

1463

DUPLICATE

BUREAU OF MILITARY HISTORY 1913-21
BURO STAIRA MILITARIA 1913-21
NO. W.S. 1463

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BUREAU OF MILITARY HISTORY, 1913-21.
STATEMENT BY WITNESS.
DOCUMENT NO. W.S. 1463.

Witness
Martin Grace,
Carrigatogher,
Nenagh,
Co. Tipperary.

Identity.

Battalion Quartermaster, 3rd Battalion,
No. 1 Tipperary Brigade.

Subject.

Activities of Ballywilliam Company, 3rd Battalion,
No. 1 Tipperary Brigade, Irish Volunteers,
1918-1921.

Conditions, if any, Stipulated by Witness.

Nil.

File No S.2787.

DUPLICATE

BUREAU OF MILITARY HISTORY 1913-21
BURO STAIRE MILEATA 1913-21
NO. W.S. 1,463

STATEMENT BY MARTIN GRACE,
Carrigatogher, Nenagh, formerly
Quartermaster, 3rd Battalion,
No. 1. Tipperary Brigade.

I was born in Carrigatogher on 12th July, 1891, on the farm where I now reside with my wife. I went to the local national school and afterwards to the Nenagh Christian Brothers until I was fourteen or fifteen years of age and then stayed at home to help on the farm.

I joined the Irish Volunteers on the night of their formation in Nenagh early in 1914 or perhaps at the end of 1913. The enrolment took place in the old jail in Pound Street on the site on which the present Christian Brothers School now stands. Frank McGrath was in charge of all the arrangements that night and I was the eight member entered on the roll.

In the months that followed a few hundred men joined the ranks, not alone from Nenagh town but from within a radius of four miles of it. My memory of the events between 1914 and 1916 is very hazy but I'm fairly certain that the vast majority of the Nenagh Volunteers followed Redmond at the "split" in the autumn of 1914 and that at the time of the Rising in 1916 there were not more than thirty men in the Nenagh Company under the captaincy of Frank McGrath. He was then one of the outstanding figures in G.A.A. circles in Tipperary and played as full back for the county and also for the local club - the "De Wets" - so called after the great Boer General. I have an idea that, a short time prior to the outbreak of the Insurrection in 1916, McGrath was injured in a match and that he was in hospital before and after Easter Week. This may account for the fact that at no time, previous to the Rising or while it was in progress, was there a mobilisation of the Nenagh Company of which I was then still a member.

After the Rising the Irish Volunteer Movement fell away in the Nenagh area and I cannot recall having had any association with the Republican Movement again until around June or July, 1917 when the Nenagh Company was revived on the initiative of Frank McGrath. Most, if not all, of the men who were in the Company up to Easter Week, 1916 rejoined and, due probably to the results of the executions of the Volunteer leaders after the Rising more than anything else, a lot of new recruits came into the ranks. In a few months it became necessary to break up the Nenagh Company into a number of Companies. Besides, the men from the country districts preferred to have separate units of their own. Some of them had to travel up to five miles to attend parades and mobilisations in the town. An Irish Volunteer Company was formed in Ballywilliam about September or October, 1917 and, about the same time, a Sinn Fein Club was started there. The Sinn Fein Club held its meetings in the Ballywilliam Creamery, a co-operative undertaking, and most of the shareholders became members of the Club. The chairman was Father Fallon. Very few of the Volunteers were connected with the Sinn Fein club.

The Ballywilliam Company started off with a membership of around twenty men and this gradually increased until it reached eighty in the following spring. The first officers of this unit were :-

Captain - William Gleeson, Carrigatogher,
 1st. Lieutenant - Patrick McDonnell, Carrigatogher,
 2nd Lieutenant - Patrick Hogan, Gortmore,
 Quartermaster - myself.

We were drilled from the outset by our own officers, all of whom had formerly been in the Nenagh Company, and there were usually two parades each week. One parade always took place on Sunday when there was generally a route march and the other parade was on a Wednesday or Thursday night. There were no arrests made in connection with public drilling in the district at any time during 1917.

The Conscription menace may have accounted for the big increase in the membership of the Company which, as I have already said, jumped from twenty to eighty by the spring of 1918. In accordance with orders from headquarters in Dublin every Volunteer had to provide himself with a gun or a pike for use in the event of an attempt being made to enforce Conscription. About twelve or fifteen men had shotguns in their homes and these weapons were at their disposal at any time. The pike heads were made from blades of sheep shears, each shears providing two heads. The leg of the shears was fastened to a wooden shaft. Ironically enough, these shafts, which were in plentiful supply, had been provided by His Majesty's Forces who, a few years before, had manoeuvres in the area. Sappers had used them as poles for the purpose of carrying temporary telegraph wires but overnight the poles had all disappeared. They were ideal for handles for different farm implements and the local farmers were quick to avail of the opportunity to get something for nothing at the expense of the British Government.

With the renewal of the Conscription threat there was no decline in the strength of the Volunteer membership in the Ballywilliam district, nor, for that matter, in any of the Companies in the neighbouring parishes, Fortroe, Pallina and Bushfield. Our Company and the others which I have just named were formed into a battalion about February or March 1918, which became known as 3rd Battalion, No. 1 Tipperary Brigade. The first Commandant was William Gleeson. I think the Vice-Commandant was Paddy McDonnell who, within a year, had replaced William Gleeson. Other officers on the battalion staff were Michael Vaughan (Wedger), Michael Kennedy (The Rajah) and Jim (Sunny) Hogan, but, beyond stating that I believe Vaughan was the first Adjutant and that he was replaced by Hogan and that Kennedy succeeded McDonnell as Vice Commandant, I cannot give more details.

As far as I can recollect I was appointed Quartermaster about September or October, 1920. I am not able to remember the names of the officers of the Companies due to the lapse of time and also because there were a lot of changes from time to time owing to arrests and internments.

Apart from drilling, our battalion was not involved in any kind of activity during 1918 or 1919. The area was quiet until the end of the latter year when a number of the big houses owned by loyalists were raided for arms. Most of these raids were under the control of Paddy McDonnell and the only one in which I participated was at Pat Bondfield's, Shallee, Silvermines, where we got a shotgun and a revolver. This raid occurred at night and we were armed with shotguns. Bondfield was held up as he opened the door to let us in and there was no resistance. There were about a dozen men in the raiding party, all from the Ballywilliam area.

The first armed attack in which I took part on British Forces, and for that matter in which any of the men of the 3rd Battalion participated, was at Borrisokane on 26th June, 1920, when an attempt was made by the North Tipperary Brigade to capture the police barracks. A party of twelve men under Paddy McDonnell left Ballywilliam for this engagement. They were, Jim (Sunny) Moran, James Grace, John Kelly, Pat Moran, James and Tom Burke, William Ryan, John Bondfield, Denis O'Brien, Jim McDonnell and myself. A cart containing a shotgun for each man left Ballywilliam earlier in the evening for Conger Cross outside Borrisokane. We left later on bikes and travelled through Ballycommon, Knight Cross and Lahorna to reach Bohermore, where, in a quarry, we joined up with the men from the other Battalions. This quarry was nearly a mile from Borrisokane. Frank McBrath was in charge of the whole force. He divided the men into sections into one of which were put ten of the men from the 3rd Battalion and three riflemen from the Moneygall area. John Bondfield and Denis O'Brien were the only

men who came with me to be put into another section whose part in the attack was to bring petrol in bottles from the quarry to a house next door to the police barracks.

Our section was under the control of Liam Hoolan, a member of the Brigade staff. We were guided into Borrisokane by a few local Volunteers and got in by the rear of two adjoining houses, one a jeweller's shop and the other a saddler's place in which we occupied positions at the upstairs windows. These two houses were on the main street almost opposite the barracks. About twenty-five yards to our left another section occupied the front or school portion of the Convent.

The attack on the barracks started after midnight. From our positions we fired odd shots at the windows and portholes of that building. Our firing must have been fairly effective because through the three windows in the house where I was placed only one police bullet entered. In all I fired only about a half a dozen shots and I would say that every man in our section fired roughly the same number.

While we were firing at the barracks the main assault on it was taking place from a house adjoining it from the roof of which a hole had been broken on the barrack roof through which petrol and bombs were being thrown. A lot of smoke was coming from the inside of the barracks but I saw no sign of flames at any time.

At about 5 a.m. the police were showing no sign of surrendering and we got orders to retire. We left the village led by Hoolan, along the same route by which we had entered it, to where we had left our bikes. All the 3rd Battalion contingent were now together and we set off for home going through Puckan and Ballycommon back to Rallywilliam.

A party of about six men under Paddy McDonnell entered Portree on 3rd November, 1920, and fired at the R.I.C. barracks there, wounding Constable Sullivan near the door of the building.

On 26th January, 1921, a party of about fifteen or sixteen men, armed with five or six rifles and the rest with shotguns, occupied positions at The Quarries two miles from Portree. The party was all drawn from the 3rd Battalion and was under the command of the Battalion O/C. We were waiting for a patrol which was expected to come out from Portree Station, and we stayed in the position all day until nightfall, but the police did not come along. We then moved into the village of Portree. The riflemen started sniping the R.I.C. barracks, firing shots at intervals. Each man discharged about ten rounds. The police made no attempt to come out. I was with a group of five men equipped with shotguns and we were placed in a laneway beside Frawley's house in the village. About half past nine an R.I.C. Sergeant named O'Connor came walking past us from one of the "pubs". He was fired at and wounded. My brother, Jim, who was also with us was accidentally wounded by one of our own men.

There was considerable shooting from the R.I.C. barracks from the time the sniping started and a lot of very lights were also sent up. These lights attracted reinforcements from Killaloe and Nenagh but, after the wounding of Sergeant O'Connor, our party withdrew and we had gone before the arrival of the reinforcements.

From that occasion until the Truce, Portree R.I.C. barracks was fired at so often that I cannot give the details. The I.R.A. sniping parties varied in strength from three to six men and always used rifles. These rifles mostly came to us from the Mid-Iimerick Brigade or from Limerick City. The sniping occurred at all hours throughout the night and sometimes by day and was mostly carried out at ranges varying from one hundred to two hundred yards.

National Archives Act, 1986, Regulations, 1988

ABSTRACTION OF PART(S) PURSUANT TO REGULATION 8

Form to be completed and inserted in the original record

in place of each part abstracted

- (i) Reference number of the separate cover under which the abstracted part has been filed: WS1463/A
- (ii) How many documents have been abstracted: 1p
- (iii) The date of each such document: 17 July 1956
- (iv) The description of each document:
WS1463 witness statement Martin Grace p. 7
Name of person

(Where appropriate, a composite description may be entered in respect of two or more related documents).

- (v) Reason(s) why the part has been abstracted for retention:
(c) Would or might cause distress or danger to living persons on the ground that they contain information about individuals, or would or might be likely to lead to an action for damages for defamation.

(These will be the reasons given on the certificate under Section 8(4).)

J. Moloney
Name: (J. Moloney.)

Grade: Col.

Department/Office/Court:

Date: 7 March 2003.

The principal idea behind these sniping activities was to harass the police and keep the garrisons in the big enemy centres like Nenagh and Killaloe occupied in coming to the relief of Portree.

About the middle of February, 1921, an R.J.C. man named Carroll, a native of Ballywilliam, Nenagh, came to the latter town on a convoy which was remaining overnight. At the time this man was stationed in County Cork and he decided to go out to see his own people who lived about five miles from Nenagh. He borrowed a bike and cycled home under cover of darkness. His father and brothers were alive at the time and none of them had any connection with the Republican movement.

As Constable Carroll landed home, was sitting in the kitchen and he heard Carroll explain how it happened that he made such an unexpected visit and added that he would be returning to Nenagh next morning. was an active member of the Ballywilliam Company and on leaving Carroll's he reported to either the Battalion Commandant, Paddy McDonnell, or the Company Captain, Jim Burke, what he had learned in Carroll's house. Next morning as Constable Carroll was returning to Nenagh he was held up at Ballyhuskey lane at around 6 o'clock by a party of five members of the Ballywilliam Company. McDonnell was in charge of the hold-up. Carroll, who had been rushed and overpowered, was brought prisoner to Goun Mountain. Word was sent to Captain Michael McCormack, a G.H.C. officer, who was in North Tipperary at the time, informing him of the capture of the policeman and asking for instructions as to how he should be dealt with. McCormack ordered his execution and the orders were carried out by a firing party of five men under Paddy McDonnell. The execution took place in Ballycommon.

Constable Carroll had figured in the aftermath to the rescue of Sean Hogan at Knocklong station in May 1919. He had found some incriminating evidence during the search of the train from which Hogan had been taken by his rescuers. Three or four I.R.A. men were in custody awaiting trial on charges of murdering some of the police who had been escorting Hogan. It was known to us at the time that Constable Carroll would be giving evidence at this trial and this, I believe, was the reason why he was executed.

The next and last action in the 3rd Battalion area, apart from the sporadic firing at Portree R.I.C. barracks, occurred on 14th May, 1921, at Monroe on the road between Portree and Nenagh and two miles from the former place.

Two policemen from Portree barracks had gone into Nenagh earlier in the day on bikes to bring out a supply of uniform caps for the men in their station. News of this reached us and a party of eight men, with Paddy McDonnell in charge, were mobilised at Monroe to attack the police on their return journey. The men comprising the party were Jim Burke, Dinny Hayes, Jim (Sunny) Hogan, Paddy McDonnell (Grallagh), Pat Sheehy, Jim Sullivan, Mick Vaughan and myself. Each man had a shotgun and a few of us also carried revolvers. We got positions behind the road fence just beside the Protestant Church.

The two policemen came cycling towards us about 3 p.m. They were about fifty yards apart. The first man had just come around a bend on the road and was about ten yards from us when Paddy McDonnell (Grallagh) and a couple of others opened fire. The policeman was wounded but he jumped off the bike, got across the fence on the other side of the road, and then made off under cover through the fields. His comrade never came under fire at all because as soon as he heard the shooting he halted and, leaving his bike on the road, also ran away through the fields. Both policemen made their escape and reached

their barracks during the evening. We captured the two bikes and about a dozen uniform caps.

The main road from Limerick to Fenagh and Dublin ran through the 3rd Battalion area for a stretch of ten or eleven miles. Orders from Brigade Headquarters towards the end of 1920 stressed the importance of making this road impassable for enemy transport. No effort was spared in putting these orders into effect and throughout the winter and onwards to the Spring the Sallywilliam, Rushfield and Ballina Companies spent, on an average, two or three nights per week on road cutting operations. Of course, the enemy troops repeatedly filled in the trenches which had been cut, but on that night or on the following night the trenches were re-opened and sometimes even widened. Another main road which ran along by the Shannon from Ballina to Portree and on to Fenagh received similar attention. As the period of hostilities came to a close in July, 1921, the two roads in question were of very little use to the enemy.

Signature: Martin Grace

Date: 14th July 1956

Witness: D. Griffin

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