

ORIGINAL

BUREAU OF MILITARY HISTORY 1913-21
BURO STAIRE MILEATA 1913-21
No. W.S. 858

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BUREAU OF MILITARY HISTORY, 1913-21.

STATEMENT BY WITNESS.

DOCUMENT NO. W.S. 858.....

Witness

Seamus Finn,
Athboy,
Co. Meath.

Identity.

Adjutant,
Meath Brigade, I.R.A.

Subject.

Capture of Trim R.I.C. Barracks,
Co. Meath, 30th Sept. 1920.

Conditions, if any, Stipulated by Witness.

Nil

File No. S.2160.....

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BUREAU OF MILITARY HISTORY 1013-21
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STATEMENT BY SEAMUS FINN,

Athboy, County Meath.

The Capture of Trim R.I.C. Barracks, 30th September, 1920.

Trim, the old Capital of County Meath, had an R.I.C. Barracks and a police force in keeping with its importance. The barracks, a miniature fortress of stone walls and barred windows, stood in the centre of a plot of ground two acres in extent on the south side of the Fair Green which opened on two sides of it. Facing to the east it stood 150 yards back from the Summerhill Road and was surrounded by a wall fifteen feet high. Strong iron gates barred the approach.

In the summer of 1920 this police stronghold held a garrison of twenty-five Constables, two Sergeants, one Head Constable and one District Inspector, a fact which, in addition to the solidity of its structure, made it a formidable enemy post.

In 1920 too the Trim area held a strong Volunteer Battalion, an I.R.A. unit which had already proved its worth in the fight for Ballivor Barracks when its members had shown that they possessed both determination and daring. Since then they had been given a special course of training so that now they were efficient as well as determined and daring fighters. A series of police swoops during the preceding months had deprived the Brigade area of some of its best officers, but others had been trained to fill the vacancies, and by the summer of 1920 the area was in a solid position.

Towards the end of 1919 and in the early months of 1920, attacks on several police barracks had been planned, but each time there had to be last-minute changes of plan resulting in repeated disappointments - except of course at Ballivor where one policeman was shot and where our men seized all the arms and ammunition kept in the barracks.

A boast made by one of the Trim police regarding the impregnability of the barrack there caused us to consider the possibility of attacking

the Trim stronghold. The suggestion was discussed with the men of the Trim Battalion and they unhesitatingly agreed that the attack should be carried out. So our decision was made and our next step was to devise ways and means, and to lay efficient plans of attack.

In this respect we were afforded very fortunate assistance by an ex-R.I.C. Sergeant named T. J. McElligott who had earlier resigned from the Police Force as a protest against Britain's Conscription plans for Ireland during World War 1. This man gave us the names of Constables who were reliable from our point of view and one of these in turn gave us valuable information regarding the lay-out of the barracks itself and regarding the movements of its garrison. He told us, for one thing, that the District Inspector was to be absent during a certain week-end and this item of information decided us upon the date of our contemplated attack: Sunday 30th September, 1920.

The undertaking was a big one, requiring careful planning and perfect timing on the part of the Brigade staff whose task it was to plan the attack, and superb pluck and fighting ability on the part of the men who were to carry it out.

The Meath Brigade area at that time took in the entire county and the Delvin district in County Westmeath as well. Its officers were Seán Boylan, Dunboyne, Brigade O.C., Sean Hayes, Drumbarragh, Brigade Vice-O.C., Seamus Finn, Athboy, Brigade Adjutant and Seamus Higgins, Trim, Brigade Quartermaster.

The Brigade was comprised of six Battalions. The first Battalion was centred on Dunboyne and led by Commandant Kit Lynam afterwards replaced by Bernard Dunne. The second was centred on Trim led by Commandant Pat Mooney who was later replaced by Michael Hynes. The third was centred on Athboy led by Commandant Sean O'Grady and later by Commandant Michael Fox when O'Grady returned to his native County Clare. The fourth Battalion took in Kells and the surrounding areas and was led by Commandant P. de Burca who later went to Dublin and was replaced by Commandant Pat Farrelly of Moynalty. The fifth Battalion took in the

Oldcastle area and was led by Commandant Sean Keogh until his arrest. It was then led by Seamus Cogan until he was killed in action in June, 1920, and then by Commandant Pat McDonald until he was also killed fighting his way through a British cordon and finally by Commandant Davie Smith of Whitegate. The sixth Battalion covered the Navan area and was commanded by Commandant Pat Loughran until his arrest then by Pat Fitzsimmons who was later replaced by Pat Kelly of Johnstown.

With the information which we had been given by the Constable to guide us we had set out scouts to note carefully the movements of the police on each successive Sunday prior to the date fixed for the attack. Their report was a detailed and comprehensive one which gave us exact information on the activities of the police garrison at the particular time which interested us.

The report said that the bigger portion of the garrison left the barracks at 7:55 a.m. each Sunday morning for 8 o'clock Mass, leaving, therefore, less than half their force behind on barrack duty. The Sergeant and occasionally the Head Constable would remain in the barrack and in all we estimated that the man power of the garrison at that time each Sunday morning would be about eight men. On Sunday morning, 30th September, we knew that the District Inspector would be absent and his quarters vacant.

With these details at our disposal we arranged a meeting with the officers of the Trim Battalion with whom we went over carefully all phases of our plans, for it was upon these officers and their men the brunt of the fighting was to fall. When we were satisfied that these men knew all that was expected of them, our next task was to organize all possible protection for them during the fight in the event of police reinforcements attempting to break through to the rescue of the Trim garrison. With this in view we held a conference with the Battalion officers of other areas in the county and issued orders that all roads leading to Trim should be systematically blocked. This matter being arranged to our satisfaction,

we made elaborate arrangements for the dumping of the arms we hoped to capture and also for the provision of transport.

The business of procuring oil and the other inflammable substances to be used against the barrack was delegated to the Brigade Adjutant. The vital job of capturing the police who had gone to Mass, as they emerged from the Church, was entrusted to the men of the first Battalion under the Brigade O.C. Boylan and Commandants Lynam and Dunne.

A final joint meeting of the Brigade Council and the officers of the Trim Battalion was held on Tuesday night, 25th September, at Trim. All details of the attack were gone over and when each man felt perfectly satisfied that he knew the entire plan of the action minutely a further serious consideration was then discussed, that of affording protection to our well-wishers and friends of Trim against possible reprisals on the part of the enemy following the attack. We surmised that the homes of our most prominent local supporters, the O'Higgins family, O'Hagans, Mooneys, Allens and Plunketts of Navan Gate might be attacked by the police. Therefore we arranged that O'Hagan's house should be occupied by twelve men drawn from the Trim Battalion with eight others in Kellys and four in Barney Reilly's to cover Market Street where the O'Hagans and O'Higgins families and the Mooney family lived. Ten men from Athboy and eight from Kilmessan were to be positioned at Navan Gate to cover Plunketts and Allens. All of these men were to be armed with rifles, revolvers, shotguns and grenades.

On Friday, 28th September, the Brigade Adjutant again met the principal men of the Trim Battalion who were to carry out the operation. Once again every phase of the plans were gone into in detail. It was further decided that the men should mobilise on the Saturday night at O'Hagans and would billet there for that night in a big room upstairs. A certain point on the wall surrounding the barracks was selected as the point over which the attackers were to climb - this was the point directly opposite the absent District Inspector's quarters where we felt the initial moves of our men were most likely to escape detection from the occupants of the barracks. This point was at the side gate leading on

to the Fair Green. The time taken to reach this part of the wall from O'Hagans in Market Street was carefully checked for it was an important factor that our men should not reach the point from which the attack was to be initiated too soon after the first section of the police had left on their way to Mass. Our intention was to give those who had remained behind sufficient time in which to settle down to their normal barrack duties so that they might be fully occupied with their morning chores. As well as that we wanted to give the Mass-going section of the garrison ample time to reach and enter the Church. We would then be sure of being able to capture and overpower them should they attempt to leave when the sounds of the attack began.

Feeling confident that everything was clear to the men of Trim and that each man understood his own individual part of the morning work perfectly, the Brigade Adjutant then set off for Athboy to arrange for men there to go to Trim on Sunday to help to meet the enemy reprisals and to arrange for the blocking of roads between Athboy and Trim. From this he travelled to Kells where he met Bob Mullen with whom he arranged for road blocks to be erected in that area. There also he arranged for transport to take him to Trim in time for the attack and also to convey back the oil which the local Company Captain, Willie Doyle, had seized at Athboy to be used in setting fire to the barrack.

He was fortunate in meeting Nick Gaynor of Ballinlough Company in Kells. This Volunteer promptly suggested that he should drive the Brigade Adjutant back in his own car. Having collected the oil at Athboy on their way back, they arrived at Trim at 8 p.m. on Saturday, and garaged their car at Plunketts of Navan Gate. From there they went to O'Hagans where they met the Trim officers who had already arrived.

The men had all reported present by the pre-arranged time 9 p.m. Two revolvers loaned for the operation by the Navan Company were handed over by Volunteers Keating and Byrne both of whom pressed hard to be allowed to participate. Their services could not be availed of however, as we had but sufficient weapons to arm the men already detailed for the

job. The plans for the attack on the following morning were once again gone over and when tea and sandwiches, which Mrs. O'Hagan had kindly sent up to us, had been duly sampled, we sent out two scouts to keep check upon the possible movements of the police that night, posted guards at the front and rear doors of our billet and then settled down to get what sleep we could.

The night passed uneventfully, and by 6.30 on Sunday morning we were all astir and had begun our final arrangements. At 7.30 the men "fell in" in three sections. Section No. 1 consisted of Commandants Mick Hynes and Paddy Mooney (who were in actual charge of the attack), Lieutenants Mick Giles and H. O'Hagan, Volunteers J. Lawlor, P. Fay, J. Kelly and Stephen Sherry from Trim Company, Capt. Pat Giles and Volunteer Larry Giles from Longwood, Volunteers C. Caffrey, P. Quinn and J. O'Brien from Kilmessan Company, all belonging to the 2nd Battalion. Section No. 2 consisted of P. Duignan, John Higgins, Pat O'Hagan, J. Healy, Joe Nolan, Phil Doggett, Pat Hynes, P. O'Hara, Matty Matthews, Pat Lawlor and L. Sherry. Section No. 3 were Pat Proctor, J. Andrews, P. Andrews, John Mooney, John Mangan, C. Reid, Thomas Sherry, Christopher McCroy, Michael Brady, James Quinn - all belonging to the 2nd Battalion. The Brigade Adjutant and Volunteer Nick Gaynor were to cover the front of the Barrack with rifles once the attack began.

The men of No. 1 Section were all armed with revolvers, ranging from .45 to .32. Their instructions were to climb the wall at the point selected, rush the back door of the barrack directly opposite that point and so gain admittance to the Barrack and, if possible, to overpower and capture the police. No. 2 Section was to follow closely upon the heels of No. 1 and help in the work of overpowering the police, and then to gather up and remove all arms, ammunition, grenades and other war material that the Barrack contained.

No. 3. Section was set the task of bringing along the tins of oil and petrol with which the Barracks was to be set afire. Its task was to sprinkle the building liberally with both oil and petrol and then touch off fires where they were likely to do most harm in the shortest possible time.

Our plans worked like magic. The men of No. 1 Section were over the back wall and through the door before the police knew anything of what was afoot. Taken so completely by surprise, they were overcome almost immediately: all, that is except Head Constable White who rushed towards a box of grenades, but was shot through the lung before he could do any harm to our men. He alone showed any heart for struggle and so the reputedly impregnable Trim R.I.C. barracks fell into our hands without even a semblance of resistance, thanks entirely to the elaborate planning of the Brigade and local officers in conjunction with the information given by our contacts among the R.I.C. to the perfect timing with which the operation was carried out, to the cool and efficient way in which the men had set to work and to the excellence of our intelligence men.

Gathering all the arms and other materials we could find and having helped the captured police to remove their personal belongings and those of their friends at Mass, we set fire to the Barracks which soon was a blazing holocaust and before noon was no more than a smouldering ruin.

Head Constable White had been shot through the lung and badly wounded. We got him attended to by Dr. T. J. Lynch who had ~~been~~ removed to the Hospital section of the local Workhouse where, incidentally, we had arrangements made for the treatment of any of our own men who might happen to be wounded in the attack. Fortunately, however, we did not require attention, for our men had carried out their morning's work without suffering as much as a scratch.

Meanwhile at the Church our friends had been equally successful. Under the leadership of Brigade O/C. Boylan, Battalion-Commandant Lynam and Vice-Commandant Frank Carolan, those men mainly drawn from the 1st Battalion, captured the police as they left the Church. One policeman,

hearing the confusion outside, hid in a Confessional. But he too was taken when the numbers had been checked and he was missed from the Company. In this part of the action together with the three officers were Barney Dunne, James Maguire and M. Phoenix, all from the Dunboyne area.

With the barrack well aflame we checked our capture of arms and ammunition, twenty rifles and carbines, twenty shotguns of which some were no longer serviceable and six revolvers was our capture of arms. Ammunition for all arms, a box of grenades and some bayonets constituted the remainder of our capture, altogether a very satisfactory morning's work.

At a hastily summoned conference it was decided that the men should all get out of town as quickly as possible, rest during the remainder of the day and then re-assemble at O'Hagans at 9 o'clock that evening to await possible enemy activities.

The Brigade Adjutant with Volunteer Sherry and Lalor of Trim, and Volunteer Gaynor to drive, securely dumped the captured arms, then set off to Athboy to meet the Company officers there and having arranged for the return journey to Trim that night, settled down to a well earned sleep.

But events did not work out so happily in Trim. A convoy of the enemy arrived there about 4 p.m. in the afternoon and in a spirit of reprisal they fired indiscriminately through the town wounding some youths who were playing hurling. In alarm, some of the more prominent men of the town approached the officers in charge of the British Forces, and were assured that no further reprisals would be taken for the destruction of the barracks. These townsmen met our officers and men when they arrived to take up positions from which they could prevent reprisals and told them that such precautions were no longer necessary. As a result a certain slackness set in among our men and they seemed to consider that the pre-arranged plans for the guarding of our friends' houses need not now be carried out. So our men withdrew in good faith. But the following morning brought a shock when we learned that the Tans

had broken loose during the night and burned houses in the town contrary to the assurances of their officers.

At a subsequent inquiry held at G.H.Q. in Dublin the officers constituting the Court declared that in view of the interference of the townspeople of Trim in the matter, little or no responsibility rested with our men for their failure to guard against the possibility of British reprisal in Trim.

It was sometime subsequently before we were able to remove the captured arms and ammunition from the dump in which we had placed them, for our movements were hampered by a particularly active Company of Auxiliaries that had been drafted into Trim immediately following the fall of the R.I.C. Barrack. Eventually the booty was distributed safely over various areas in the Brigade with the exception of the box of grenades which was recaptured by the enemy. This was seized by a hold-up patrol between Trim and Ballivor when it was being conveyed to Ballivor by Tom Byrne of Raharney Company. Byrne was badly beaten up by Black & Tans and was later sentenced to ten years' penal servitude which he was serving in an English gaol until released under the terms of the Truce.

The worst of the British official reprisals for the destruction of Trim R.I.C. barracks were not launched until approximately 4 o'clock on Monday morning when about 200 Auxiliaries and Black & Tans from Gormanstown descended upon the town and began an orgy of terror and destruction. The O'Higgins' home was their first objective and they smashed their way into it to find that only Mrs. O'Higgins and her daughter were inside. Brigade Quartermaster Seamus O'Higgins and his brother Sean were still with the Active Service Unit. The two ladies were given but a few minutes to get out of the house which was then sent up in flames. It was but the first of many fires during a night that will never be forgotten by those who witnessed the scenes of plunder and brutality that followed. Fully a quarter of the town was completely gutted. Amongst the places burned by the British in addition to the O'Higgins' house and shop were the residence and drapery shop of Harry and

Bob Allen in High Street. Bob Allen was chairman of the Sinn Fein Comhairle Ceanntair but Harry took no part in politics. The bakery and mineral waterworks of J. & E. Smyth & Co. of Market Street also went up in flames together with a residence attached. Smyths employed about a hundred persons and the object of the burning was to create unemployment. The home of Commandant Mooney's parents was also wrecked and both of them brutally ill-treated. The parents and sister of Volunteers P. O'Hagan and Harry O'Hagan were similarly abused and their home smashed up and their furniture and effects also smashed. Lalor's house in Castle Street came in for like treatment and the parents of Paddy and Joe Lalor were beaten up. Many other houses were broken into and looted. The Town Hall was burned down. Few public houses escaped. On the same morning some of the R.I.C. who had garrisoned the barrack raided the house of our contact, Constable Patrick Meehan of the Trim R.I.C. who had resigned a few days previously. He had been in contact with us since the resignation of Sergeant McElligott and had kept us very well informed of enemy activities. Fortunately he was not at home at the time of the police raid and consequently he escaped certain death and mutilation. Following the raid he contacted some of our men and a car was commandeered to drive him to safety. The car was driven by Denis Maher now Rev. Father Denis Maher of the Welsh Mission. Meehan was much sought after by Tans and British agents but was successful in evading their attention. He subsequently joined the Garda Siochana and was promoted to the rank of Superintendent and was stationed in County Longford. He is now dead, (R.I.P.).

A garrison of Auxiliaries and Black & Tans subsequently posted in Trim gave real hell to the townsfolk. As a result of the conduct of that particular group of Auxiliaries, Brigadier General Crozier who was head of the Force resigned his command following the looting and burning of Chandler's public house in the hamlet of Robinstown on the night of 9th February, 1921. They were in no mood for pleasantries. Having questioned Bob Chandler as to whether he had any arms and ammunition, and

having been informed that he had none, they beat him and kicked him downstairs. They then set about looting his hostelry, a task that was after their own hearts and for which they were well equipped. Necks were broken off bottles and drink was consumed to the value of more than a hundred pounds. Fittings and stock were wantonly smashed and destroyed. They ill-treated Chandler's invalid mother, a very old lady, stole many valuables and made a bonfire of clothing and furniture before they left the place. Bob Chandler gave details of the damage to the I.R.A. and subsequently he had to go on the 'run' from the British.

Two Auxiliaries who had been in the looting of Chandlers went urgently to Dublin and reported what had taken place to General Crozier, "at the peril of their lives", wrote the General, "as their comrades would undoubtedly have killed them had they known". A number of the Auxiliaries were immediately suspended. "By the middle of February, 1921" continued Crozier, "conditions had become so impossible that I resigned. "The occasion of my resignation was the Trim incident connected with the dismissal of the policemen, their reinstatement and the condonation of their offences by the Government". In reality there were dozens of "occasions", many more grave than the Trim incident. "I returned to Dublin after I had resigned at the request of the Chief Secretary in order to help to solve the Trim question" states Crozier. He added, "The inquiry which was held by the police was a pure farce. The Courtmartial Department of G.H.Q. told them so, and told me also".

When divisions were formed in the Irish Republican Army in April, 1921, Meath became the kernal of the First Eastern Division. The following appointments were made: Divisional O/C. Commandant General Sean Boylan, Divisional Vice O.C. and Director of Training and Special Services Colonel Commandant Seamus Finn. Divisional Adjutant Colonel Commandant Patrick Clinton. Divisional Quartermaster Seamus O'Higgins. Divisional Director of Engineering Colonel Commandant E. Cullen. Other officers on the Divisional Staff were Commandant Paddy Mooney, Assistant Training Officer, Captain Arthur Levins, Captain Martin Finn and Captain Donal Landers. The Divisional area included the

following Brigades ⁱ - Dunboyné and part of North Kildare ⁱⁱ - Navan which included all the original Trim and Navan Battalions; ⁱⁱⁱ Kells which included the original fourth and fifth Battalions and part of East Cavan as far north as Kilbride East; ^{iv} Athboy including part of Westmeath; ^v Mullingar and the surrounding areas; ^{vi} Edenderry, North Offaly and part of South Meath, ^{vii} Naas and central Kildare as far as Old Kilcullen and the Curragh, ^{viii} Fingal, ^{ix} Drogheda and all South Louth.

Signed:

Seamus Finn

(Seamus Finn)

Date:

June 1st 1953

June 1st 1953.

Witness:

Matthew Barry

(Matthew Barry) Comd't.

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