

ORIGINAL

BUREAU OF MILITARY HISTORY 1913-21

BURO STAIRÉ MILEATA 1913 21

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BUREAU OF MILITARY HISTORY, 1913-21

STATEMENT BY WITNESS.

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Witness

Patrick Sheehan,
East Commons,
Ardfert,
Co. Kerry.

Identity.

Captain Ardfert Company Irish Volunteers,
Co. Kerry, 1917 - .

Subject.

Ardfert Company Irish Volunteers,
Co. Kerry, 1914-1921.

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BUREAU OF MILITARY HISTORY 1913-21
BURO STAIRÉ MILÉATA 1913-21
No. W.S. 1088

088

STATEMENT BY PATRICK SHEEHAN,
East Commons, Ardfert, County Kerry.

I was born in East Commons, Ardfert, in March 1895. I was sent to Ardfert National School until I was 15 years of age. When I left school I went to work on my father's farm.

I joined the Volunteers when they were first formed in Ardfert in the spring of 1914. Our drill instructors were ex-British soldiers named Garrett Firnane, Martin Sullivan and Dinegan. The strength of the Company was approximately 100 men. We drilled with wooden rifles for a time. After Redmond's speech at Woodenbridge, County Wicklow, in which he called on the Volunteers to defend the shores of Ireland by joining the British Army, the Volunteers in Ardfert broke up and ceased to exist.

Early in 1917 the Company was re-formed here. The strength at first was approximately 25 men. I was appointed Company Captain, John Carmody of Tubridmore became 1st Lieutenant and Jim Carmody, Tralee Road, Ardfert, became 2nd Lieutenant. We paraded and drilled three times a week and had route marches. By the end of the year our membership increased to about 55 men. I was then the chief drill instructor having at the time studied drill manuals on the subject.

Shortly after the reorganisation of the Company here a general mobilisation of Volunteers from the County of Kerry took place at McKenna's Fort, which is now known as Casement's Fort. It is situated about a mile and a half from Ardfert village. The mobilisation was held in commemoration of Casement's arrest in the previous year - 1916. Over 1,000 Volunteers and many sympathisers turned up for the ceremony. The National Flag was hoisted after which Austin Stack, who had only a short time before been released after his arrest around Easter Week 1916,

delivered an oration and called on the young men of the County to join the Volunteers. The local Volunteers on the occasion catered for the meeting by providing tea and sandwiches.

During the threat of conscription in early 1918 our membership increased considerably. On the occasion of a protest meeting in Tralee, attended by Volunteer Companies from all over North Kerry, I discovered that when this Company was mobilised for the event, the strength had more than doubled. Over 150 men turned up and marched the six miles into Tralee. At the meeting several speeches were made protesting against the enforcement of conscription for Ireland. During the period we had intensive drilling especially in the early morning when test mobilisations were held at different hours. Volunteers who owned shotguns turned out on parade armed with their guns. When the scare was over most of the older men left the Company but the younger men remained which left the Company strength about 100 men.

That year, on the anniversary of Casement's arrest, the local Company once again paraded to Casement's Fort for a commemoration ceremony. They were followed by a force of 50 R.I.C. which had been drafted into the village for the occasion. When we reached the Fort a decade of the Rosary was recited after which we left and went cross country towards Branderwell bog, north-west of Ardfert village so as to confuse the R.I.C. We had to cross a canal 25 feet wide by a narrow footbridge. Having crossed the bridge we destroyed it. When the R.I.C. arrived at the spot they could not cross and had to return. We eventually returned to Ardfert.

As the Sinn Féin candidate, Austin Stack, was returned unopposed at the General Election at the end of the year, we took no part in the election campaign.

From early 1919 we continued to drill and parade. During this year I, with other members of the Company, took part in collecting for the Dail Fireann loan. The people of the area subscribed very generously: they, for the most part, were by now strong supporters of Sinn Fein and the I.R.A. generally. At the latter end of the year I received an order from the Battalion O/C. Tom Clifford to collect all arms in the Company area. This order I carried out with the help of the members of the Company and collected 50 shotguns in all. Around the same time we trenched and blocked all the main roads in the area.

On the occasion of an I.R.A. attack on Camp R.I.C. barracks on the 19th February, 1920, I was instructed by the Battalion O/C. Tom Clifford to block all roads and cut telephone wires in my area so as to prevent reinforcements from Causeway, Listowel and Ballylongford going to the assistance of the P.I.C. at Camp. As well as blocking roads in my Company area on the occasion, I took a number of our men to Ballyroe about two miles from Ardfert on the Ardfert to Tralee road where we felled a number of trees and trenched roads there.

On the 2nd June, 1920, I was ordered by Tom Clifford to take twenty men of the Ardfert Company to Fenit on the occasion of the I.R.A. attack on Fenit R.I.C. barracks. The actual attack was carried out by the Tralee Battalion. I, with ^{the} twenty men, reported that night at Fenit to Dan Jeffers of Strand Street Company, Tralee, who had charge of the attack. I and two other men of my Company had rifles. The remainder had shotguns or revolvers. I was allocated a position with my twenty men at a point overlooking the pier at the end of which was a sloop manned by Mariners.

Immediately the attack on the barracks had opened by the Tralee men, members of the local Company with the use of straw, petrol and paraffin set the pier (which was a wooden structure) on fire. The

pier was approximately 300 yards from the barracks. A short time later the Mariners appeared on the pier and proceeded towards the burning section. When they had reached this point I gave the order "Open fire". We fired about five or six rounds each. The mariners retreated back to the sloop from which they fired about six shells into a field in front of the barracks where the Tralee men were posted for the attack.

The attack on the barracks lasted about four hours. By then the barracks was on fire as well as the pier, but still the R.I.C. had not surrendered. As it was nearing daylight the signal to retire went and we withdrew. On the following day the R.I.C. evacuated Fenit. Before I left Ardfert for Fenit that night I left word for the remainder of the Company to block all roads in the neighbourhood. This they did in the early part of the night. They also cut telephone wires in the area.

A short time before the attack on Fenit, the R.I.C. had evacuated their barracks in the village of Ardfert. They, however, left behind in the barracks the wife and family of ^{the sergeant as well as the wife and family of} an R.I.C. Sergeant at Abbeydorney three miles away. Clifford, the Battalion O.C. whom I met at a Battalion Council meeting, instructed me to burn down the barracks.

Having taken the two families to safety in the village I, with a number of men of the Company, sprinkled paraffin and petrol through the rooms and then set the building on fire. While we were engaged on this job I had placed other men of the Company on scout duty around the village and roads leading thereto. Since the barracks had been evacuated a cycle patrol of Military from Tralee visited Ardfert at irregular intervals and for this reason we had to be on the look-out in case they paid a visit while we were engaged on the burning of the barracks.

During the year railway men generally refused to co-operate with enemy forces by refusing to carry Army personnel on trains when they carried arms. About this time I received instructions from Clifford to remove a railway guard who had taken a train with armed Military on one of these occasions. This day he took a train from Tralee to Limerick. I was instructed to intercept him on the return journey from Limerick at Ardfert station. When the train came to a halt at the station, I with about six members of the Company approached the guard and at the point of a revolver placed him under arrest and removed him from the station. I then ordered a local porter to take the guard's place in the train and take it to Tralee.

We kept the guard a prisoner for three or four days after which he was brought before a local Sinn Fein Court which had been set up some time previously. He was fined a £1 by the President of the Court and cautioned as to his future behaviour in co-operating with the enemy.

On the morning of the 31st October, 1920, selected men from each Company in the battalion, which was known as the Ardfert Battalion, were mobilised after Mass in Ardfert. In all about 250 from the eight Companies in the Battalion were selected. The Company areas were Ardfert, Ballyheigue, Causeway, Kerryhead, Churchill, Kilflynn, Abbeydorney and Kilmoyley.

Clifford, the Battalion O/C., had received an order from the Brigade O/C. Paddy Cahill, to carry out an attack on an enemy patrol which travelled occasionally between Tralee and Abbeydorney. On this particular day, which was a Sunday, the patrol was expected to pay one of their visits to Abbeydorney. I heard that this was a general order to all battalions in the Brigade area, following the death of T. MacSwiney on hunger strike.

The 250 men were all armed with either rifles, shotguns or revolvers. Clifford who was in charge marched the party to a point on the road about $1\frac{1}{2}$ miles from Abbeydorney village. He had already selected the ambush position. When we got there we took up positions in extended formation on each side of the road. We remained in our positions for four hours but no enemy forces appeared during the period. Clifford then decided to withdraw.

Before we withdrew Clifford selected a number of officers and men to report that same night for an attack on enemy patrols in the villages of Abbeydorney and Causeway. These were the only two places in the Battalion area where enemy forces were stationed. I was appointed by Clifford to take charge of the attack in Abbeydorney. I selected about ten men from Ardfert Company. They were John Carmody (deceased), Michael Sheehan, Frank Barrett, Tim Driscoll, Patrick Riordan, John Murphy, John Mahony and others whose names I cannot remember.

Between 8 and 9 o'clock I and the ten Ardfert men took up positions at a crossroads in the village on one side of a road. Men from other Companies in the Battalion were located in different parts of the village. I sent a member of the Abbeydorney Company who was acting as scout towards the barracks to find out the position and arranged for him to signal the approach of enemy forces. Half an hour after we had taken up positions the scout returned and informed us that two Tans were approaching our positions. I had instructed our men as to what they had to do, that was to take deliberate aim when they got the order "open fire" from me.

When the two Tans reached a point 30 yards from our positions, I gave the order. Our men opened fire immediately; the two Tans were shot dead. As soon as we had opened fire shooting became general all over the village. The other sections of our men posted in other

parts of the village opened fire at random. I withdrew with my section and returned to Ardfert. The following day several houses in the village of Abbeydorney were raided and burned down by the Tans.

On the 5th November, 1920, I was ordered by Clifford to mobilise a number of men of the Ardfert Company for the purpose of an attack on a Tan patrol between the villages of Spa and Fenit. I selected about 40 men which was about half the strength of the Company at the time and took them to Ardfert village to await final instructions as directed by Clifford. All of the men were armed, about three or four had rifles, the remainder had shot guns or revolvers.

We were some time in the village awaiting final instructions when a convoy of 14 lorry loads of Tans arrived. I, with the Battalion O/C. Clifford and Jim Carmody, while armed with revolvers, happened to be on the footpath in the centre of the village at the time. As soon as the Tans arrived they opened fire all round the village. They had seen Clifford, Carmody and myself, but I don't think they observed our arms. Clifford and Carmody dashed into a field and escaped. I went into a forge and took cover in a dark corner which was hidden by the smoke of the forge. Firing continued outside. After a while a Tan appeared in the forge and spoke to the blacksmith. The Tan could not see ~~me~~ although I had him covered all the time with my revolver. After a while he left. Four military then arrived and sat in the forge for some time.

That day the enemy captured two of our men; the remainder escaped. One of our men named Tom Healey was wounded but he escaped with the others. A girl named O'Connell was shot dead. The two I.R.A. men and a shopkeeper named Michael McGuire and other civilians were taken to Causeway where that night McGuire was shot dead by the Tans outside the barracks. It was McGuire who had supplied the paraffin for the burning of the barracks in Ardfert some time earlier. Our proposed attack was in the circumstances called off.

On the 8th November, 1920, the Tans swept into Ardfert from two different points and arrested three men of the Ardfert Company - John Cantillion, Michael Brosnan and Maurice McElligott, took them into a field and told them to run. As Cantillion and Brosnan ran they were shot dead. McElligott refused to run and had his head battered by the butt of a revolver. In his case an R.I.C. man told him not to run. He succeeded in escaping.

From November, 1920 to April 1921 I took part in sniping attacks on the barracks in Abbeydorney and on several occasions I took charge of these attacks.

From April, 1921 to the Truce a number of our men in the area were arrested. Activities had become fewer. After the Truce I joined the National Army and served until 1929 retaining my rank of Captain.

Signed:

P. Sheehan

(P. Sheehan)

Date:

11. 3. 55

Witness:

John J. Daly

(John J. Daly)

