

ORIGINAL

BUREAU OF MILITARY HISTORY 1913-21
BURO STAIRLE MILEATA 1913-21
NO. W.S. 1594

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BUREAU OF MILITARY HISTORY, 1913-21.

STATEMENT BY WITNESS.

DOCUMENT NO. W.S. 1594.....

Witness

Thomas Kiernan,
Ballymahon,
Co. Longford.

Identity.

Battn. Adjt., Irish Volunteers,
Co. Westmeath.

Subject.

Activities of Castlepollard Company,
Irish Volunteers, Co. Westmeath,
1918-21.

Conditions, if any, Stipulated by Witness.

Nil.

File No S.2911.....

Form B.S.M. 2

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STATEMENT BY THOMAS KIERAN,
Ballymahon, County Longford.

I was born at Stonestown, Castlepollard, County Westmeath, and received my education at the local National School there. History and Irish were taught as subjects in the school but no special emphasis was put on them. There was no attempt by our teachers to bring us up as patriotic young Irishmen.

I went to work in Moate early in 1918. There was a good Company of the Irish Volunteers organised in Moate at this time and I joined this Company. Con Costello was the Captain of the Company there. The strength of the Company was about fifty or so. But there were no arms of any sort available. The Conscription crisis was at its height at this time and there were numerous anti-conscription meetings held at which we paraded in full strength. We also had training parades practically every evening. Such parades were held openly and watched by the R.I.C. who, however, did not interfere with us. I believe that the R.I.C. were just as much opposed to conscription as we were.

The Volunteers collected a large amount of money for the anti-conscription fund and they had everyone sign the anti-conscription pledge. Other than this there was nothing out of the ordinary done to meet the conscription menace.

I left Moate and returned to Castlepollard and joined the Volunteer Company there. Patrick McCabe was the Captain of the Company in Castlepollard. Brian Roddy was 1st Lieutenant and John McLoughlin was 2nd Lieutenant. The Company in Castlepollard was about sixty strong. There were no arms in this Company either

and we carried hurling sticks on parades. McCabe, the Captain, took charge of the parades and imparted what instruction we got. A lot of the Volunteers were men who had joined up on account of conscription menace and when this threat died down the strength of the Company dwindled down to about twenty.

At this time I think there was a Battalion organisation in existence for this area. Joe Kennedy of Castlepollard was the Battalion O/C. I think we were part of the Mullingar Battalion. The remainder of the year up to December was very quiet. In December a general election was held and the Sinn Féin organisation, which was the political side of the independence movement, contested all seats in the country, the vast majority of which were held by the Irish Parliamentary Party. The greater amount of work was performed by the Volunteers in the way of canvassing voters and arranging transport to take voters to the polling stations. There were numerous meetings on behalf of Sinn Féin and the Volunteers usually paraded to those and provided parties to protect the speakers from hostile demonstrations from the opposition parties. The R.I.C. were openly hostile to Sinn Féin and in a covered way encouraged the Party followers.

On polling day the Volunteers had guards on all the polling stations to ensure that the supporters of Sinn Féin were allowed to record their votes freely. I was on duty at Ballycomoye. Everything went off quietly and there were no clashes with the R.I.C. or the Irish Party supporters. Quite a lot of personation was indulged in by the Volunteers on behalf of the Sinn Féin candidate. At the conclusion of the polling the Volunteers put a guard on the ballot boxes when they were removed to the County Hall in Mullingar for counting. Laurence Ginnell was the Sinn Féin candidate and he won by a large majority.

The Sinn Féin Members of Parliament were pledged not to take their seats in the English Parliament but to establish an Irish Government in Dublin. In January, 1921, those of them who were not in Jail assembled in the Mansion House, Dublin, and set themselves up as the Government of the Irish Republic. They established Ministeries and appointed Ministers to look after the various departments. They affirmed their allegiance to the Irish Republic as declared in 1916.

The Dáil now floated a Loan of some million pounds and the Volunteers were again busy in pushing this. They canvassed and collected extensively. The Loan was well supported and a big sum was realised. Everyone was given a temporary receipt and later on received an official one signed by Michael Collins. None of the money collected went astray, every penny being accounted for. I am sure the subscribers did not consider that they were buying shares in a loan, but that it was just another collection, which was quite common in these days, and yet it was surprising that some of the people who subscribed were opposed to our policy prior and during the elections.

The Dáil now declared that the Irish Volunteers were the Army of the Irish Republic and decreed that every Volunteer and officer would have to take an Oath of Allegiance to the Irish Republic. No persuasion or force was to be used to induce Volunteers to take this Oath as everyone was quite free not to do so if they liked. Anyone declining to take the Oath would cease to be a Volunteer. Our officers and men took the Oath without hesitation and, as far as I can remember, there were no defaulters. Drilling and training went on as usual but were carried out secretly now. We still had no arms except a few small revolvers and a few shotguns, the property of individual Volunteers.

Around August or September, 1919, Headquarters became aware that the British Authorities were about to take up all the arms in the country that were under the control of the civilians. In order to forestall this move, General Headquarters ordered the I.R.A. to collect all the arms and so we visited or raided every house around our area where guns of any type were kept. Generally it was only a matter of asking for them and they were handed over willingly. We collected a number of guns of various types - a lot of them unserviceable - and a small supply of shotgun cartridges. As far as I know we got no service weapons of any type. The guns were distributed among the Volunteers who were charged with the responsibility of keeping them safely and in good order. There were no shooting affairs during the collection of the arms. The R.I.C. and British Military came around to the houses looking for the guns after we had removed them and in all cases they drew blanks.

The R.I.C. now evacuated their small stations at Finea and Coole, withdrawing their men to larger stations. They realised they could no longer hold on to those small outlying posts, some of which had already been attacked and captured throughout the country. The withdrawal of the R.I.C. meant that the unruly elements in the population would now almost have a clear field for their nefarious activities and indulge in robberies and so forth, but the Volunteers short-circuited this by taking on themselves to police the country. The Volunteers had been doing an amount of this work for some time previous to this, but now the work was intensified. It put a big strain on the Volunteers as they could only devote their spare time to this work, but they entered it with great 'vim' and made a great success of it. It was a complete change from the monotony of parades and drills. The Volunteers had an advantage over the R.I.C.

as regards police duty. Firstly, they knew the people who lived around them much better, and secondly, they got the more or less whole-hearted co-operation of the people. The R.I.C. never had the complete co-operation of the people as they were always looked upon with distrust and were overbearing in their attitude. The people quickly developed a loss of confidence in the R.I.C. and in their capacity to maintain law and order and even in the larger centres where R.I.C. garrisons were still maintained the Volunteers were performing all the police duties necessary.

Very few arrests had to be made in the area as the people were generally law-abiding. A place of detention - usually referred to as "Unknown destinations" - was established in an old house at Helltown. Prisoners were detained there where they were kept under a Volunteer guard. Usually the prisoners were from other Battalion areas, as it was the policy not to keep prisoners in their own district, where they were unknown to the Volunteers guarding them. This was a wise precaution. Prisoners were tried either by Military Court comprised of Volunteer Officers from outside areas or brought before a Sinn Féin Court. The sentences were usually pretty stiff and in some cases prisoners were deported out of the country. The withdrawal of the R.I.C. gave us much more liberty of action and we could now move around the area much more freely than heretofore. The R.I.C. kept more or less to the town or surrounds of their barracks. By now there was a great chasm between the R.I.C. and the vast majority of the people who looked upon this Force as a purely enemy garrison being maintained by the English Government to keep the country in subjection. The R.I.C. had always been the principal intelligence agents of the British Authorities and now for the first time their activities in this respect were very much curtailed by being compelled to withdraw

from all their small stations. Many of the small stations were maintained for intelligence work solely.

The Sinn Féin Courts of Justice and Arbitration Courts were now established and the people took their troubles to them and ignored the English Courts which were deserted except for an odd loyalist. The Solicitors and Barristers began to practice at the Sinn Féin Courts, whose common sense rather than law was the dominating feature. Local men of standing in the community, whose decisions would command respect, acted as Judges at these Courts. William Kelly of Castlepollard and Thomas Clinton and Christopher Halpin took on the role of Judges in our area. At first the Courts were held openly in St. Michael's Hall, Castlepollard, and the R.I.C. did not interfere. Later on the R.I.C. began to raid the Courts and arrest the Judges and litigants and then the Courts had to be held in secret. The Volunteers did duty at the Courts as well as providing protection parties to keep the Court from being surprised by enemy forces. The Volunteers also enforced the rulings of the Courts where necessary and collected fines and so forth. The people abided loyally by the decisions of the Courts and only in a few cases had Volunteer action to be undertaken.

A Battalion organisation had come into being in our area by now. Joe Kennedy of Castlepollard was Battalion O/C. Kennedy, however, was arrested and received a prison sentence for reading the 1916 Proclamation at a public meeting, and Patrick McCabe of Castlepollard was now appointed to command the Battalion. The Companies going to make up the Battalion were - Castlepollard, Glenidon, Whitehall, Coole and Boherquell, and later on a Company was organised in Ballymocoyle.

Brian Roddy was Captain of Castlepollard. I think James Nugent was Captain of Glenidon Company; Matthew Bruton, Captain, Whitehall Company; Luke Rock, Captain, Coole Company, and Patrick Smyth, Captain, Boherquill Company. The total strength of the Battalion, I would estimate, was around one hundred and fifty, so that Companies were really only sections. Except for a few odd revolvers of different calibres and a few shotguns, which were used by individual Volunteers, there were no arms in the Battalion.

The British Magistrate still continued to come out to Castlepollard to hold Court there. He was warned several times to desist but ignored the warnings, so it was decided to kidnap him, which was done. I was very ill at this time and so I was not on this job. I had to go to Hospital as I continued to be very ill and was there for a long period. Actually I did not come out of Hospital until April, 1921, so I was very much out of touch with Volunteer affairs. Meanwhile the Battalion O/C., McCabe, had been arrested and given a prison sentence for having some documents or plans in connection with Castlepollard R.I.C. Barracks. He was replaced as Battalion O/C. by John Macken. Macken was later arrested, and my brother, Patrick, replaced him. Some short time after this the Battalion Adjutant was arrested and I was now appointed in his stead. The Battalion organisation was still the same as before I went to Hospital.

Following the kidnapping and release again of the British Magistrate, a good number of Volunteers, including some of the officers, had been arrested following a big round-up of the area carried out by the British Forces. There were also quite a few of the Volunteers compelled to go 'on the run'. James Maguire of Glenidon was now the Brigade O/C., Harry Killeavy was the Vice-O/C. of the Brigade. I think Joseph Beglin was the Brigade Adjutant and Seamus Murphy the Brigade Quartermaster. Henry Conroy was

the Brigade Intelligence Officer and James Nea the Brigade Engineer.

The Battalions comprising the Brigade were - 1st Mullingar area and 2nd Loughanvalley area, 3rd Kinnegad area, and 4th Castlepollard area. Sometime around the end of May, our men attacked Castlepollard R.I.C. Barracks. This barracks contained a number of R.I.C. reinforced by a large contingent of Black and Tans who were in force in the country now. The attack was not of a very serious kind but just to harass and annoy the enemy. The Battalion O/C. took charge of the attacking party which had a few rifles on loan from the Mullingar Battalion, and a number of men armed with shotguns. A few rounds were fired at the barracks from a selected position and then our men withdrew. The garrison replied with rifles and lewis gun fire and sent up numerous very light signals calling for assistance. This firing went on for some hours after our men had withdrawn and the enemy must have used up a large amount of ammunition. No assistance came out from Mullingar or other areas to the garrison.

On the 11th July a similar attack took place just before the hour due for the Truce to come into effect. My brother took charge of a small party who took up position near the barracks and fired a few shots at it and then withdrew. Again the garrison fired back with vigour. There were no casualties on either side.

During the early part of the summer of 1921 the R.I.C. and Tans raided extensively around the area and seized all the cycles they could lay their hands on. Unfortunately most of the cycles seized belonged to Volunteers.

A number of land mines of the concrete type were made in the area by the Companies. There was also a fair share of buckshot or slugs made which was loaded into shotgun cartridges after the ordinary shot was removed. It was very hard to store cartridges under our conditions as the compressed paper from which the casing was made absorbed the damp or moisture from the air and became swollen. It was then a feat to get them into the guns or to extract them when fired.

There was the usual Battalion intelligence organisation in the Battalion and Companies, but this was only useful for keeping watch on local people suspected of giving information or helping the enemy, and in the detection of ordinary offences against the civilian law. There was no contact as far as I know with any of the R.I.C. or Tans within the garrison in Castlepollard and the Post Office there was manned by an ex-R.I.C. man who was hostile to us. There were no spies shot in the area.

Communications were maintained throughout the area by means of dispatch riders on cycles. The Belfast Boycott was enforced in the area, but there was really little to do in this respect as very little Belfast goods came there and what did stopped as soon as the Boycott started. We were continually harassing enemy movements by cutting telephone and telegraph communications and by blocking the roads, either by cutting trenches across them or felling trees on them. Usually the enemy made the local people fill in these trenches again and remove the trees.

At the time in 1921 that Seán McEoin was being tried in Dublin, orders were issued from G.H.Q. that on no account were the military police and civilian witnesses to be allowed to reach Dublin.

The Brigade decided to lay an ambush on the main Dublin Road at Griffinstown for this purpose. A large number of Volunteers from

all over the Brigade were mobilised armed with all types of weapons including some dozen rifles or so, and took up position at that spot in the early hours of the morning. A concrete mine was placed in the road by the Brigade Engineer. When all was organised and waiting for the enemy transport to come the mine was accidentally exploded by the Brigade Engineer. It blew a large hole in the road and felled a tree growing along the side of the road. Fortunately no one was injured. This put paid to any attempt at ambush and the Brigade O/C., Seamus Maguire, who was in charge, ordered the Volunteers to withdraw and disperse to their own areas, which they did without further incident. As it happened, the enemy party did not travel that road from Longford but went instead through the County Meath by a circular route, thereby avoiding the main road to Dublin.

SIGNED Thomas Kiernan

DATE 6th March 1957.

WITNESS James Honway

