

ORIGINAL

BUREAU OF MILITARY HISTORY 1913-21
BURO STAIRÉ MILEATA 1913-21
No. W.S. 713

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BUREAU OF MILITARY HISTORY, 1913-21.

STATEMENT BY WITNESS

DOCUMENT NO. W.S. 713

Witness

Denis Dwyer,
150 Kilnap Place,
Cork.

Identity.

Member of "F" Company, 6th Battalion,
1st Cork Brigade, 1918 -

Lieutenant same Company, 1921.

Subject.

- (a) Activities of 6th Battalion,
1st Cork Brigade, 1918-1921;
- (b) Ambush at Dripsey, Co. Cork, 28/1/1921.

Conditions, if any, Stipulated by Witness.

Nil.

File No. S. 2026.

Form B.S.M. 2

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STATEMENT OF DENIS DWYER
OF 150 KILNAP PLACE, CORK.

"I was born at Grenagh, Co. Cork, in April, 1895, and took up employment in 1912 in the old G.S. & W. Railway, Cork, as a plumber's help.

I joined the Volunteers at Cork in 1915, but a few months after joining, I enlisted in the Irish Guards following the appeals then being made for recruits by the Irish Party and the Chairman of the Railway - Sir Wm. Goulding.

I was in the Irish Guards for about 2½ years and of which I spent about 21 months on active service in France. I was in the battle of Loos, Ypres, and the Somme battles. My first Company Commander and later Commanding Officer was Captain Alexander, who is now Lord Alexander and present British Minister for Defence. I was twice wounded in France and following my second wound was sent to a hospital in Lancashire. After some months in hospital I was allowed home on convalescent leave and I never returned to England.

Shortly after my return in 1918, I joined the Grenagh Volunteers which was then known as "F" Company of the 6th Battalion, 1st Cork Brigade, and I was appointed Company Training Officer, and also as a Section Leader. The other Companies of the 6th Battalion were - Blarney, Courtbrack, Donoughmore, Coachford, Rylane and Inniscarra. These Companies varied a lot in strength: some of them were small - about 20 to 30, while others reached the 80 to 100 mark. The Grenagh Company was about 50 or 60 strong, the majority of whom were fairly regular in their attendances at training parades.

P.T.O.

The Company held very little arms; there were a few old pattern rifles, a few revolvers and some shot-guns. I had a German revolver myself which I had brought from France. The whole Battalion was poorly supplied, as far as arms were concerned, unless for shot-guns. As all our Companies were rural, a large number of the farmers' sons had shot-guns.

During 1918 and 1919, there was very little activity of note, apart from the training parades and an occasional arrest in the district.

In late 1919 and into 1920, the momentum of our activities increased considerably. We had frequent road-blocking as our district covered the main Cork-Mallow road and the same applied to communications as our Company was the link between Cork and Mallow. The telegraph wires were tapped on numerous occasions by some of our men, and with the connivance of the local postman, who was one of ourselves, the mails were raided several times and consequently there were numerous searches from time to time by the British Military.

Another period of activity was when the farmers were instructed not to pay rates, and on the arrival of the Sheriff's party with bailiffs and R.I.C., we fired on them a few times and they beat a hasty retreat and did not trouble the locality again.

The Brigade O.C., (Seán Hegarty), stayed in our Company area on several occasions, as also did some other of the Brigade and Cork City Officers, and for which our Company provided scouts and night protection parties.

Several Sinn Féin Courts were also held in the area, and on occasions we held the prisoners in custody.

About the middle of 1920, an R.I.C. Sergeant named

Seery came to our district from the North: the old Sergeant who was still in the Station was a decent old type and was due for retirement. This Sergeant Seery made it known far and wide that he was going to clean up the area of all "Shinners". We carefully noted the time of their patrols for a week or so, and one day we held up the patrol consisting of Sergt. Seery and two Constables. Murt Curtin was in charge of our party which included five others and myself. When Murt Curtin gave the order "Hands up", Seery seemed as if he was going to show fight, so he was shot and wounded. I am not sure of what became of him but there was some talk that he died subsequently. This capture increased our armament by 1 rifle, 2 revolvers and a belt and bayonet. A Constable Barry, who was one of the patrol, knew the most of us but never gave the game away as Seery had been very unpopular in the barracks.

Some hours following this attack, a large military party raided the district and carried out extensive searches, accompanied by a few blood-hounds. A brother of mine was assaulted by one of the blood-hounds and so were many other persons. No arrests were made that day, but the following day another raid was carried out and a brother of one of our attacking party, named McCarthy, was arrested and also another innocent person.

Towards the end of 1920, a big swoop was made on the district by the military and our 1st Lieut. (T. O'Connell - since dead) and about six Volunteers were arrested. They were taken to Mallow and were used for several weeks as hostages in lorry patrols and during their arrest some of them had received very rough treatment from their captors. After a month or six weeks they were released.

I do not recollect the Auxiliary-R.I.C. ever visiting our area.

Sometime late in 1920, or early in 1921, a British soldier in uniform without badges was caught in the locality: he stated he was a deserter. As far as I can recollect, he gave no name or regiment. He was held in arrest for some short time while enquiries were being made. We were very suspicious of him for about this time many of the alleged deserters were British spies. It was eventually decided to execute him and I was one of the party detailed for the job. He died very bravely without the slightest flinching, which convinced us that he was a British Intelligence Officer. He was only in our custody for less than two (2) days, during which he was kept in an unoccupied cottage on the farm of a Matt Donovan of Ballywalloon, situated about $1\frac{1}{2}$ miles from the village of Grenagh. His remains were buried on the farm, roughly about 300 yards from the cottage mentioned above, and as far as I know, the remains are still there.

In or about this time, a man named Horgan joined the local Company. Some members of the Company knew Horgan's uncle and considered him alright and suitable. I was rather suspicious of him and remarked to a comrade named Murt Curtin, that I considered Horgan a shifty customer. Curtin did not agree with me as he thought I was being over cautious. There was very little activity at this time but one evening I mentioned to Horgan confidentially that there would be great excitement shortly in our area as a very big ambush was to be carried out on a military lorry patrol on a date a week later and that the ambush position was to be along the high ground at Daly's quarry at Rathduff. Horgan cleared off on some pretext a few days before the date I had mentioned for the ambush and on the date the ambush was supposed to take place,

one of the largest military parties we had seen up to this made a cordon over a very wide area and carried out extensive searches within the general locality at Rathduff. We never saw Horgan again as he cleared off to England: it seemed fairly evident that he had given information to the British of the supposed ambush.

ATTACK ON BLARNEY R.I.C. BARRACKS - JUNE, 1920.

The Battalion staged an attack on the Blarney R.I.C. Barracks in June, 1920. I do not know the details unless that personnel of our Company (Grenagh) was responsible for covering the road between Ballincollig and Blarney and about twelve others and myself set up a few road blocks, which were covered by us with a few rifles, shot-guns and grenades. Although Verey Lights had been fired from Blarney, there were no reinforcements from the Military Post at Ballincollig. Reinforcements, however, did arrive from Cork City and the attacking party had to withdraw. We heard subsequently that the explosives failed to breach the wall. Some days following this attack, R.I.C. in civvies, posing as Cattle Dealers, visited a number of houses in the district and discussed the Barrack attack, trying to seek information, but the farmers they visited were very suspicious of them and kept their mouths shut and gave them no information.

DRIPSEY AMBUSH - 28.1.1921.

Our biggest Unit operation was what is known as the Dripsey Ambush which was organised and carried out by Officers and men of the 6th Battalion, 1st Cork Brigade.

A Unit Column, which was formed in late 1920, was drawn from the seven Companies of the Battalion, viz., Grenagh, Blarney, Courtbrack, Donoughmore, Rylane, Coachford, and Inniscarra, and the participating Volunteers numbered
P.T.O.

about sixty all ranks. Prior to this there had been a Brigade Column operating in the Brigade Area under Sando Donovan, but I don't remember if any of our Battalion were in the Brigade Column.

In preparation for the Ambush, it was decided to give the Unit Column an intensive course of training. This was started in early January, 1921, and continued for a fortnight approximately. The training was conducted by me in conjunction with the Unit O.C. (Jackie O'Leary) and the Vice O.C. (Frank Busted). The training comprised: (i) Use of ground and cover, (ii) occupation of and withdrawal from a position, (iii) security measures, including scouting and field signalling, and (iv) Fire Control. This training was carried out in the Parish of Donoughmore where the Column was billeted. Donoughmore is a big, long and straggling Parish, and we made several changes of billets within the Parish during our location there.

The scene of the ambush was in the wooded country overlooking the River Lee, approximately one mile from the village of Coachford on the Cork City side. At the time, this road - Cork-Ballincollig-Coachford-Macroon - was much in use by enemy forces as it was the practice to send mixed force of "Black and Tans" and military from Macroon to Cork each week for Pay and supplies of stores, etc. This convoy normally consisted of about seven Crossley tenders and the total complement of troops on the lorries may vary between twenty-five to thirty all told. Close watch had been maintained on the time of movements of this convoy for about a month, and from the information thus gained, the time of arrival at the location of the Ambush would be between 9 a.m. and 10 a.m.

It was then decided to ambush and destroy this force on Friday, January 28th, 1921.

The Column, under its Commander, Jackie O'Leary, and his Battalion staff, left Camp at Donoughmore on the night of January 27th and marched to the Village of Peake, near the scene of the ambush. About midnight the Column rested in a mansion, the property of Captain Bowen Colthurst, who had become notorious for a number of unauthorised executions he carried out after the 1916 Rising, including Sheehy Skeffington.

The Column was supplied with food after resting and then moved into better positions which had already been reconnoitred.

All were at action stations at dawn, and despite the normal tension, high spirits were maintained while we awaited the approach of the enemy convoy. We were full of confidence in the ultimate victory of our forces, for as far as could be foreseen, all possible steps had been taken to ensure success.

The firing position was roughly 150 yards long - along the road fence for 50 yards and then breaking along the skyline 15 yards from the main road, where a number of trees was sawn through and held in position by ropes which were secured to other trees. These trees were to be dropped as the enemy forces were coming into the ambush position. Two farm-carts heavily laden with manure and farm implements were ready in a nearby laneway to be pushed behind the lorry as it passed, thus giving the enemy no chance of continuing his journey or retreating back to Macroom and so trapping them in the ambush position. The River Lee flowed parallel with the road and was impassable at this particular point, making the "trap" complete. Snipers held positions over-

looking the river's edge to ensure that none of the enemy could take advantage of any cover which it may give. Signallers were also placed in position to give approach signals and enemy strength.

We had waited patiently for hours but no enemy forces appeared, but, as events afterwards proved, information of the attack was conveyed to the enemy through a Mrs. Lindsay (widow of a British Army Officer) who lived in the vicinity. The ultimate result was that at about 4 p.m. that date, the Column was surprised and surrounded by a large enemy force drawn from the 1st Manchester Regiment, who were stationed at Ballincollogh. These were well equipped with modern weapons and had at least one armoured car. They had almost succeeded in surrounding us without being observed, as our scouts who were by now on continuous duty for twenty hours without food or rest, were almost exhausted and had got careless and had gone into neighbouring houses for refreshments, leaving no one to watch the enemy approach. The first warning we got of our danger was a volley of shots fired on our right flank and the approach of an armoured car. The Column, on the orders of our O.C., started to retire from the centre. The line of retreat lay up high ground through a plough-field, which was under enemy fire. On the top of the field the British forces had already occupied a fence from which they were pouring heavy fire on the Column. We returned the fire resulting in the enemy seeking safer cover. The enemy had by now closed in on our front and rear and also on one flank and were making strenuous efforts to complete the circle and cut us off completely. Our only source of retreat now was by a narrow laneway, of which the enemy had full view. A gateway at the end of the laneway was locked and barred by the owner, who was hostile to the I.R.A. and we had no time

or alternative but to climb over it. I happened to be the last man getting over it and I slipped between the post and the gate and was securely held by the leg without any chance of releasing myself, and were it not for the prompt action of the Battalion Quartermaster (Denis Murray), who came back at great personal risk, and released me from my very precarious position, I would undoubtedly have been shot or captured.

Ultimately, after all night fighting, the Column reached safety in a friendly neighbourhood in the mountains of Rylane, where a check was made of men and material. There was sadness in our Camp as many of our comrades were wounded and many more in enemy hands. The wounded we managed to get away.

On visiting the scene of the ambush two days afterwards, I was amazed how we got out without being completely wiped out as the enemy had all the advantages, being so superior in numbers, arms and training, etc., and especially the manner in which we had to retreat which could not be, of necessity, in any sort of a military formation. I had personally experienced some very tough and trying situations in France in 1916 and 1917, but this, while it lasted, surpassed any of them. Were it not for my former battle experience, it is very doubtful if I would have lived to tell the tale, for in the withdrawal I was the last man of the party out of the position and luckily I had held on to a grenade, and when some of the enemy were closely on my heels, I threw the grenade, which stopped them in their tracks, thereby giving me an opportunity to make a successful getaway.

The Officers taking part in the Ambush were:-

J. O'Leary, O.C.

P.T.O.

F. Busteed Vice O.C.
D. Murray Quartermaster
J. Barratt, Adjutant (Died of wounds)
N. McNeilus, Attached. (Recent escapee from Cork Jail).

The following were the O.S.C. in charge of the Company contingents:-

D. Buckley, O.C., Blarney Company
M. Murray, O.C., Courtbrack "
S. Manning, O.C., Donoughmore "
D. Dwyer (Self) A/O/C., Grenagh "
S. Crowley, O.C., Coachford "
D. Henchin, O.C., Rylane "

I forget who was in charge of the Inniscarra Company.

During the fight, eight (8) of the Column were captured, six (6) of whom were subsequently executed and one sentenced to a long term of imprisonment, later released under the general amnesty, and one died of wounds (J. Barratt).

Before the executions were carried out, an ultimatum was forwarded to the Officer Commanding British Forces in Cork, to the effect that reprisals would follow if the executions were proceeded with. These reprisals were duly brought into effect on the night of the executions, several British soldiers being shot dead in Cork City, and the Mrs. Lindsay already mentioned above, was executed for giving information of the ambush to the British.

PROPOSED ATTACK ON MACROOM CASTLE, 1921.

Some time about May or June, 1921, I forget the date or the details, a big attack was initiated on Macroom Castle, then occupied by a mixed force of military and Auxiliary R.I.C. The attack was on a Divisional level as personnel from all the Cork Brigades were participating and I also heard that some of the South Kerry Brigade were to take part.

The plan was to set fire to a loyalist's house near Macroom and as soon as the enemy from the Castle rushed to the scene of the fire, our main party was to rush the Castle and deal with any enemy personnel left inside and capture whatever arms or other equipment of use to us. The second party was to engage such of the enemy as would proceed to the scene of the fire. I was one of the latter party, together with about twenty others from the 6th Battalion and personnel from other Brigades.

Nothing resulted, however, for although the house was set on fire, the enemy never left the Castle.

OTHER DETAILS.

I do not think there are any other details worth recording. While in the Column we had some long distance skirmishing, such as firing at enemy lorries, but as these distances were a few hundred yards or upwards, it is difficult to say if any casualties were inflicted. Such attacks were, more or less, only of a nuisance value.

RANK.

My rank in the Volunteers on the date of the Truce was Lieutenant of "F" Company (Grenagh), 6th Battalion, 1st Cork Brigade."

Denis Dwyer Signature
(Denis Dwyer)

12th August 1952 Date

Witnessed by

Thomas Halpin
(Thomas Halpin) Lieut. Col.

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