

W.S. 1,201

ORIGINAL

BUREAU OF MILITARY HISTORY 1913-21  
BURO STAIRS MILITARY HISTORY  
No. W.S. 1201

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BUREAU OF MILITARY HISTORY, 1913-21.  
STATEMENT BY WITNESS.  
DOCUMENT NO. W.S. 1,201

Witness

John ('Dick') Conway,  
Ballintleva,  
Caherlistrane,  
Co. Galway.

Identity.

Lieut. Sylane Company, Tuam Battalion,  
Galway Brigade, 1917-1921.

Subject.

Sylane Company, Tuam Battalion,  
Galway Brigade, 1917-1921.

Conditions, if any, Stipulated by Witness.

Nil

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STATEMENT BY JOHN (Dick) CONWAY

Ballintleva, Caherlistrane, Co. Galway

I was born at Ballintleva, Caherlistrane, Co. Galway, in the month of June 1900, and attended Sylane National School in the parish of Corofin until I reached the age of 14 years. I then went to work on my father's farm at home in Ballintleva

I joined Sylane Company of the Irish Volunteers at the time of its reorganisation in the Harvest of 1917. The company captain was Bernard Kelly, now deceased. 1st Lieut. was Martin Bane, now Rev. M. Bane, U.S.A.; 2nd Lieut. was Patrick Conway, afterwards brigade quartermaster, North Galway Brigade, and now in U.S.A. Thomas Hussey was company Q.M. and Joseph O'Brien was adjutant. The company was organised by Michael Walsh, who was then a student at University College Galway. I think he was either Brigade Q.M. or Brigade Engineer at the time. He was assisted in the work of organisation by Bernard Kelly and Patrick Conway, whom I have already mentioned. The strength of the company at the outset was about 20 men and it increased later to about 50.

There was a Sinn Fein Club in the parish (Belclare) in the year 1917 also. It was organised by four elderly men. Their names are: John Costello, Killower, Belclare; Thomas Costello, ditto (brother of John); Martin Craven, Ballintleva; Thomas Grady, Belclare.

Parades of the Sylane Company were held twice a week on week nights. The parades were secret. We practised foot drill and some arms drill with the assistance of wooden 'guns'. There were no route marches that I can remember. Drilling was carried on in secret all the time between 1917 and 1920, when it ceased altogether. There is nothing worthy of mention in the year 1917 except that we took a keen interest

in the election of Eamond e Valera in Clare and the election of the few other Sinn Fein candidates in by-elections that year.

I cannot say there was very much excitement about the threat of conscription in our company. I cannot remember very much about it. I do remember, though, an incident that occurred at the end of the first World War. Colonel Bernard was a landlord at Castlehackett in our company area. It came to the notice of the Volunteers that his workmen were making preparations for a big bonfire on the summit of Castlehackett Hill to celebrate England's victory in the Great War. These men were hauling quantities of timber and bags of turf to the summit of the hill for a few days. On the night the fire was to be lighted, seven or eight of the Sylane Company, armed with shotguns, went to the top of the hill where Colonel Bernard's tenants and workmen and two members of the R.I.C. had assembled.

The fire had been just lighted when the Volunteers arrived. Lieut. Bane (now Father Bane) inquired from Mr. Jackson - Colonel Bernard's land steward - and from the two R.I.C. why the bonfire was lighted. They said it was to celebrate England's victory in the war. Lieut. Bane said that Ireland was not concerned and what when our country would be free the Volunteers would light a fire on that spot. The armed Volunteers then fired three or four shots over the heads of the bonfire party and they all ran away down the hill, including the two members of the R.I.C. We then scattered the fire and put it out and threw the lighting sods of turf after the retreating crowd. Nobody was arrested after this incident. We were expecting to be arrested and were greatly surprised that the R.I.C. took no action.

Lieut. Patrick Conway - afterwards Q.M. North Galway Brigade - and Lieut. Martin Bane were in charge of our party,

which included Volunteers Michael Newell, Thomas Hussey, Thomas Moran, Martin Reilly, Michael Higgins and myself.

I remember that shortly after the bonfire incident I spent about a fortnight or three weeks making a house-to-house canvas on behalf of Dr. Cusack, the Sinn Fein candidate in the General Election of 1918. Mr. John Costello of the Sinn Fein Club was with me on this work. I remember also helping the Sinn Fein Club to collect the Dáil Éireann Loan, which, as well as I remember, was very well supported.

In the year 1919, the company made several raids for arms. The raids were commenced about October and were completed about Christmas. Before we commenced raiding, we had three double-barreled shotguns, the property of individual Volunteers. By the time the raids were completed, we had 20 shotguns extra. They were a mixed lot of single and double-barreled guns, the most of them in good condition. Only one of those guns was handed over to us with good grace. We had to take all the others by a show of force. Colonel Bernard, whom I have already mentioned, was a local landlord. He later became a General in the British army. We got two double-barreled shotguns at his residence, both in good condition, as well as one rifle and a duck gun. The rifle was about two feet longer than the Lee-Enfield rifle and was no use to us as we never got any ammunition to fit it. The duck gun was also useless for the same reason.

Colonel Bernard was not at home at the time of the raid on his residence. We had difficulty in gaining admittance, having to fire shots through the door to make the steward open to us. We also met with opposition at Lowry's of Kilbannon. The Lowry family was very hostile. We had to search for the gun which we eventually found concealed behind one of the women of the family, an old lady of about 80 years of age. While we were searching for the gun in Lowry's, a son of

Lowry's stole off to Tuam unknown to us and informed the R.I.C. We had only just left the village when the R.I.C. arrived.

At Christmas 1919, Michael Walsh of U.C.G. Company, already mentioned, was home for the usual holidays from the College. He and the company officers planned to capture Castlehackett R.I.C. barracks during the vacation time. It was thought a good time for the job as the R.I.C. would be drinking and generally lax about Christmas time. Word was sent to Barnaderg company for the loan of their shotguns and the one or two rifles which they possessed at that time. Our company had one rifle, a Russian sporting model with plenty of ammunition for it as .303 fitted it. The Barnaderg company insisted on coming to help in the attack and use their own arms themselves. The attack was fixed for 12th night, but as somebody suggested that it was Little Christmas night and not a nice thing to have an attack on that holy night, it was fixed for the following night, the 7th January 1920.

The barrack was situated on the side of the main road between Tuam and Headford and about six miles from Tuam and the same distance roughly from Headford. The garrison consisted of five R.I.C. men and one sergeant. The attacking party consisted of from 20 to 25 officers and men drawn in about equal numbers from the Sylane and Barnaderg companies. Michael Walsh of U.C.G. Company was in charge of the whole party. As far as I can recollect, he was the only man armed with a rifle. It was the Russian sporting rifle already referred to. The remainder of the attackers were armed with shotguns.

The I.R.A. assembled for the attack at a lime-kiln at Castlehackett about 400 yards on the Tuam side of the barrack. We were at the lime-kiln about 9 p.m. The night was very cold with showers of hailstones. I remember that Volunteer

Martin Reilly of Sylane Company said he heard there were R.I.C. from the barrack (Castlehackett) on the main road. Lieut. Conway, afterwards Q.M. North Galway Brigade, and Company Q.M. Thomas Hussey, afterwards Lieut. Sylane Company, scouted the road from the lime-kiln to the village of Belclare and when they returned they reported that the road was clear.

Michael Walsh sent me to scout the road round about the barrack and when I reported back to him that all was clear we took up positions. That would be some time after 10 p.m.

The majority of the attacking party took up positions along the wall of the main road facing the barrack at a range of 20 yards. I remember that Volunteers Martin Reilly and Patrick Fleming were beside me. About four men went to the gable on the Belclare or Tuam side of the building and started boring a hole for a charge of gelignite with which it was hoped to make a breach in the gable. They were protected at this work by three or four men as there was a small window directly over the heads of the party preparing the laying of the gelignite. The men protecting the party at the gable included Michael Walsh, University College, Galway Company, Bernard Kelly, captain Sylane Company, Thomas Hussey, Q.M., Sylane Company, and, I think, Volunteer John Reilly, Sylane Company. I think the party at the gable was in position before we were in position at the front. There were some shots fired by the men at the gable at one of the garrison who came to the gable window and opened it. All the attacking party then opened fire; we at the front of the building directing our fire at the windows facing us and at the door. The return fire from the garrison was fairly light.

The attack lasted about five hours. We thought the R.I.C. would surrender. They were called upon several times to do so. We were hoping that we could blow in the entrance door at the front with home-manufactured hand grenades. Lieutenant

Patrick Conway, Sylane Company - afterwards Brigade Q.M. North Galway Brigade - threw four or five of these grenades at the front door in an endeavour to burst it in, but, apart from blowing a small hole in the door, the effort was not effective. I remember I was sent by Lieut. Conway twice during the attack to scout the road in the vicinity of the barrack on the Headford side in case of reinforcements to the garrison from that direction. There was no road block on that side, nor on the Tuam side either.

At about 4 a.m. we noticed that there was rifle fire in our direction from the rear of the barrack. The fire was at first very high, the bullets coming through the trees over our heads. We could not understand it. After a little while, the fire became more accurate, the bullets hitting the coping stones on the wall of the road where the attacking party facing the building was in position. I cannot remember what action was taken to investigate or counteract the rifle fire from the rear of the barrack. We knew it did not come from our own men. We learned afterwards that it came from two members of the garrison who had been out on duty on the Headford side guarding a broken-down R.I.C. car, about two miles from the barrack. It seems that when they became aware of the attack they worked their way through the fields to the rear of the barracks. I heard that they were blamed by their own authorities for their delay in taking action.

Our withdrawal from the attack was unhurried. There were some discussions between the officers before the withdrawal. I think it was decided that as the gelignite did not make a breach, and as the hand grenades failed to burst open the door, there would be no point in prolonging the attack. I must say here that the charge of gelignite split the gable from top to bottom without making a breach.

The following is a list of the officers and men who took part in the attack, as far as I can remember:- Sylane Company - Captain Bernard Kelly (deceased); Lieut. Patrick Conway, afterwards Brigade Q.M. North Galway Brigade; Michael Walsh, U.C.G. Company, and, I think, then Brigade Q.M. Galway Brigade.

I am rather inclined to think that he was then Brigade Q.M. and not Brigade Engineer. What makes me think so is that if he had been Brigade Engineer he would have taken charge of the mining of the gable at the attack. In any event, he was then a brigade officer. To continue the list - Thomas Hussey, Company Q.M., afterwards Lieut. Sylane Company; Lieut. Martin Bane, now Rev. Fr. Bane, U.S.A.; Volunteers Michael Leppard,

*J.C.* Michael Garvey, John and Martin Reilly, Patrick Fleming, and *Michael Higgins* myself, then a Volunteer - afterwards 1st Lieut. Sylane Company.

Barnaderg Company:- Michael Moran, O/C. Tuam Battalion, afterwards killed by the Black and Tans while a prisoner; Thomas Dunleavy, afterwards O/C. Tuam Battalion; Timothy Dunleavy company captain; Michael Joseph Ryan, afterwards Brigade Engineer, North Galway Brigade, and Volunteers James Courtney, Peter Burke, Michael Farrell, Timothy Moran, ... Cunningham and Patrick Geoghegan.

One of the garrison was wounded. He was the man who opened the window and at whom the first shots were fired. I heard afterwards that he was the sergeant. None of the I.R.A. was wounded. Thomas Hussey, who was one of the party protecting the mining party at the gable, and Michael Joseph Ryan, who was in charge of the mining party, will, I am sure, give a detailed account about this end of the attack.

The next incident of any importance in this area was the attack on Castlegrove R.I.C. barrack which took place in the Spring of 1920, about the end of March, I would say. I first heard of the proposed attack three or four days before it occurred, from Company Captain Bernard Kelly. The barrack



was situated on the main Tuam/Ballinrobe road about six miles from the town of Tuam. It was a long two-storey building with a great many windows at the front facing the main road. Men from five companies took part in the attack, viz: Sylane, Tuam, Barnaderg, Caherlistrane and Cortoon. The number of men from my company (Sylane) engaged was about 30, of whom about half, armed with shotguns, took part in the attack proper. The other half company was engaged in scouting and blocking the Tuam/Ballinrobe road by felling trees both on the Tuam and Ballinrobe side of the barrack. Three of my company were engaged in mining the gable on the Ballinrobe side, as far as I can remember. They were Lieutenant Martin Bane, Volunteer Patrick Walsh and Volunteer John Reilly, with Lieut. Bane in charge.

Lieut. Bane had learned something about explosives from Michael Joseph Ryan of Barnaderg Company, afterwards Brigade engineer, North Galway Brigade, and from Michael Walsh, U.C.G. Company. I think that Michael Joseph Ryan was in full charge of the mining of both gables in this attack.

About 12 of my company (Sylane) took up positions behind the wall of the main road facing the barrack at a range of about 25 yards. I was one of that number. I remember that Captain Bernard Kelly (now deceased) was beside me and that we were at the flank on the Ballinrobe side. Volunteer Daniel O'Shea (now in U.S.A.) was also beside me. The Barnaderg Company was stationed at the Tuam end. I cannot remember whether two mines exploded or only one, but when the explosion or explosions occurred, all at the front opened fire, directing our fire at the windows in front of us and at the doors. Fire from the barrack opened immediately and it was very heavy. Verey lights went up immediately also. They followed one another in quick succession for a long time.

The R.I.C. must have been firing high, because I remember

well that we were able to keep our heads up at least in the position at the Ballinrobe side. The attack lasted at least two hours, before I heard any talk of withdrawal. Michael Moran, O/C. Tuam Battalion, was in charge of the attack with Lieut. Conway of Sylane Company and James Moloney of Tuam Company - afterwards O/C. Dunmore Battalion - North Galway Brigade, as his principal assistants. I remember that our company got orders to keep on firing at the building while the rest of the attackers were being withdrawn. I think this order came from James Moloney. Our company remained firing at the barracks for 20 minutes or so and then withdrew without sustaining any casualty.

I remember that the night was very bright and I was able to see a home-made hand grenade on the ground as I was passing the gate on our withdrawal. I picked it up and brought it with me. I cannot remember any grenade of any kind being used in the attack. There was no casualty amongst the garrison as far as I know and the I.R.A. had no casualty

Castlehackett R.I.C. barrack was evacuated the day after it was attacked and it was destroyed by Sylane Company on Easter Saturday night, 1920. It was burned with the help of paraffin oil and straw. As far as I can now remember, Castlegrove R.I.C. barrack was also evacuated the day following the attack on it and it was destroyed by Sylane Company shortly after.

I remember that in June 1920, I acted as guard over a prisoner named Martin Connolly (nicknamed "Oighre"). He was a native of Milltown, Co. Galway, and was brought to Sylane Company area by James Moloney and Alfie O'Dea, a Justice of the Republican Courts. He was kept a prisoner in Sylane Company area for four or five days awaiting courtmartial by battalion officers. I cannot remember what

he was accused of. He escaped and made his way to the R.I.C. barrack in Tuam. As a result of his escape, four members of our company were arrested and charged with unlawful assembly and unlawful arrest. They were sentenced to four months imprisonment. They were:- Thomas Hussey, Company Q.M.; his brother, Volunteer Henry Hussey; Volunteers Michael Higgins and Martin Conneely.

About the middle of June 1920, an ambush was prepared by my company for a party of R.I.C. that travelled from Headford to Tuam to attend the English Court or Petty Sessions in the town of Tuam. They were seen passing the first day of the Court sitting. That night, there was a meeting of the company officers and the question of the R.I.C. party was discussed. It was decided to attack them the next day. Seven or eight Volunteers, who were chosen for the attack were just late to attack them, as the R.I.C. had just passed on their bicycles before the I.R.A. had taken up positions. The same Volunteers again waited the next day until about dinner hour, but the R.I.C. did not come the way. Lieutenant Bane was in charge. on both days.

On the first Monday in August 1920, 60 men drawn from Sylane, Corofin and Caherlistrane Companies, with Michael Walsh, U.C.G. Company in charge, took up ambush positions just inside the fence on the Tuam/Athenry road, about one mile from Annagh, to attack a lorry load of British military. The British party was in the habit of travelling every Monday morning from Annagh to Ballyglunin Post Office to draw money to pay the men stationed at Annagh. At least 50 men were stationed there. They were cavalry, but I do not remember what regiment they belonged to. We remained in position from 8 a.m. to about 4 p.m., but the British party did not turn up. It had been forgotten that it was a Bank Holiday and that the Post Office was closed. One unarmed British soldier from

Annagh came into our position and we took him prisoner. He was held prisoner until we withdrew, when we took his tunic and cap and released him. We had to hold a large number of people who were coming from the fair of Turloughmore until we withdrew from the position.

Immediately after our withdrawal from the position near Annagh, my company (Sylane) returned to our own area via Belclare, and stopped at Canavan's publichouse for refreshments. We were scattered about in front of Canavan's when a lorry of British military came from the direction of Headford. It was an open lorry and it contained about eight or nine soldiers. When the British party spotted us, they put on speed and passed by us before we could get a shot at them. We had not been expecting them and our guns were not loaded.

A little while before the prepared ambush at Annagh, I remember I got word from Lieut. Bane to attack two R.I.C. men who, it was expected, would accompany General Thomas Luane to the Assizes in Galway. General Luane was a British Magistrate or had some connection officially with the British Courts. I took six or seven men from my company and we took up positions on the side of the main Ballinrobe/Tuam road about two miles from Tuam at a place called Kilbannon. We had a tree ready to block the road, but the car we expected with Luane and his escort of two R.I.C. did not turn up. We were in position from 9 a.m. to noon. Earlier in the morning we had warned two water bailiffs not to attend the Assizes in Galway. They gave us an assurance that they would not attend and we verified later that they kept their word. That was the same day that a party of R.I.C. returning from Galway Assizes were attacked at Gallagher on their way home to Dunmore and two of them were killed.

Very early in 1921, in January I would say, I took part in an attack on two members of the R.I.C. in the village of

Kilconly. General Luane had a guard of R.I.C. and some of them went regularly every evening to Blake's publichouse in Kilconly for refreshments. Battalion O/C. Thomas Dunleavy happened to be in Sylane Company area at this time staying with Company Captain Bernard Kelly. They chatted about the habit of the R.I.C. party going to Blake's and decided to attack them. Lieut. Bane sent word to me to collect the four rifles dumped in Sylane Wood and to take them to the house of Peter Brennan close to Kilconly.

We met the Battalion O/C., the Battalion Adjutant, Sean O'Neill, Captain Kelly and Lieut. Bane at Brennan's. We also met Thomas Hussey, Company Q.M., and Volunteers Cregg, Cunningham and Lally from Kilconly area. When the party arrived at Kilconly, Volunteer Cregg was sent into Blake's to find out if the R.I.C. were there. He returned with the information that two members of the R.I.C. were inside. We took up positions inside the wall of the road 50 yards from Blake's. We were there about an hour when the two R.I.C. left the publichouse and walked in our direction. It was a very dark night and I remember hearing the swish of the raincoats of the R.I.C. as they walked towards us. I remember that Thomas Hussey shone a flash lamp on the two R.I.C. They were ordered to halt and raise their hands. I think they had no rifles. Battn. O/C. Thomas Dunleavy gave the order to fire and all fired together. It was a good volley. After having fired a few shots more we were ordered to withdraw by the Battalion O/C. We thought that the two R.I.C. were dead, but we learned later that only one of them was wounded, the other escaping unhurt.

The Battalion O/C. then gave orders to protect the houses of men who might be suspected by the R.I.C. of having taken part in the attack. A party under the command of Lieut. Bane remained four nights in succession protecting the homes of

Lieut. Bane himself, Thomas Hussey, Michael Higgins and Mark Canney. No attempt was made to burn any of the houses. The Sinn Fein Hall at Sylane had been burned a short time before.

In May 1921, the R.I.C. barrack in Headford was attacked. I received orders from Vincent Corcoran, Battalion Vice Comdt. Headford Battalion, to block the road between Tuam and Headford at Castlehackett on the main road and at Sylane on the Tuam/Weir road to Headford. I was then Lieutenant of Sylane Company and I carried out the order with six men of my own company. We blocked the roads by felling trees. That was the last operation I remember before the Truce of July 1921.

About a month before the Truce we made a collection of money for arms.

There were about eight republican police in the Sylane Company area, under the command of a sergeant named Patrick McHugh. They did duty in connection with licensed premises, lights on carts and bicycles, and did jobs in implementing the decisions of the Republican Courts of which I remember that Mr. Alfie O'Dea, brother of Louis O'Dea, was a Justice.

There was no R.I.C. man in the area, as far as I am aware, who was sympathetic or who helped us by giving information, or in any other manner. I remember, however, being at Mass at Caherlistrane one Sunday about a month before the Truce. The church was surrounded by British military and R.I.C. and the young men were separated from the elderly men for identification. I passed by an R.I.C. man who was then stationed in Headford. He knew me well as he had been stationed at Castlehackett before its evacuation, but he did not pretend to notice me and I escaped being made prisoner.

I remember now also that there was a collection for arms in the Summer of 1920 in which I took part. We got one pound in every house and we handed the total amount collected to the battalion officers.

The local people in the area were all very generous in the matter of collections and, as regards giving food and shelter to Volunteers on the run.

Signed: John "Dick" Conway  
(John 'Dick' Conway)  
Date: 28 June, 1955.

Witness: C. Moynihan.  
(C. Moynihan)

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