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ORIGINAL

BUREAU OF MILITARY HISTORY 1913-21

BURO STAIRE MILEATA 1913-21

No. W.S. 1429

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BUREAU OF MILITARY HISTORY, 1913-21

STATEMENT BY WITNESS.

DOCUMENT NO. W.S. 1429.

Witness

Thomas Howlett,
Dunbrody,
Campile,
Co. Wexford.

Identity.

Vice Commandant, 2nd Battalion, South Wexford
Brigade, March, 1921.

7
O/C, 2nd Battalion, South Wexford Brigade,
January, 1922.

Subject.

Activities of Campile Company, 2nd Battalion,
South Wexford Brigade, 1918-1921.

Conditions, if any, Stipulated by Witness.

Nil.

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STATEMENT BY MR. THOMAS HOWLETT,
Dunbrody, Campile, Co. Wexford.

On the formation of a company of the Irish Volunteers in Horeswood parish in the early part of 1918, I joined up with about thirty others. It was called Campile company. Tom Kent, Great Island, was appointed company captain; Patrick Carty, Ballykerogue - now living in the Arklow area - was appointed 1st lieutenant, and I was appointed 2nd lieutenant.

During the summer of 1918, we met sometimes for field drill, and were put through formations by officers from New Ross. I expect they were battalion officers, but we were not told what ranks they held. They included Joe Carty, Paddy Hayden and Martin Deegan. We had as yet no military operations as a company, but a few Volunteers went to Waterford for the bye-election to protect the speakers at public meetings held by Sinn Féin, and to prevent the meetings from being broken up by gangs organised by supporters of the Irish Party. The Volunteers also organised and attended demonstrations to welcome home released prisoners.

During 1919, our numbers increased, but we lost some of the original members through emigration and other causes. We had our first operation as a military unit when we carried out raids for arms in the company area. The arms we got were principally shotguns and small calibre rifles.

The New Ross officers continued to visit and train the company. The training included foot drill,

arms drill, bayonet training and lectures on the use of small arms and hand grenades.

1920:

At the start of this year, things went on as before. Some time in the early part of this year, Tom O'Hanlon, Gusserane, first appeared to us as an officer, but we were not told his rank or to what unit he was attached. Phil Lennon never appeared to our company, but he was held in respect, and all Volunteers looked on him as being the 'big man'.

About the spring of 1920, Joe McMahon, a native of Kilmaley, Co. Clare, came to work at Warren's of Whitechurch which was in the 2nd battalion (Campile battalion) area, and while there he was active with the 1st battalion (New Ross battalion). He was later killed in Co. Cavan.

When Dáil Eireann took over control of the Volunteers, the latter became the Irish Republican Army, and we took the oath of allegiance to the Irish Republic. The oath was administered to the officers and men by Tom O'Hanlon.

There was a quantity of pressed hay in the company area belonging to the British military. It had been bought and paid for by them, and was awaiting transportation to one or other of the military barracks. The company was instructed to burn it, and this order was duly carried out.

During the summer and autumn of this year, the R.I.C. evacuated Arthurstown, Campile, Fethard-on-Sea and Tintern barracks which were in our battalion area. They were burned a few nights after being vacated. The

garrisons were transferred to Duncannon and Foulksmills barracks, now the only two occupied R.I.C. barracks in our battalion area. Instructions were issued by the battalion to Campile, Ramsgrange and Fethard-on-Sea companies, for each of them to snipe Duncannon barrack on one night each week. Similar instructions were issued to Gusserane, New Bawn and Clongeen companies concerning Foulksmills barrack. These instructions were carried out, and in fact some weeks the barracks were actually sniped every night. The sniping was carried on through the winter of 1920.

After the raid on Hook lighthouse, from which a large quantity of explosives was taken, things were put on a war footing in the company, and activities were intensified. These included the trenching of roads, blocking the roads by felling trees across them, cutting telephone wires, lying in wait for enemy patrols, holding up of trains and raiding of mails.

At this time, according to orders issued by the British military authorities, it was necessary to have permission from them to hold social functions, such as dances, concerts, etc. Needless to say, this order was defied by the people. Permission to hold dances, etc., was never asked for. On some of the nights when dances were held, we lay in wait to ambush the enemy, expecting they would come to raid the dance. On other occasions, we raided the mails or held up trains, or engaged in other activities in an attempt to draw the enemy out, but they never came. On some of these occasions, we selected ambush positions and mined the road; other times we merely blocked the road at the ambush position. We

always remained in the positions for several hours.

Some time during the year, Tom Kent resigned his rank of company captain and was replaced by Pat Carty. I became 1st lieutenant, while James Sinnott, Ballykerogue, became 2nd lieutenant. We got a quantity of the explosives which had been captured at Hook lighthouse, and started to manufacture bombs at Rowe's, Timmock. We had to leave there after a short time, as a brother of the owner was a very active Volunteer. We then took over an unused shooting lodge on Kilmanock marshes; this place was isolated. The munitions section, under company quartermaster Jim Grace, started to turn out crude hand grenades. At first, iron boxes of cart wheels were used, but as these were found to be too heavy, iron piping was secured, and ends were fitted to them with a fuse protruding. These men worked there in the cold and misery of a damp unheated house three nights a week, while the company officers attended in turn, as they had to supervise the blocking of roads and other jobs.

In December, we got orders to have all bombs packed up and removed to a convenient place where they could be loaded into a motor car, to have bottles filled with petrol, to examine all our buckshot, cartridges and guns, and hand them over to our best men, and to have motor cars earmarked for commandeering, and await further orders.

A few days later, Tom O'Hanlon, who at this time was 2nd battalion O/C (Campile), met Pat Carty and myself. He told us that we had been appointed to the battalion staff, Pat Carty as vice commandant, myself as quartermaster, and Tommy O'Sullivan as adjutant. He also told

us that it had been decided to attack Foulksmills R.I.C. barrack. He said they had a large land mine made, and had a man trained to throw a rope over a house. One end of the rope was to be attached to the mine, and when the rope was thrown over the roof, Pat and I were to pull the rope until the mine was on the roof. The mine would then be exploded. When this occurred, Pat was to return and take charge of the shotgunmen who would be positioned behind the wall, on the far side of the road in front of the barrack. I was to return and take charge of the bombing section. They were to throw the grenades and bottles of petrol into the hole in the roof, if the R.I.C. had not already surrendered.

All companies in the battalion had been instructed to block all roads leading to Foulksmills. It was estimated that the strength of the garrison was two sergeants and twenty men, including some Black and Tans.

Foulksmills R.I.C. barrack was a solidly constructed detached building, with a slated roof. It was about eight or ten feet from the side of the road. Dividing it from the road was a low wall, surmounted by a railing. In the centre and projecting from the front of the building was an entrance porch. There were two windows in front, on the ground floor. These, of course, had steel shutters with loopholes. The barrack was of rather unusual design, as there were no front windows on the first floor; there was one window in each gable end, on the first floor. In the ground floor gable ends were loopholes but no windows. At the rere was a lean-to, extending ten to twelve feet from the main building. As part of the defensive arrangements, barbed wire had been

placed on all sides of the barrack, from the eaves to the ground, and extending about eight feet from the base of the building.

A Saturday night in December was the night chosen for the attack, and one o'clock was the hour for us to be in our positions. On the night of the attack, Campile company mobilised as instructed. We commandeered Matt. Hart's motor car, into which we loaded the bombs and bottles of petrol. At eleven o'clock, we set out, some of the men walking, others on bicycles and the officers in the motor car. All arrived at Foulksmills in good time after covering the seven Irish miles. There was no light or stir anywhere, not even in the R.I.C. barrack. When we placed the men in their positions, Pat and I went to our position in front of the barrack. The Campile and Gusserane companies formed the attacking party, with a few men from the local companies of Clongeen and New Bawn. Having waited for a considerable time - until long after the time appointed for the attack to start - Pat and I went around to the back to see what was wrong. We were told that the keyman - the man trained to throw the rope - could not be found, and even a journey to his house failed to locate him.

It was then decided that James Gill, who later became adjutant, South Wexford brigade, and Peter Jordan, who for a while was brigade quartermaster, should try to throw the rope over the roof. Both attempted to do so, but without success. Then Jordan and Gill started to cut through the barbed wire at the rere of the barrack, so as to place the mine close against the building.

After some time, the mine was exploded, and we heard Tom O'Hanlon, who was in charge of the attack,

yelling to the R.I.C. to surrender. They answered by opening up with rifle and machine gun fire, and by throwing out hand grenades. They also sent up Verey lights.

Our shotgun men replied, and directed their fire on the windows and loopholes. The bombing section also came into action and threw the bombs on to the roof, but some of them did not explode. The bottles of petrol were also thrown. This was, no use, as there was no breach in the roof.

After some time, with the ammunition running out and the bombs being ineffective owing to the failure to make a breach in the roof, the attack was called off.

I would like to state here that the failure to capture the barracks could not, in any way, be attributed to lack of courage or determination on the part of the officers or men. As will be seen from this account, when the original plan was upset, other alternatives were tried. The failure was due solely to lack of experience. I believe that, if we had even one man with experience of barrack attacks, we could have captured the barrack that night. Even after the two slaps of the rope on the roof, the police apparently did not waken, as there was no reply from them, and I fully believe we could have put a ladder on the roof and dragged up the mine without ever waking them.

When we returned to our motor car, we found it was hemmed in between two barricades, and, as the road blocking parties had gone home, there was nothing for it only to foot it back to Campile, cold, miserable and hungry, and pressing on, so that the people going to early Mass would not see us.

About a week later, Pat Carty was appointed battalion O/C. I was appointed adjutant, and John Kent, Great Island, battalion quartermaster. Tom O'Hanlon had been appointed brigade O/C, and Tom Sullivan to some other job on brigade staff.

Shortly after this, Seán McBride, an inspection officer from G.H.Q., arrived and reorganised the brigade. I was appointed vice battalion O/C, Martin Walsh, adjutant, John Kent, quartermaster, and my brother, Martin, intelligence officer.

A short time afterwards, Tom O'Hanlon, brigade O/C, formed an active service unit, taking in all the best battalion and company officers, but - later, in March 1921 - G.H.Q. sent down a permanent officer to this area, and he ordered all those men to return to their units, using the words, "You don't know how to fight, and have nothing to fight with, but I can guarantee you that you will get the opportunity when you are ready!" This action led to a break with the brigade O/C, Tom O'Hanlon, who resigned and went in charge of the men from other areas who were on the run. Tom O'Sullivan was then appointed brigade O/C, M. Parker, vice O/C, James Gill, adjutant, Peter Jordan, quartermaster, and my brother, Martin, intelligence officer.

From this on until the Truce, no big operation was attempted. The battalion officers had to take each company on operations, sniping barracks, holding up trains, raiding mails and blocking roads. The battalion at this time was comprised of seven companies - Gusserane, Campile, Ramsgrange, Fethard on Sea, St. Leonard's, Clongeen and New Bawn, but later on, when some of the

companies were amalgamated, the number was reduced to four.
The following were the companies amalgamated:-

New Bawn and Clongeen.
Gusserane and St. Leonards.
Ramsgrange and Fethard on Sea.

Campile company remained as it was.

When the Truce was on about two months, a brigade training camp was formed, and later each battalion had its own training camp.

Early in 1922, when the 3rd eastern division was formed, I was appointed O/C, South Wexford brigade, with Pat Carty, Vice O/C, A. Bailey, adjutant, Peter Donnelly, quartermaster, Joe Traynor, intelligence officer, and John Maddock, engineer. I remained O/C until after the cease fire in 1923, when all the other brigade officers, with the exception of John Maddock, were either in jail or resigned.

SIGNED: *Fleming-Horlock*

DATE: *June 1st 1956*

WITNESS *Sean Brennan Lieut-Col.*

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