the heavy rain and we again left our positions and took shelter in the disused house. It transpired afterwards that the policemen had gone into a publichouse on the Roscommon side of Lanesboro and had made a considerable delay there. We did not leave anybody on watch outside as we did not want to be seen by the local people.

We were inside the house sheltering from the rain when we heard the swish of bicycles on the wet road outside. The two policemen were just cycling past the house. We rushed out on to the road. They had just passed the house now. The O/C. shouted at them to halt and get off their cycles. Instead of halting they stopped low on their machines and started to cycle hard away from us. By the time we got on to the road they were about 150 yards away from us. The road inclined downwards at this place so that they were gaining speed rapidly. We ran up the road after them and Dan Madden and I, who had the rifles, opened fire on them from the top of the hill on the road. The first shot, however, was fired by the O/C. out of his automatic and was meant to make them realise we meant business. On the first volley being fired from the rifles, one of the policemen cycled into the ditch and fell off his cycle into the hedge out of our view. The other policeman continued on to the crossroads and there dismounted and, removing the rifle from his cycle, went into a house close by. We advanced down the road towards the house and saw him looking at us through a hedge and we fired at him again. He now came out on the road with a white handkerchief tied to the muzzle of his rifle and held over his head. He advanced up the road to meet us and Davis took the rifle from him. We marched him up the road to where his companion was lying with the cycle on top of him.

While we were searching this man whom we now discovered was dead, the O/C. left Compton in charge of the prisoner. Compton was armed with a shotgun. They were about 5 or 6 yards away from us and on the road. The prisoner made a grab for Compton's gun with which he was being covered off. He grabbed the barrel of the gun and the gun went off. The prisoner fell on the road, turned over on his face and gave a few snores and lay still. We thought he was dead.

We collected the policeman's two rifles and the small amount of ammunition they had and left the scene making away across country. When some distance across the fields one of our fellows noticed that the O/C's coat tails were badly torn. He then discovered that the shot from Compton's gun when the prisoner had tried to take it off him had shot his coat tail away. Madden, however, had not got even one grain of shot in him. We afterwards discovered that the prisoner policeman had not been injured at all and that he was only feigning death. He got up after we left and, some time later, walked back to Lanesboro, a considerable distance away. We did not take the cycles belonging to the police, yet this policeman did not use his cycle and the cycles remained on the road until the night when they were collected by some of the Volunteers from Cloontuskert area.

Father Hurley from Ballagh, accompanied by his servant, came and attended to the dead policeman. While he was doing so a lorry load of British military passed by but did not stop or take any notice, although they must have seen the dead policemen on the roadside with the priest in attendance.

Our booty from this affair was two carbine rifles and about 25 rounds of .303. Constable Clarke was the name of the man who was killed, and Macken was the name of the constable who surrendered. The British authorities did not institute any

After this we made several attempts to ambush parties of R.I.C., but we were never able to make contact with them. We went into Lanesboro' on at least two occasions hoping to contact a patrol of R.I.C. which was in the habit of patrolling the Ballyleague area, but we had no luck in this respect. Our party on these occasions was made up of men from the local Company.

"The Four Mile House Ambush":

In October, 1920, on the 20th of the month, I think, Commandant Madden and I went over and inspected a site for an ambush at Four Mile House. Lorry loads of military were in the habit of passing along this road nearly every day. We mobilised the whole Company except just a few who could not turn up for reasons that someone was dead belonging to them or such personal reasons.

We collected every available rifle we could get hold of and appealed to the Brigade O/C. for arms. He made four rifles available to us. Paddy Tierney and I collected those rifles at the house of a man called Quigley the night before. Quigley was the O/C. of the 2nd Battalion. We also had four rifles of our own, making in all about eight rifles. The remainder of the party were armed with shot guns. There were also some revolvers on the job.

The Company when mobilised was about thirty-five strong. We were assisted by the Kilbride Company. The Kilbride Company were to block the roads. They had trees partly cut to fall across the road to prevent reinforcements coming to the assistance of the party that would be attacked. Another party of the Kilbride Company were to block the side roads leading into the position for the same purpose. We slept the previous

night in a cottage at Ballagh - lying on the floor. About 4 o'clock the following morning we started to march to Four Mile House arriving at the scene at about 7 or 7.30 a.m.

We had arranged with the Kilbride Company to have a farm-cart and a long pole ready. This was to be used for blocking the road in front of the lorry and could be shoved out on to the road at the last moment. On arrival we found that they had not got the cart or pole so we had to commandeer one then. Carts are easily obtained and we were lucky in that there was a carpenter's shop near at hand where we got a suitable pole. We had the cart in the Chapel yard and were in the process of tying the pole on to it when the lorry containing enemy arrived. This was a party of R.I.C., about nine or ten strong, coming from Roscommon.

The attacking party were in position but the cart and pole were not ready and was not pushed out on the road as planned. We opened rapid fire on them and succeeded in getting off about three rounds each, but did not succeed in stopping them and they continued on their route. There were four R.I.C. men killed and about four more wounded. The driver of the tender or lorry and Sergeant Bolster of the R.I.C. and a Constable Rahilly were injured.

The R.I.C. did not return the fire but sped on for all their worth. The Kilbride Company were engaged building a block of stones across the road some distance above the scene of the ambush but they drove across this and did not stop until they got to Strokestown. We remained there for about ten minutes afterwards. Another car came along but as it was a civilian car we did not interfere with it. We did not know until afterwards that this car contained the District Inspector or County Inspector of the R.I.C.. He was a lucky

man. He did not know the ambush had taken place until afterwards. He actually seen us and I believe that he was under the impression that we did not want to harm him.

After this we cleared out and returned to the cottage at Ballagh from where we dispersed. We had captured nothing and had expended a lot of our small supply of ammunition.

"Formation of the South Roscommon Flying Column".

Immediately after this the Column was started in the area on a whole time basis. All the men comprising the column were men who were on the "run". Originally the Column was organised at Kenny's of the Glebe, Kilross, and comprised Pat Madden as O/C. I was Vice O/C. Peter and Michael Collins, John McDermott, James McDermott, Henry Compton, Dan Madden, a brother of the O/C, Jim Tiernan, John Gibbons and Michael Gibbons, James Cooney, Mark Fallon, Tom Madden and some others whom I cannot now remember. From Kiltiernan Company we had Tom Brennan and Stephen Murray and Tom Egan. From Roscommon Company we had Joe Finlay and "Boddens" Doorley and Tim Monaghan, Frank Simons and Richard Simons from the local Company were also members. From Kilbride Company we had Peter Farrell; from Athleague Jack Comboy, and from Ballyleague Pat Melady. Joe McTiernan from Roscommon was also a member. This, as far as I can remember, composed the Column at that time.

We had only four rifles. The ones we had borrowed for the Four Mile ambush had been returned to the 2nd Battalion. The remainder were armed with shot guns. Our supply of ammunition was very limited. We had very little money and we had to live on the generosity of the people. We all billeted in one house and kept outposts and sentinels on duty at all times. We did a considerable amount of training there.

"Incident at Castlenode or Castlenode Ambush:

While we were still at this place a few of our men, about eight, proceeded to Castlenode near Strokestown to commandeer a car. We already had one car which had been commandeered. I was not with this party but I knew all about what happened there. They went into the house to commandeer the car leaving two sentries on the road. While the rest of the party were getting the car ready one of the daughters of Wallpole, who owned the car, slipped out of the house and getting on a horse went across country to the British military camp at Strokestown which was about a mile away. A lorry-full of military came out from Strokestown and halted at the bridge about one hundred or a hundred and fifty yards from the entrance gate and proceeded across the fields towards the house. The sentries at the gate, Collins and Gibbons, opened fire on them. The soldiers lay down and opened a terrific fire on where the sentries were. All of our raiding party got away and assembled again at a point some distance from the house. Here, after a conference, they went back again to the house and proceeded to take the car out of the garage when they were fired on again from inside the house. Apparently the British main party had withdrawn leaving some men inside the house. Our men who were in the garage had to make their escape through a small window at the rear of the garage. They all got away safely however without incurring any casualties. It was understood that there were two or three of the military wounded in this episode. An inquiry was held by the Column O/C into the conduct of this operation and the men got a serious 'telling off' for their foolish conduct. This incident came to be known as the Castlenode ambush. On several occasions we went into Lanesboro' to ambush the police there but could never make contact with them.

"Preparation to meet Reprisals:

After Four Mile House ambush we expected reprisals on Roscommon and for three or four nights we occupied the houses opposite the barracks and also Mrs. Harlows and Ned Farrells which faced the barracks. More of us took up position on the streets and others inside the Harrison Hall. Some men from Athleague assisted us in this. The garrison, however, did not interfere or make any attempt to carry out reprisals. We also had placed a guard on Madden's house as it had been raided several times previously by the British but nothing happened there either.

"The Column is disbanded".

We sent two men to Dublin to try and procure arms but all they succeeded in getting was a Morris Tube, which was only of use for instructional purposes. As we could do nothing it was decided to disband the Column and that the men should return to their own Company areas. Before this was done, however, a large scale round-up of the area was carried out by the British Forces. They used about seven hundred men in this operation. They converged in on where we were located and surrounded the place at some distance. A road circles the area and this was continually patrolled by men in lorries while men on foot combed every house and field in the area. We had, however, moved outside the encircled area at daylight that morning and were clear of their search parties and the area in which they were so interested. That evening, however, they arrested Dan Madden and Patrick Farrell who had been away from the Column and were trying to get to our headquarters. They brought them to Strokestown that night and then to Athlone. They were tried by courtmartial and Madden was sentenced to ten years which he did at Dartmoor,

being there until after the Treaty was signed when he was released. Farrell was interned in the Curragh. Some stuff, I do not remember what, was found on Madden. The Column now disbanded, each man returning to his own Company area.

"Attempt to ambush R.I.C. Patrol at Lanesboro':

The next incident took place in January 1921. We had information that a patrol of R.I.C. and Tans were in the habit of leaving the barracks in Lanesboro' and patrolling out towards the Longford side and we decided to try and ambush them. We proceeded in two boats and crossed Lough Ree about a mile south of Lanesboro'. There were about nine men in each boat. It was a wild wet night. Local men rowed us across - they were the two Scallys and Egann belonging to Cloonstuckert Company. On landing on the other side of the lough we proceeded down the road to the village of Lanesboro' and remained there until after 1 a.m. in the morning. No patrol came out.

The storm was now so bad that we could not recross the lough and we took shelter in a hay shed until near day-light when we had to start. We were very nearly lost in our effort to cross the lough now, it was so bad. This was easily the the worst time I ever experienced. Some of our comrades who were waiting for us on the Roscommon side had given up hope and having decided that we were all drowned returned to their homes. This took place on the night of the 6th January, 1921, "Twelfth Night".

"Ambush of Police Patrol at Strokestown":

A few nights before the previous incident I had helped to organise an ambush on a patrol of R.I.C. at Strokestown.

This took place also on the night of the 6th January. One of our men - Gibbons - was there. The ambush took place in Elphin Street. One policeman, Sergeant McArdle, died from wounds received in this ambush. None of our fellows was hit in the encounter and all got away safely.

"Attack on Elphin Barracks":

In January, around the beginning of the New Year, 1921, Seán Connolly who was Vice-O.C. of the Longford Brigade, arrived in our area and stayed for a few days with us and then went on to North Roscommon where he organised an attack on Elphin barracks. Seven or eight of our men went down there to help him on this. Peter Farrell, John Gibbons and Peter Collins were amongst this party. The attack was not a success however. From Roscommon Connolly went on to Leitrim where he was subsequently killed in an encounter with British Forces.

"Reorganisation of the Column":

Around the beginning of the New Year the Column was again organised in the area. By this time every Volunteer in the area was on "the run". The Column was from twenty-five to thirty strong. The armament was the same as for the original Column, there being no increase. We constructed large "Dug Outs" to sleep in. Otherwise we lived on the local people. In the first week in February the British carried out a huge "round up" of the area. About fifteen hundred troops drawn from their garrisons in Longford, Athlone, Boyle and Roscommon and other centres took part in this. A large number of the troops were concentrated in Roscommon the previous night and some of the R.I.C. there who were friendly to us sent us word that something unusual was about to take

place. At this time the Column was billeted in the houses around the area. All the men were aroused early and alerted. Our sentries could see the lights of the lorries of the approaching enemy. The Column was mobilised and moved in a westerly direction towards Four Mile House. In this way we got outside the area of search of the British Forces and so escaped.

Every man and woman in the district searched, was detained and brought to Beechwood where they had to walk past a cottage apparently for identification. The cottage contained officers and police. It was understood that they had police from other parts of the country there who, before joining the Force, were locals. Two men of the Column were picked up by the British Forces: they were Gibbons and Kearns, but they were apparently not identified and were released the following day. Canon Hurley was detained at Beechwood with the rest of the people. Towards night-time he appealed to the British Commanding Officer to release the women. He did so but they had to walk to their homes. They had been brought to Beechwood in Army lorries.

"An Escape at Castlerea":

At the end of January or beginning of February, 1921, the Brigade O/C asked for some help to be sent to the Castlerea area. This was the 1st Battalion area. He wanted us to reorganise the Battalion and to start operations there in order to relieve the pressure on our area. Frank Simons went down and spent a week there and came back without result. The organisation there was in a poor state. Pat Madden and I then went down. We had our headquarters outside Loughlinn in a house owned by people called Ganly. We spent about ten days there. We went around the various Companies and found that

they existed mostly only in name. The most we could get on any parade in any Company area was about ten and in some cases none at all. One morning while we were in Ganly's the place was surrounded. The Brigade O/C and two or three others were there also at the time. We were in bed and at daylight we were called by the sentry to find the place completely surrounded by British Forces.

The Brigade O/C and the others were out of the house first, leaving Madden and I behind. When we got out there was no trace of the Brigade O/C or the others and we went in the wrong direction. We were armed with revolvers. We proceeded in the direction of Castlereagh or east from Loughlinn. When about two hundred yards or so from the house we almost walked into a party of police and military. We were quite close to them at the time. The military officer put up his finger and beckoned to us and said, "Come up here". We turned and threw ourselves across the ditch and got down the next field until we were about eighty yards from them. They opened fire on us then. They now spread out and started to pursue us and at every opportunity they fired at us. This continued for about a mile and a half across country. The country around there is pretty bare and particularly so at this time of year.

We never fired a shot at them but still they did not seem inclined to close in on us and when we stopped running and walked they did likewise. We came to some houses and Madden decided we could not continue, so we went into a house and stationed ourselves each side of the door - ready with our guns. There was an old man in the house and we told him to tell them if they inquired that we had just passed on. Two soldiers came to the door and inquired of the old man if he

had seen us. He said that we had passed by a few minutes previously. The whole party then came up and passed on. When they were out of sight we left the house and doubled back on the way we had come and after travelling a few hundred yards we almost walked into another party who were following up the last party. They did not see us and we lay down in a drain until they had proceeded on.

We stayed there for about two hours hoping they had left the area. All seemed quiet now and it was now about 2 o'clock in the afternoon. We now left our hiding place and proceeded to the nearest house. We had nothing to eat from the previous day, but the people in the house had nothing to give us, they were so poor. We then went to another house and here we were lucky and we got some good food and new socks. We now proceeded back to Ganly's. When we arrived there we found the place turned upside down, so to speak, even the cocks of hay in the haggard had been tossed. We had left our two overcoats and also our two bicycles. Of course they were gone.

We decided we could not stay in that area any longer and there did not seem to be any hope of getting anything going there. That night we went down to the village of Loughlinn and raided the Post Office there and took three Post Office cycles. The Post Mistress abused us so we took her cycle also, but only brought it a short distance. This was on a Saturday night. On Sunday morning we arrived at Ballinaghelish Chapel and went to the house of Mrs. O'Hara. John Bergin was with us now. We had travelled about fifteen or sixteen miles. Mrs. O'Hara was about to go to Mass, but instead she took off her coat and hat and got breakfast for us and we went to bed there.

We told Mrs. O'Hara not to call us for food or anything of that sort unless it was absolutely necessary, and we did not awake until Monday evening, we were so exhausted. We were then almost in the Kilbride Company area and Peter Farrell, who was the company commander there, escorted us back to our own area. We found the place extensively blocked by our men. They had got the "wind up" and decided to block the roads so as to immobilise the enemy. The area had already been well blocked off by cutting trenches across the roads. The trenches were cut so that farm carts and such vehicles could get through, but motor lorries or cars could not.

The ambush at Scramogue.

On our return to our own area we found that a good many of our men from the outlying districts had left the column and gone back to their own areas. So we were now depending on our own company members with a few exceptions. There was not much activity until the Scramogue ambush which took place on the 23rd March 1921.

When Sean Connolly had been here around the New Year he had with Pat Madden, Frank Simons, Martin Fallon and me discussed staging an ambush on the strokestown-Longford road. This was outside our battalion and brigade area. Nothing was done about it, however, until March, after Connolly was killed. I cannot recall any reason why the matter was delayed.

In March 1921, we put scouts on the road to ascertain what was passing that way. One of the scouts lived on the road and he kept a tally of all military or police movements along that road and made a daily report to me. His reports confirmed that never more than three lorries of Tans or military passed that way at any one time, and we decided we would be able to handle a party of that size.

Fat Madden and I went to Leavy's house at Scramogue. Leavy

was on the staff of the 3rd Battalion, North Roscommon Brigade. We contacted Leavy and made a reconnaissance of the area with him. The best position for an ambush was close to the village. Leavy said that this was the only position on the road and, although we pointed out to him that probably a number of houses including his own would be destroyed by the British forces, he replied that if we were successful he did not care a damn. We were there and then decided on this spot just outside the village. We decided not to block the road as there was too much civilian traffic on it.

The enemy would have to slow down at the bend of the road and we would occupy a good commanding position in which we could not be taken in the rear or flanks. The position was only about three quarters of a mile from the military camp in the demesne at Strokestown.

On the night of 22nd March we mobilised at Cooney's cross-roads. We mobilised about twenty all told. We had about eight or nine service rifles; four of these were our own and the brigade supplied us with the remainder. The rest of the party were armed with shotguns. We had about twenty-five rounds for each rifle. I think it was less. For the shotguns we had cartridges loaded with buckshot, but these were in short supply also; in fact, they were very limited. Some of the cartridges were loaded with ball or bullets especially made for the job. The cartridges were damp and it was hard to extract them from the guns. We marched seven miles to Scramogue and on our way we were joined by four or five men from Carniskag Company of the North Roscommon Brigade. We arrived at Scramogue about two hours before daylight and were joined there by about ten or twelve men from the Curraghroe Company also of the North Roscommon Brigade. All those men were armed with shotguns only. Leavy was in charge of a party that was detailed to block the road between Scramogue and Termonbarry to prevent reinforcements

coming from Longford. We were building on the enemy coming from Strokestown side. The Kiltievan Company blocked the roads leading into the area from Athlone side. The country around has high walls bordering the roads and these made good road blocks when thrown on to the road. Every company in the battalion was engaged in blocking roads. There were a few men from Strokestown with us that morning also - Murty O'Connor and ... Keegan, now a superintendent in the Guards, and Peter Mullooly. Mullooly was an organiser in the area, but ~~it~~ was a native of Strokestown also.

When we arrived we started to prepare our position. We had to build a bank of sods inside in the field along the road to give us cover. We also cut holes in the hedges behind us to facilitate us when getting away from the place or in case we had to make a hurried retreat. We took out the family that lived in the house at the corner on the road and we occupied it by four men. We loopholed that house. We also had to remove the families from other houses close by which would be in the battle area. All those families were put into one house and a guard put on them. While we were working on the position the Leavy girls made tea for us and four or five men went to their place at a time and partook of this refreshment.

At about 7.30 a.m. we had our work finished and the position manned. We soon heard the sound of a lorry approaching from the Strokestown side. We had a good view of the road in that direction for about half a mile or so. Everyone was now alerted. The first thing we saw coming was a man with a pony and trap. He was about 100 yards away from our position when we sighted the lorry in the distance. One of our men shouted to this man to turn into the byroad, which he did. Almost immediately that he entered this byroad the enemy were upon us. They were a party of military in a Crossley tender - about ten or eleven all told. They had a Hatcher machine gun

mounted on a tripod in the centre of the tender and were commanded by a Captain Peake, who was the officer commanding the British military in the camp at Strokestown. There was also a Lieutenant Tennant in the party. He was a relation, I believe, of Winston Churchill. They had two prisoners in civilian attire in their custody whom they were apparently taking to Longford. The Hotchkiss gunner - a Corporal Hogbin - was standing on the tender behind the gun ready for action. They belonged to the 9th Lancers. Fat Madden was in charge of the ambush party and I was second in command. Madden's instructions were that we were to let the lorry or lorries, as the case might be, come close into our position before opening fire on them, so that the shotguns would be effective. The men with the rifles were to concentrate on the following lorries. Fire was to be opened on a whistle blast from him.

The tender came to about thirty five yards from us and on the whistle blast we opened fire on them including, I think, the rifle men. The tender swerved and then wheeled into its left and hit the wall. All of the occupants who survived our first volley jumped in across the wall including the two officers and there put up a feeble resistance. I think most of them were wounded even before they jumped. They did not fire more than four or five shots all told. Captain Peake ran back from the position towards Strokestown and had got about four hundred yards when he was killed by a shot from one of the riflemen in our position on the right of the road. He received the bullet in the back of the head as he was about to jump over a fence. In all, he had three wounds and apparently had been hit twice before receiving the one that ended his life.

The remainder of the enemy party now surrendered on being called on to do so; the first to come over to us were the two prisoners who were unwounded, strange to say. We now left our

soldiers in it. One was the machine gun corporal. We put them on the side of the road and then removed what arms and bombs there were on the tender - also the machine gun - and prepared to burn the tender. In the meantime the remainder of the enemy party had given up their arms and equipment to others of our party. Lieut. Tennant, who was dying, handed up his revolver and belt. All of the enemy had either been killed outright or died of wounds within a few days, the exception being Corporal Hogan, who recovered from his wounds.

We were not able to do anything for the wounded as we were quite close to the enemy encampment at Strokestown and expected a party from there to arrive at any moment and had to get away as quickly as we could. We were not able to get down to Captain Feake where he was lying to collect his arms. We set fire to the tender and then started our retreat, bringing the two prisoners with us. We were under the impression that they were I.R.A. prisoners as they said: "We are prisoners", and we knew that the military at Strokestown had a number of such men in their custody at Strokestown. It was only when we called a halt after some hours trekking that we started to question the prisoners and then discovered that they were two Black and Tans. They were in civilian attire. He separated from the Curraghroe men after this halt, they going towards their own area.

We had captured two Service rifles, one damaged in the firing; also some revolvers - only two, I think. One .22 sporting rifle, one Hotchkiss machine gun and about 700 rounds of ammunition for same and some bombs. An extraordinary item captured was a huge stock whip with a very short handle and an enormous thong. We kept the machine gun and ammunition and gave the rifles, including the sporting one, to the Curraghroe men, also some ammunition. I don't remember now who took the revolvers. The only conclusion we could come to regarding the stock whip was that they had it for whipping prisoners when

On finding out that we had two Black and Tans as prisoners, one a constable Evans, and the other a Constable Buchanan, we were faced with a problem. The CurraghRofe men brought Buchanan with them and we took Evans. That night we executed Evans and buried him in Cloonboney Bog. The CurraghRofe Volunteers also executed Buchanan that night. Buchanan made a bold attempt to escape and ran into the Shannon where he was shot. During the time the prisoners had been with us and particularly at the early stage when we thought they were I.R.A. men, they had learned an enormous amount about us and would be able to identify all of us which would in all probability mean our execution, so that there was no alternative but to put them away for good.

I should have stated previously that we also had another party of men under Henry Compton some of whom were armed with shotguns, and others acting as scouts to cover our retreat. We thought that there would be at least three lorries of enemy. The enemy did not carry out very extensive reprisals for this ambush, as was their wont. They burned the house we occupied at Scramogue and also a house belonging to people called Walsh, not far from here. When raiding Walsh's house they found straw in an outhouse which appeared to be where men had slept. This was not the case.

On getting back to our own area we dispersed, each man keeping his arms. Our quartermaster, Joe Fallon, took charge of the machine gun. At this time we used to sleep in our dugouts. When we separated from the CurraghRofe men Pat Mullooly and Brian Nangle went to Farrell's publichouse at Loughil. They were not there long when an enemy party coming from Athlone swept in on top of them there. They rushed out of the publichouse and were fired on and had to surrender. They were found in possession of some of the equipment that had been taken off the tender at Scramogue. They had already

captured another of our men called Hughes, who was an ex-British army man and who had already proceeded to his home and disposed of his stuff and was on his way into Strokestown to draw his British army pension when they picked him up on the road. Hughes was subsequently released - the fact that he was a British army pensioner and carrying his papers apparently satisfied them that he was a loyal citizen.

Mullooley and Nangle were given a terrific beating in which Mullooley's nose was broken. The Black and Tans went to Mullooley's house that night and took out his brother Michael and shot him in the garden of the house. He was also a Volunteer, but was not in the ambush at Scramogue that day. Mullooley and Nangle were brought either to the George V Hospital in Dublin or to the Curragh Military Hospital where Corporal Hogben, the machine gunner, was a patient. They asked Hogben to identify Mullooley and Nangle as being at Scramogue, but he refused to do so and turned his back to them and said: "I am too sick to recognise anybody". They were kept in Athlone barracks for some time. Mullooley escaped from Athlone and got back to this area. Nangle, as far as I remember, was interned until after the Truce.

For days after Scramogue the area around here was a hot-bed of enemy activity, but they got none of the column. We had four or five dugouts in the area in which we stayed all night and we got food from the local people during the day. Those dugouts were very damp, particularly so at this time of year and, looking back on it now, I am amazed that we did not all contract T.B. or rheumatism.

Incident at Kilrooskey near Ballagh:

In May 1921 we had a party of I.R.A. cutting a trench in the road at Kilrooskey, near Ballagh. There were about twenty men digging this trench. Some of these were civilians who had been rounded up by our fellows to assist in the work. Peter Collins, who was Lieutenant in the local Company, was in charge. It was about 12 p.m. and they were not long at work! Three men were posted as sentries some distance further up the road on the Roscommon side and a similar party on the road on the other side of the diggings. Of the three men on the Roscommon side, one was armed with a rifle, the second man had a hand grenade and the third had a shot gun. The night was a very dark one. One of the sentries on the Roscommon side thought he could perceive men approaching him on foot, and in file along the side of the road. The sentry called on them to halt as he thought they were local people. They were Black and Tans and R.I.C.

Immediately on calling on them to halt he was fired on. He returned the fire with his rifle, but only fired one shot. The man with the hand grenade threw it in the direction of the enemy and then all three retreated. The digging party and the sentries on the other side, on hearing the firing all decamped and made good their escape.

The sentry who had fired the one shot killed a Black and Tan named Constable Reading with that shot, and the man with the bomb also succeeded in wounding two or three of the Tans. The Tans and R.I.C. remained there and kept on firing until daylight next morning.

They then retired to a nearby house and remained there until reinforcements came out from Roscommon looking for them. All of the I.R.A. party and the civilians got away without suffering any casualties.

At the inquest on Constable Reading, a Mr. Black from Roscommon who was acting as foreman of the jury expressed himself very strongly about the state of the country and about murdering this constable on the road. Mr. Black was an auctioneer and Income Tax collector. Some time afterwards Mr. Black came out to this area to conduct an auction at Mrs. O'Connor's of Ballagh. We went there and had a conversation with him regarding his statement at the inquest and informed him that we were fining him ten pounds (£10), which he paid promptly. We informed him that he could conduct that auction, but that after that he was not to come into that area again. He was in such a hurry to get out that he sold the articles off very cheaply, and in many cases for only a fraction of their value.

"Beechwood - Tans lay a trap mine":

Shortly before the last affair a sad incident took place at Beechwood on the main Lanesboro - Roscommon road. A trench had been cut across the road at Beechwood. The Cloontuskert Company was responsible for this and were under orders that this road was to be kept impassable at all times. The Tans came out to Beechwood and filled in the trench and put a trap mine in it. An ex-British Army man who had watched the Tans, suspected that there was something wrong and came and told me about it. I instructed the Cloontuskert Company not to re-open this trench but to dig a new one. They were too lazy, I suppose, to cut a new one and started to re-open the old one. They were not long digging when they heard a

fizzling or buzzing noise which they listened to. There was an explosion and four men were wounded, Lieutenant Scally, J. O'Connor, O/C of the Company, John Kelly and Jim Gannon. Scally died from his wounds a few days afterwards, although some of the others seemed to be more dangerously wounded. They were removed to an island on the Shannon where they were attended by Drs. Charles Kelly and Dudley Ford. Dr. Kelly was from Roscommon and Dr. Ford was from Strokestown. Both these men's services were always available to us on request and, of course, without charge. A Nurse Fayne also looked after the wounded men on the island.

The remains of Lt. Scally were brought at night to Kiltewan and buried in the churchyard there. After the Truce the remains were removed and re-interred in the burial ground at Clóontuskert, at which time he was given a wonderful public funeral. The other men remained on the island for about two months. The police began to get suspicious of such movement in the area then and we were obliged to transfer them to the Kilbride Company area. They all recovered and are still living. O'Connor still carries some of the shrapnel of the mine in his thigh. There is a monument erected to the memory of Lt. Scally on the roadside at Beechwood.

Attempted ambush at Ballyleague:

Around this time also, we occupied the village of Ballyleague which is on the Roscommon side of the bridge over the Shannon at Lanesboro. The weather was now fine and warm and the Tans and R.I.C. were in the habit of coming out from the Barracks at Lanesboro (which had a strong garrison) and sitting on the bridge in the sunshine. We occupied the houses covering the bridge and waited in the hope of getting a crack at them.

We stayed in our positions for about two and a half hours but only one policeman came out and sat for about half an hour. We did not fire at him as we wanted bigger game.

We could not remain longer in the positions as it would be dangerous to do so. Contrary to our expectations, while we were in Ballyleague the people treated us very well and gave us refreshments and implored us to stay longer - although it would probably have meant that their houses would have been burned had the ambush come off. Father Dolan, who was curate there, waited in the chapel all the while in case we wanted him and when we were departing he blessed us all. There were no other activities until the Truce.

Spies, British agents and Intelligence work:

Our Intelligence Officer was Michael Quinn - an ex-British Army man. Very few of the Battalion Staff ever knew until after the Truce that he was associated with the movement. He associated freely with the police and was able to get information from them. There were two R.I.C. men in Roscommon who assisted us in many ways - Sergts. Duffy and Harte. One of them was clerk to the County Inspector and the other was clerk to the District Inspector's Office. They informed us when the enemy were planning big rounds up and gave us a chance to outwit the British forces.

Two spies or agents were executed in this area. One was an ex-R.I.C. man and the other was a Postmaster. We had our suspicions regarding both of them. The Postmaster had always been openly hostile to Sinn Féin and the I.R.A., and it was more or less common gossip that he was acting as an agent for the British Intelligence Service. Our friends in the police in

Roscommon had sent word to us to be careful of these men as they had apparently given some information during a round-up in the area previously.

We dressed up a few of our men in British army uniforms, complete even unto helmets, and having rehearsed them in what was required of them sent them to interview the postmaster. They knocked at the door but were not admitted until they used some bad language. Then a woman's voice inside said: "Open the door. It is all right, it's the military". I remained outside where I could hear what was said inside the house. I was amazed how much the postmaster knew about us. He told the "wouldbe" British soldiers every detail about our organisation and its members, our hide outs and even where we had some of our arms concealed. They asked him about myself. He said I was the ringleader and the drill master. When our "would-be" soldiers were leaving he asked if he would be paid for the information he had given, and said that he was decently treated the last time.

The whole matter was the subject of a report to G.H.Q. through our own Headquarters, and some weeks later we received an instruction from Headquarters that the two men were to be executed. The ex-R.I.C. man was passing information through a shop boy in Roscommon named McCullagh. This was confirmed by our friends Sgts. Duggy and Harte in Police Headquarters in Roscommon. He also had another agent in Strokestown to whom he passed information. We kept the ex-policeman's house watched and he was seen passing a letter to the Strokestown agent.

When we went to get the ex-R.I.C. man to execute him, he had his house barricaded and we had to force an entrance into it to get him. Another party took the postmaster and his daughter into custody. The daughter was tied to the chapel gate at Ballagh, where she remained all night and until after Mass on the following morning when some one released her. The postmaster and the ex-policeman were brought to Connor Hurley's house where the canon heard their confession. All this time we kept them separated and did not let them see each other. On the way along the road to the place fixed for execution, we told one of them that we were also going to execute another man that night. He said "Who"?, and on being told he could guess gave the other man's name first time. We took them to Kilrooskey Cross Roads and there they were shot. A proper firing party had been detailed, some of whose guns had been loaded with blank ammunition in the orthodox manner. We placed the usual label on them and left them on the roadside where they were shot. The police came out about midday the following day (Sunday) and photographed their bodies where they were lying. They were subsequently buried by their relatives. Before being shot the policeman finished up his last prayers by praying for the success of our cause and that no member of the I.R.A. would ever come to harm. The postmaster was named McAuley, and was a native of the district. The ex-policeman was named Scanlon - native of Sligo. McCullagh succeeded in getting out of the country before we could get hold of him.

There were some other men executed as spies in the district also, but I have not sufficient knowledge of their cases to give any details.

In 1919 there was a robbery in Roscommon town where a certain shop was broken into and articles removed. We arrested two men for this, one was named Ward and another whose name I cannot now remember. We took them to the Kiltreevan area, but failed to get any information out of them despite some persuasive methods on our part. Although we were satisfied that we had the right men we were forced to set them free. We had them blindfolded, of course, so that they would not recognise any of us. Ward became a habitual visitor to the police barracks in Roscommon and, as such, was a danger to us. He was arrested one night and brought to the Shannon and thrown in and drowned. His body was never recovered. I do not know if he was giving information to the police.

Hoare

Another man named, an ex- British Army man, was also a habitual visitor to the R.I.C. barracks. We tried to get him also, but he succeeded in getting into the police barracks and was never seen outside it again. He remained in the barracks until the Tans evacuated it after the Treaty, when he accompanied them. He got on the boat but I believe he never reached England. They must have thrown him overboard.

British lorry wrecked in a trench:

About November 1920 a trench had been cut across the main Lanesboro - Roscommon road. It was night time, and a lorry load of military travelling from Lanesboro direction to Roscommon crashed into this trench and was wrecked. I cannot say if any of them were injured. They remained there with the lorry until morning. We did not hear about this in time or else we could have dealt with them.

The I.R.B. :

I joined the I.R.B. some time in 1919. Pat Madden the Bn. O/C was Centre, and the other members included Peter Collins, John Gibbons, Frank Simon, Tom Madden, J. Tiernan, Michael Collins and some others whom I cannot now remember. Meetings were usually held after meetings of the Battalion Council. Only routine matters were dealt with at such meetings, and when the situation got "hot" in the area no further meetings were held and the organisation to all intents and purposes ceased to exist. It never seemed to have served any purpose or to have any object and was superfluous at the time.

The Truce:

When the Truce came we were glad of the respite and to be able to get a decent rest. We were in a better position than ever before to have carried on the fight. Our morale was very high and gaining strength, the men were eager for a fight and the people were supporting us by all means in their power.

Signed: Luke Duffy
(Luke Duffy)

Date: 26-3-21

Witness:

Matthew Barry
(Matthew Barry), Comd't.

