

W. S. 1,145

ORIGINAL

BUREAU OF MILITARY HISTORY 1913-21

BURO STAIRÉ MILEATA 1913-21

No. W.S. 1145

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BUREAU OF MILITARY HISTORY, 1913-21.

STATEMENT BY WITNESS.

DOCUMENT NO. W.S. 1,145

Witness

Michael O'Donnell,  
Aughrim,  
Milford,  
Charleville,  
Co. Cork.

Identity.

Quartermaster Charleville Battalion  
Cork II Brigade.

Subject.

Liscarroll Company Irish Volunteers  
Co. Cork, 1915-1921.

Conditions, if any, Stipulated by Witness.

Nil

File No. S. 2449

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STATEMENT BY MICHAEL O'DONNELL,

Aughrim, Milford, Charleville, County Cork.

I was born at my present address in November 1884. I was educated at Dromina National School until I reached the age of 16 when I went to work in Newtownshandrum Creamery. I served my time as a buttermaker at the creamery. Having completed my apprenticeship I continued to work at Newtownshandrum until 1909 or 1910 when I went to work at Lisscarrol Creamery.

During my youth and early manhood my parents were interested in the political parties of the time. In this area these were the Redmondite and O'Brienite parties. They were about evenly divided in the district and at election times there were often ructions between the opposing sections. There was no trace of Sinn Féin at this time. When Home Rule was supposed to be on the way and Carson started the Ulster Volunteers in 1913 the Irish Volunteers were organised. However, it was, I think, 1915 before a unit of the Irish Volunteers was established in Lisscarrol. The membership was mainly confined to the Redmondite followers and we of the O'Brien party did not take part. We tried to organise a unit for our own men but there was very little support and eventually the Volunteers faded out as far as the two parties were concerned.

There was nothing much to excite interest in National affairs until the news of the Rising of Easter Week 1916 broke. Nobody in the district appeared to realise what was happening but when the executions took place the general public began to become sympathetic. The younger elements began to realise for the first time that Ireland was a nation and they began to lose confidence in their political leaders.

Early in 1917 a branch of the Gaelic League was formed in Liscarrol. This led to the organisation of other events which tended to revive the spirit of nationality, such as aerideachtanna, concerts, hurling matches. The leaders in this move were - William Ryan, N.T., Paddy O'Brien, Ned O'Brien, Tom Kelleher, Tom Canty.

During the summer of 1917 Sinn Féin was being organised throughout the country while units of the Irish Volunteers were being formed. It was not, however, until late in the year that a company of Irish Volunteers was organised at Liscarrol. The Company was organised by Jim Brislane who, at the time, was an officer in the Volunteers in Charleville where he was employed. The strength of the Company, which I joined on the first mobilisation, was about 40. Representatives of both the political parties (O'Brienites and Redmondites) were amongst the members. Jim Brislane appointed Tom Kelleher as Company Captain until such time as it would be suitable to have an election of officers. In January 1918 the first election of officers resulted as follows :-

O/C. Tom Kelleher  
 1st.Lieut. Paddy O'Brien  
 2nd.Lieut. Denis O'Connell.

When the threat of Conscription arose the strength of the Company increased to about 100 towards the early summer of 1918. We had not much arms in the Company at this time. As far as I can remember we had about six or seven shot guns and some ammunition for same. However, we collected all available shot guns from the farmers in the district and soon had about 40 with a small supply of ammunition for each.

Towards the end of March, 1918, the R.I.C. raided the home of the Company O/C. (Tom Kelleher) with the intention of arresting him. He was not at home when the R.I.C. called but as a result of the raid he had to go 'on the run'. He remained 'on the run' all through the summer and autumn but he regularly took charge of the Company's weekly parade. He was taken ill during the 'Big Flu' in the autumn of 1918 and he died on December 16th. of that year. He was buried with full military honours in the family burial ground near Drumcollogher.

I should have mentioned that following the passing of the Conscription scare the strength of the Company fell to about 40. When an election of officers was held early in 1919 it resulted as follows :-

O/C. Paddy O'Brien  
 1st.Lieut. Michael O'Regan  
 2nd.Lieut. John Fitzgibbon.

The usual training in foot-drill went on in the fields around the district. The O/C. (Paddy O'Brien) bought a Lee Enfield rifle from a soldier home on leave from the British Army, and he also managed to get a few revolvers with a little ammunition. The working of these weapons were explained to us on occasional parades but, due to the scarcity of ammunition, we could not have any target practice. However, towards the end of 1919 we obtained a .22 rifle with a supply of ammunition and this enabled us to have a few shots now and again.

Towards the end of 1919 the British raided Lisscarrol Creamery, where I was employed, enquiring for me. I then 'went on the run' and with a few others who were in a similar position I was moving

round the area for a couple of months. Amongst those who were 'on the run' were - John Regan, Mick O'Regan, Tom Culhane, Paddy Reilly, Con McCarthy and the Battalion Quartermaster - Jim Winters. It was about this time that Paddy O'Brien became Vice O/C. of the Charleville Battalion. The officers of the Company now were :-

O/C. Mick O'Regan  
 1st.Lieut. Paddy Reilly  
 2nd.Lieut. John Fitzgibbon.

In February, 1920, it was decided to ambush a military lorry on the road between Buttevant and Liscarrol. Paddy O'Brien was in charge and others present were Paddy Reilly, Mick O'Regan, John O'Regan, Tom Culhane, Con McCarthy, Mick O'Donnell (witness). There were also a number of members of the local Company. With the exception of Paddy O'Brien, who had a rifle, we were all armed with shot guns. It was arranged to trench the road about  $1\frac{1}{2}$  miles from Buttevant and we took up a position inside the roadside fence. In order to attract the enemy the men of Freemount Company were to stage an attack on the R.I.C. barracks there. The men who were to dig the trench failed to turn up and the whole affair had to be abandoned. The arrangements for the attack at Freemount had to be called off but, apparently, the I.R.A. activities had been observed as Freemount R.I.C. barracks was evacuated within a few days.

During March, 1920, an ambush on somewhat similar lines to the foregoing was planned for Milford-Charleville Road, but the enemy failed to put in an appearance.

When the attack on Kilmallock R.I.C. barracks took place at the end of May 1920 nearly every Company in the Charleville Battalion was engaged in blocking roads to ensure that the enemy forces from Buttevant, Charleville and Ballyvonare Camp could not reach Kilmallock

area. This work was so well done that the enemy parties did not reach Kilmallock until noon of the day after the attack on the barracks. With all available members of Liscarrol Company I was engaged in blocking the Liscarrol-Buttevant road. Men from Liscarrol who took part in the actual attack on Kilmallock were :- Paddy O'Brien, Paddy Reilly and Mick Regan.

Another abortive ambush was laid at Gibbonsgrove on the Newtownshandrum-Milford road about the middle of July, 1920. Men from Charleville, Dromina, Liscarrol, Newtown and Milford Companies were engaged but, although we lay in ambush for over three hours the enemy did not turn up. At this time a number of men were 'on the run' from the various Companies in the battalion. It was decided to keep them together as much as possible and with this in view it was decided to organise a battalion flying column. This would be the end of August or early September 1920. Paddy O'Brien (Battalion Vice O/C.) and Tom Coughlan (Charleville) had been called to the Brigade Column. The remainder of the men 'on the run' - Jim Brislane (Battalion O/C.), Jim Winters (Battalion Quartermaster), Patrick Russell (Churchtown), Con McCarthy, Edward McCarthy, Charley O'Connor (Charleville), Mick O'Regan (O/C.), Paddy Reilly (1st. Lieutenant), Mick O'Donnell (witness), John O'Regan, Patrick Sheedy (Liscarrol), Ned Ryan (Ballyhea), Patrick J. O'Brien and John O'Brien (Effin) - were organised as a battalion column.

Towards the end of September 1920, the Column received information that a small party of military travelled regularly on the Kanturk-Buttevant road. They were apparently conveying stores from Buttevant to the garrison at Kanturk. They usually travelled in three wagons drawn by mules. It was decided to attempt to ambush this party and the following were detailed for the job :-

Paddy Reilly, Mick O'Regan, Thomas Culhane, Mick O'Donnell (witness), Con McCarthy, Patrick Frawley, James Noonan. Jim Brislane was in charge. All, except Jim Brislane, who had a rifle, were armed with shot guns. We took up positions behind the roadside fence at Lisgriffin. This was about 9 a.m. The enemy convoy of three mule carts moved into our position about 10 a.m. and we immediately fired a volley, at the same time called on the enemy to surrender. The soldiers immediately stuck up their hands and were about to surrender when the leading mule took fright and with the other mules stampeded, taking the soldiers out of the position before we could get in another shot. The military escaped to Buttevant.

On the 30th October, 1920 (I think) the Battalion Column, together with the Newmarket Column, took up positions at Doona, Milford, with the intention of attacking a patrol from the R.I.C. barracks. We were about 300 yards from Milford barracks and remained in position for the whole day, but the patrol did not come out. Paddy O'Brien was in charge. The joint Columns retired to Tullylease just before dark.

Milford Barracks was evacuated two or three days later. When Paddy O'Brien received word from the local Company I.O. that the Barracks was being evacuated he made arrangements for the Column to assist the members of Milford Company to destroy it that night. The Column moved into Milford area and contact was made with the locals. Some of the Column were instructed to get hay or straw from a neighbouring farm. Some of the locals went into the village of Milford to get paraffin oil while the Column O/C (Paddy O'Brien) and Battalion O/C. (Jim Brislane) entered the building to inspect it. At this stage two "Tans", who had come from Drumcollogher, approached the barracks without being seen - all locals and members of Column

were busy getting the material to destroy the building. As the "Tans" reached the door of the barrack they saw Paddy O'Brien (Jim Brislane had only just left the barrack) and called on him to "stick em up", at the same time opening fire. Paddy O'Brien was wounded but managed to close the barrack door. The "Tans" captured Tim Crimmins who had gone to the village for supplies and who was returning to the barracks. They took him to the door and when Paddy O'Brien heard his voice he fired a shot. Tim Crimmins dashed away shouting that he was shot and the Tans let him go. He made contact with the Battalion O/C (Jim Brislane) who was then able to give instructions to the Column to open fire on the area near the door of the barrack. After a few minutes when firing ceased the Tans were nowhere to be seen. Paddy O'Brien, who was wounded in the face, was removed by the Battalion O/C. and the Crimmins brothers (John and Tim) for attention by the local doctor. The Column then withdrew and the barracks was not destroyed until the following Sunday.

During November and up to the week before Christmas, 1920 the Column lay in ambush on several occasions at selected positions in the area, but on no occasion did we make contact with the enemy. Just prior to Christmas the Column was disbanded and the members were free to move about until the New Year.

When the Column reassembled about mid-January we followed the lines of activity pursued before Christmas and with like results - no contact with the enemy. We lay in ambush positions nearly every day on different roads but without result. Eventually some members of the Column were detailed to go into Chwrchtown one night to endeavour to make contact with a "Tan" patrol there. As a result one Tan was shot. The members of the Column on this job were - Mick O'Regan, Paddy Sheedy, Paddy Russell, Con McCarthy, Tom Culhane, Dan O'Brien, Mick O'Brien, Jim Winters.

The enemy posts at Buttevant, Charleville and Churchtown were sniped regularly about two or three nights each week. This work was allotted to the Column in sections and it kept the enemy in a state of nerves. At this stage the garrisons in these posts were prepared to open fire on hearing the least sound. This sniping activity was kept up in the area right up to the Truce.

During the early months of 1921 the enemy began to develop a system of encircling areas in force instead of the spasmodic raids which they had been carrying out. In the changed circumstances instructions were issued to cut all lines of communication in the district by demolishing bridges, trenching roads, felling trees. This work was mainly carried out by the members of the local Companies but in many cases the Column had to <sup>provide</sup> armed guards to protect the men engaged on this work. In Lisscarrol area alone four bridges were destroyed and five trenches opened; while in the Battalion area there were about twenty bridges demolished and a like number of trenches cut.

Sometime about April 1921 a large force of military endeavoured to encircle the Lisgriffin, Lisscarrol, Freemount, Dromina and Churchtown area. The Battalion Column was in this area at the time but, owing to the co-operation of the people in the area combined with a good system of scouting, we were able to get outside the enemy ring under cover of darkness. Apparently as a result of the difficulty experienced in getting through the area during this 'round up' the enemy spent some days rounding up civilians and forcing them to fill in the trenches on the roads. However, these trenches were re-opened by the members of the local Companies during the night, so daylight found the lines of communication still cut.

When Paddy O'Brien, his brother Dan and John O'Regan (Battalion Vice O/C) were surrounded at my home on the morning of 10th May, 1921, I was staying at a neighbour's house (Fitzpatricks) I was just about

to make my way across the fields to my own house when I heard the outburst of firing. I was not aware that Paddy O'Brien or the others were at my home at the time. I waited for a few minutes and as the firing continued I decided to fire a few revolver shots in order to distract the enemy's attention. Following these shots, firing ceased and I moved away towards Freemount. Later that evening I met Paddy O'Brien at Dwane's, Ballinla, and then we returned to my home at Aughrim where we found the home broken up.

When Jim Winters (Battalion Quartermaster) was arrested in April 1921 (I think), I was appointed in his place. I was engaged on the inspection and construction of dumps, the smashing of communication lines, training the members of local Companies in the use and care of arms as well as taking my place in the Column as and when called upon between the date of my appointment as Battalion Quartermaster and the Truce.

My rank at the Truce - Quartermaster, Charleville Battalion, Cork IV. Brigade. The strength of the Battalion was about 600.

Signed:

Michael O'Donnell

(Michael O'Donnell)

Date:

25<sup>th</sup> April 1955

Witness:

P. O'Donnell

(P. O'Donnell)

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