

ORIGINAL

BUREAU OF MILITARY HISTORY 1913-21
BURO STAIRÉ MILÉ TA 1913-21
No. W.S. 1,315

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BUREAU OF MILITARY HISTORY, 1913-21.
STATEMENT BY WITNESS.

DOCUMENT NO. W.S. 1,315

Witness

Henry O'Keeffe,
Ballymacarbery,
Co. Waterford.

Identity.

Captain, Ballymacarbery Company
Irish Volunteers, West Waterford
Brigade, 1917-1923.

Subject.

Ballymacarbery Company Irish Volunteers,
Co. Waterford, 1917-1923.

Conditions, if any, Stipulated by Witness.

Nil

File No. S.2634

Form B.S.M. 2

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STATEMENT BY HENRY O'KEEFFE,
Ballymacarbery, County Waterford.

I was born in Ballymacarbery in the year 1898. My people were small farmers. I was educated at the local National School and was a member of the local hurling and football clubs.

My first connection with the National Movement for Independence was when I joined the Ballymacarbery Company of Irish Volunteers sometime early in the year 1917.

There were about thirty of us in it for a start. Our Company Captain was a man named Michael O'Ryan, now deceased. Paddy Ryan of Curtiswood, Ballymacarbery, was Lieutenant and Tom Whelan the Adjutant

As far as guns were concerned, I think we had about a dozen shot guns at the time. These belonged to farmers whose sons were Volunteers. The farm labourers in the Company could also get a few shot guns from the men for whom they worked. The farmers' sons were, in nearly every case, sons of small farmers in the district.

We drilled in the fields and, although there was a police barracks in Ballymacarbery with an R.I.C. Sergeant and three Constables, they did not interfere with us, at least not at that time - 1917.

Our first bit of defiance occurred at Easter, 1917, when we placed the Tricolour on tops of trees, chimneys of houses, and telegraph poles to celebrate the anniversary of the 1916 Rising. The police took steps to remove the flags. This they did, with great difficulty, in many cases.

During the year 1918, the Company was mostly concerned with drilling and general training. A few recruits came along and the number of shotguns we had increased to about eighteen.

Most of the lads, including myself, were members of the local Sinn Féin Cumann and, when the General Election of 1918 was coming off, we put in a lot of hard work canvassing and stewarding election meetings on behalf of the Sinn Féin candidate in our area.

An incident occurred in connection with that election which might be worth recording, as it was the first time that any of our lads came to grips with the police in this district.

A Sinn Féin election poster was put up on the Chapel gate at Fourmilewater by Paddy Ryan, the Lieutenant in our Company. After Mass on Sunday, the Sergeant of the police and a Constable went to take down the poster. Four Volunteers were waiting nearby to see what would happen. As the R.I.C. Sergeant went to remove the poster, Paddy Ryan and Michael O'Ryan our Company Captain, seized the Sergeant and hustled him away. The Constable tried then but he, too, was gripped and thrown back. After some more scuffling the police gave up the attempt and returned to their barracks.

As our men were well known to the R.I.C. two of them, Michael O'Ryan and Paddy Ryan, had to 'go on the run' to escape arrest.

Some months afterwards raiding for these men started. A Volunteer was arrested from the locality and tried for the offence of interfering with the police. He was released on 'recognising' the Court.

At the General Election of December, 1918, we did stewarding work at the polling booths and escorted the ballot boxes to the place where the count was taking place. This was all done openly in defiance of the R.I.C. who were present, but they did not interfere with us. We did all these jobs unarmed.

In the early months of 1919, we commenced raiding houses for arms, as we heard that the police would be out collecting them and we wanted to get there first. We had no trouble in most cases. The guns (shotguns) were handed up alright. There were, however, several people who we knew were not on our side; these we called on at night. We were wearing a disguise and carrying arms. About a half a dozen of us, usually, took part in these armed raids.

We got the guns in every case without any opposition.

The year 1919 was mostly taken up with this raiding for arms, drilling and training work.

In 1920, things began to liven up a bit. We commenced raiding the mails for letters which might give some information of enemy movements and we began to trench roads and break down the telephone wires to hinder the enemy's movements about the country.

Ballymacarbery R.I.C. Barracks was evacuated about the middle of 1920. We burned it down to prevent the enemy occupying it again.

Lord Ashtown's mansion at Glenahiery, about a mile north of Ballymacarbery, was also burned by us, as we learned that the military were going to use it as a barracks.

When the Sinn Féin Courts were started in Ballymacarbery and Touraneena, some of our Company acted as armed guards while the Courts were sitting; others acted as scouts on high ground overlooking the

roads leading to these villages to give warning of any enemy approaching. In no instance were the Courts surprised by any British troops or police.

It was in the autumn of 1920 that I was appointed Captain of the Ballymacarbery Company instead of Michael O'Ryan. At that time a separate Company was formed in the Nire Valley which adjoins the district of Ballymacarbery. Jim Power was made Captain of the Nire Company. Previous to this the Nire men were in our Company, but because of the distance (in some cases five or six miles) between us, the Brigade O/C., Pax Whelan of Dungarvan, decided to split the Nire and Ballymacarbery Companies.

My first action against the enemy took place at Kilmanahan about five miles north of Ballymacarbery.

Attack on Kilmanahan R.I.C. barracks.

I cannot place the date of this attack. I think it was early 1921 but I am not sure of this at all.

Jack Morrissey of the Kilbrien Company was in charge that night..

I remember that about six or eight of us left Ballymacarbery on the night of the attack. We met up with about a dozen of the Kilbrien men before we reached Kilmanahan. I was armed with a shotgun. I think most of our men were armed with the same.

When we all met outside Kilmanahan, Paddy Ryan, our Lieutenant, and another man were sent off to cut the telegraph wires leading to Clonmel. They came back to us when that was done and Jack Morrissey then put us in positions surrounding the barracks. I was put behind a wall about twenty-five yards from the rere of the barracks.

The building we were to attack was a very strongly built house. The garrison was, I think, a Sergeant and five Constables and they had the upper and lower windows covered with steel shutters with loop-holes for firing. The windows at the rear of the building were fixed much the same.

We opened the attack at a signal from Jack Morrissey at about 10 p.m. The night was dark, but fine. The moment we 'opened up' the police shot up very lights for help. They commenced heavy rifle fire through the loopholes of the windows and got a machine gun going. Grenades were also flung out by the police.

We kept on cracking away at the flashes/^{coming}from the barrack windows and continued to do this for about half an hour.

By this time it must have been clear to Jack Morrissey that we had neither sufficient guns or the ammunition to keep up the attack, or to cause the enemy to evacuate the place. As well as that, we were only about six miles from Clonmel where a large military garrison was always stationed. These must have seen the very lights go up from Kilmanahan barracks and they would soon be out in large numbers to find out what was going on. We would be in no position at all to 'take on' a large force of military now, as our ammunition was practically all gone. In the circumstances, Jack Morrissey gave the order to 'pull out', which we did without encountering any British forces. I returned safely to my district with the other Ballymacarbery men.

We did not suffer any casualties in this engagement. I do not remember if the police had anybody killed or wounded.

Early in the year, 1921, a peculiar situation developed in the Ballymacarbery area which gave us a lot of trouble. About this time, a gang of twelve men or so began raiding houses at night robbing people of goods and money in the name of the I.R.A. Complaints were coming in from people who had been robbed and the thing became so serious that we had to devote a great deal of our time to dealing with the matter.

Armed Volunteers patrols watched from farmhouses which had been 'threatened' by these raiders who, in addition to robbing, burned hundreds of tons of hay belonging to farmers in the locality. These robbers went so far as to challenge the I.R.A. to come out and meet them. They were all armed.

Night after night we were out on armed patrol. We had a good idea who the raiders were but we were anxious to catch them red-handed.

After about two months during which we tried to trap the raiders, we did succeed in getting hold of one of them. Threats were made by us as to what would happen if he did not tell who the culprits were. Eventually, this man told all he knew with the result that the gang were rounded up. They were courtmartialled and heavily fined, after which robbery activities ceased.

Whilst we were engaged dealing with these fellows and for months before that (late 1920) we were in contact many times with Flying Columns from Tipperary and West Waterford who came in to the Nire Valley for rest and training.

The Nire Valley is so called from the River Nire which flows through it. The valley is in the northern end of the Comeragh mountains in North East Waterford and extends from Ballymacarbery at it's head, right into the mountains for about ten miles. This was an ideal resting place for the Flying Columns. It was easy to spot any enemy approaching and it was easy for the Columns to slip across the mountains should the British venture up the valley.

As I have said, it was used very often by the Tipperary men - Treacy's Column and Hogan's Column - and it was our job to see after these lads when they came into the Nire Valley out of enemy reach.

Many a time word came to us by scouts of the approach of one or other of these Columns, or the West Waterford Column under George Lennon of Dungarvan. Word might come by day or by night.

My job would then be to mobilise the Company (armed) and proceed westwards to contact the Tipperary men, or south to meet the West Waterford men. We would then lead the Column safely by mountain paths down into the Nire Valley, where billeting arrangements would be made for them when the first news of their coming would reach us.

When a Column was in the Nire Valley we mounted armed guard by day and by night. Scouts were posted on the mountain to signal the approach of any British troops.

The fact that the Nire Valley was such a safe resting place for many of our lads, hard-pressed in other areas, was responsible for the lack of any major action against the British in the Nire Ballymacarbery area. It was considered essential that the area

should be as quiet as possible, so as not to draw the British out to our district and so ruin any chances our lads had of having a safe hide-out.

As regards this matter of the importance of the Nire Valley as a safe retreat, I would like to mention the fact that, when District Inspector Potter of the R.I.C. was taken prisoner by a Tipperary Column in March, 1921, the Tipperary men immediately headed for the Nire Valley with their prisoner.

On that occasion, word reached me by scouts from the Newcastle Company (to the west of us) that a Tipperary Column, under Dinny Lacey, was approaching from the north-west across the mountains. I got my men out to positions to receive them and then I went to a place called Croughclooney, about four miles across the mountains into Tipperary where I contacted Lacey and his men. I went into the house where Potter was held prisoner. Lacey told me he was making for the Nire Valley the next day and I informed him that we were ready to take him in and had sent word on to the Nire men to be prepared.

That night I was on armed guard with some others outside the house where District Inspector Potter was held.

Next day I guided the Column eastwards across the mountains to Ballymacarbery when, with others of my Company, we passed the Column and Potter over to the Nire men. They took the party well up into the valley and had billeting arrangements ready for them.

Shortly after this I heard that D.I. Potter was executed by our lads. In connection with the shooting of Potter I would like to state that, when the Tipperary Column, one of them told me that Potter was blamed for leading British Auxiliaries to a house in Tipperary where two men were murdered. I do not know, of course, whether this was really the reason why the District Inspector was shot by our lads;

I merely wish to relate what the Column man said to me that night in Croughclooney.

Most of the period in the months before the Truce of July, 1921 was taken up looking after the safe conduct of visiting Flying Columns. Despatch work and scouting took up a lot of our time but we did manage to do a great deal of trenching of roads and cutting of telegraph and telephone wires so as to isolate the Nire Valley district as much as possible.

It was, I think, in May, 1921, we collected a levy placed on farmers by the Brigade O/C. This money, which amounted to about £300, was passed on to the Brigade towards the purchase of arms and equipment.

I was in my Company area when the Truce came in July, 1921.

Shortly after the Truce, the 7th Battalion, West Waterford Brigade, was formed with Jack Morrissey of Kilbrien as Commandant. Previous to this we were in the 1st Battalion area. The new Battalion covered the districts Kilbrien, Knockboy, Touraneena, Beary's Cross, Ballymacarbery and The Nire - all in the mountainous country in North West Waterford. Battalion Headquarters was set up at Knockboy under Jack Morrissey and an officers' training course started. I was put in charge of a class on signalling.

When the Civil War broke out I took the Republican side and joined a Column under Jack O'Mara of Knockboy. I remained mostly in my own area helping the Tipperary Columns and was there when the Cease Fire Order came in June, 1923.

Signed: Henry O'Keeffe

Date: 14th December 1955

(Henry O'Keeffe)

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Witness: T. O'Gorman

(T. O'Gorman)

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