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STATEMENT BY WITNESS

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Witness

James Brennan,
182 Phibsborough Road,
Dublin

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STATEMENT BY MR. JAMES BRENNAN,

182 Phibsborough Road, Dublin.

Captain - "L" Company, Third Battalion, Kilkenny Brigade

I was born in the year of 1896 at the residence of my mother's people at Mountrath, Co. Leix. My father, who was a farmer at Moyrath, Wolfhill, Co. Leix, was a member of the Land League and my grandfather, from whom my father inherited the farm, was connected with the Fenian movement in 1867. I was reared on the farm at Moyrath and attended the national school at Wolfhill until I was twelve years of age. From then until my fifteenth year, I attended the Christian Brothers' school in Carlow, cycling there each day, a distance of, approximately, eight miles. After leaving school, I assisted my father on the farm.

I joined the Irish National Volunteers when they were formed in my district early in 1914* The company was known as the Newtown Company and had a strength of about two hundred men. For some months, the members of the company were very enthusiastic and turned out for training on week evenings after work and on Sunday afternoons. Our drill instructor was an ex British army reservist named Carroll. He was a very good instructor, one of the best I have known.

Sometime during the summer of 1914 I marched with the Newtown Company to a review of Irish National Volunteers which was held at Modinbeagh, Co. Leix. This review was held on a Sunday and units were present from Counties Leix, Kilkenny, Kildare and Carlow. The assembled Volunteers were reviewed by Liam Mellows. It was the largest parade of a Volunteer force I have ever seen.

The split in the Volunteer movement came soon afterwards, and the Newtown Company more or less broke up. This was a big disappointment to many. Some of the members joined the British army and the others lost their enthusiasm and did not bother to attend the parades. In fact, the Irish National Volunteers or, as they were then called, the Redmondite Volunteers ceased to exist in the district.

In 1915 I joined a company of Irish Volunteers which was then in existence at The Swan, a village about six miles from my home in Newtown. The company commander at the time was the late Mr. Patrick J. Fleming, afterwards of Hospitals Trust, Ltd. The strength of the company was small, not more than twenty members. We had weekly parades or meetings to which I generally cycled ^ from Newtown. I remained a member of this company until 1918. There were no activities with which I was connected during the years, 1915 to 1918.

Early in 191 I was asked by, I think, Patrick J. Fleming to form a Volunteer company in my own district of Newtown. At that time and for some time previously, Volunteer companies were being organised in the neighbouring county of Kilkenny and for some reason which I cannot explain, part of Co. Leix, including the village of The Swan and the district in which I lived, were included with Kilkenny for Volunteer purposes. I arranged a meeting in Newtown and formed a new company there. The area allotted to the company consisted of the parishes of Newtown and Mayo. The strength of the Company at the time of its formation was twenty-five, composed of farmers' sons and coal miners. I was elected as Company Captain. Thomas Dowling was elected 1st Lieutenant and Patrick Hennessy was elected 2nd Lieutenant. This company, commanded by the same officers, was in existence on the 11th July, 1921,' and had then a strength of ninety.

It was designated as L. Company, 3^d Battalion, Kilkenny Brigade.

Weekly parades were held at which we had drill, lectures and instructions in the care and use of arms.

At the time of the formation of the company, we had no arms but, during the period of the conscription threat in 1918, we managed to secure three revolvers and about twenty shotguns. Some of these arms were obtained from sympathisers who handed them in voluntarily, and the balance were got by raids for arms on houses in the vicinity of the company area. Up to the year of 1920, these arms were held by individual Volunteers of the company who were responsible for their safe custody. In that year we provided a safe dump for the arms where they were kept when not required. During the conscription threat period, the strength of the company also increased and, with few exceptions, those who joined at that time remained loyal members of the company up to the time of the Truce in 1921.

In March, 1920, Hugginstown R.I.C. barracks was attacked and captured by members of the Kilkenny Brigade. Shortly afterwards, the R.I.C. barracks in my company area, i.e., Newtown barracks, was evacuated by the R.I.C. Acting on instructions from the Battalion O/C who was then James Culleton, I, with members of my company, destroyed the evacuated barracks by burning it on the night of Easter Saturday, 1920. Although I was not then aware of it, this was done -in accordance with the general order from G.H.Q. for the destruction of evacuated R.I.C. barracks in all areas.

Sometime about August or September, 1920, when cycling at about 10 p.m. to a company parade which was being held in a field some distance from my home, I cycled into a large cycle patrol of British military, R.I.C. men and Black and Tans who were halted on the road. They held me up, searched and questioned me. Fortunately, I had given up the habit of bringing the company roll book with me to company meetings at this time, and the only thing which I had on me on this occasion and which appeared to arouse their suspicions was a pamphlet relating to something, I think, about Irish industrial revival.

However, after some short time, they told me I could proceed about my business. I continued on to the field where the company was assembled and dismissed the men, after telling them what had happened.

Accompanied by Thomas Dowling, the Company 1st Lieutenant, I returned to my home and removed from their hiding 'place in a hay-rick a shotgun and ammunition, the company roll-book and some other documents relating to the movement. Having secured these items in a better hiding place some distance from the house, I decided, on the advice of Dowling, not to return home to sleep there that night; so I went on to the house of friends, named Graham, at Tolerton. The decision not to return home was a good one, for at about 1 a.m. the following morning my home was surrounded by British forces - presumably the party who held me up on the road the previous night. An intensive search of the house and out-offices was made for me by the British forces but, as already stated, I was not there, and nothing of an incriminating nature was found. From this until the Truce my home was frequently raided for me at all hours of the day or night, but I remained on the run and avoided arrest. Although on the run, I attended the company parades and battalion council meetings.

On the 31st March, 1921, I received an instruction from the Battalion O/C, who was then Michael Fleming of The Swan, to carry out a raid on the courthouse, Castlecomer, and to seize the money which was being collected for dog licences together with the relative records. The courthouse was situated about fifty yards from the military barracks where, at that time, a large force of British military, R.I.C. and Black and Tans were stationed. At this time, the area was under martial law.

About 5 PM on that evening, Patrick Hennessey, John O'Reilly and myself cycled into Castlecomer. We were armed with revolvers. We held up the staff in the courthouse and seized the money and the record book in which the dog licence payments were recorded. The money, which

amounted to about £70, was mostly in silver. We had not allowed for this, and thus found ourselves with an unexpected heavy load to carry away.

We got back to our bicycles which we had parked convenient to the courthouse and took our departure as quickly as we could. In our haste, however, to leave the courthouse and possibly due to the element of surprise in finding the moneys almost all in silver, we omitted to disconnect the telephone in the office in the courthouse. The alarm must have been given almost immediately, for soon after we got clear of the town, we heard the sound of two tenders of military and Black and Tans giving us chase. By using a laneway which ran parallel but some distance from the main road and getting into fields, we succeeded in eluding our pursuers, who kept to the road, and we got safely away. We handed over the money and the record book to the Battalion O/C when we contacted him later that night.

During my time on the run, I frequently stayed at Graham's of Tolerton and occasionally visited the house of Dick Buggy at Gorthahile. Whenever the Flying Column came in to the area, I usually billeted with them.

Amongst other houses, Graham's and Buggy's occasionally billeted members of the column.

On the evening of Friday, 17th June, 1921, I called to Dick Buggy's house at Gortahile and saw some members of the flying column there. Amongst others present were the late George O'Dwyer, who was then O/C of the Kilkenny Brigade, and Frank Fogarty of Castlecomer who was the Battalion Engineer of the 3rd Battalion. Frank Fogarty was busy preparing a land mine.

I had no idea that anything special in the way of an operation was being contemplated and was wondering what all the preparations were for, when the Brigade O/C told me to go to my company area and to have four members of my company armed as best as possible at Coolbawn, about one mile from Castlecomer on the main Castlecomer-Athy road at 3 a.m. next morning. He also told me that it would be advisable for the men to go to confession, and he had arranged for Father McNamara, a local priest and supporter, to hear the men's confessions at a certain place that night where I cannot now recall. I then learned that a large quantity of explosives, escorted by a party of British forces in lorries, was expected to leave Castlecomer military barracks on the following morning and proceed via Coolbawn to the coal mines where, the explosives would be handed over for use in the mines.

It was the intention to place the mine on the road, to explode it as the first lorry passed over it, and to attack the party of British forces by an ambush party of four men from each company in the 3rd Battalion, supported by the flying column.

I set off for Newtown (my company area) which was about six miles away. There I collected three men, viz., Patrick Hennessey, James Delaney and John O'Reilly, who with myself would make up the four men required from my company. We had a fairly substantial meal and went to the dump, where we selected the best of the shotguns.

I had a Winchester repeating shotgun and about fifty rounds of ammunition. It was now about 1 a.m., and I realised that it would probably be too late to go to the place where Father McNamara was hearing the men's confessions; so, on our way to Coolbawn, we knocked at the residence of Father Rice, the parish priest of Mayo. Father Rice, with whom I was fairly well acquainted, was no doubt very much surprised at the sight of four healthy young men knocking him up between one and two o'clock in the morning with a request to have their confessions heard. However, he graciously complied with our wishes, heard our confessions in his sitting room, and we proceeded on our way to Coolbawn.

It was a beautiful summer's morning. We arrived at Coolbawn in good time. Practically all those who were to take part in the attack had assembled and, after some delay, we were moved into our positions. George O'Dwyer, the Brigade O/C, was in charge. Including the flying column, the strength of the ambushing party would, I should say, have been between fifty and sixty men.

The members of the flying column were, as far as I remember, armed with Lee Enfield rifles. The remainder of the party had shotguns. A few carried revolvers.

My position was with the main body, on the left-hand side of the road as you approach the town of Castlecomer on the way from Athy. To our rear was a small wood. The mine had been placed in the road, and we lay down patiently to await the coming of the convoy with the explosives.

About 9 a.m., word went around that we were being surrounded by British forces and we were told to get away the best way we could. Almost immediately, fire was opened on us from three sides and confusion seemed to reign everywhere. With two companions, I entered the wood which, up to that time at any rate, had not been occupied by the surrounding British forces. I lost contact with my two companions' in the wood. However, to make a long story short, I succeeded in passing through the wood, crossed through fields out into the open country and, late that evening, without further incident, I arrived at Graham's of Tolerton.

Three members of the flying column were lost in that incident at Coolbawn. One, John Harley, was shot dead, and two, Nicholas Mullins and James Doyle, were seriously wounded and captured. Nicholas Mullins died that afternoon in Castlecomer military barrack. I dread to think what would have happened, had the British forces completely surrounded us before their presence had been discovered. As it was, I should say we were very fortunate that there were not more casualties amongst our forces.

There were other tasks of a general nature, such as, the trenching of roads and supplying guards and scouts for Republican courts and meetings carried out by members of my company from time to time. Before concluding this narrative, I would like, however, to mention an incident which happened in my area about the year of 1918 and which had a sequel in or about the time of the Truce in 1921.

Sometime in 1918 workmen in the employment of a man, named Sixsmith, went on strike. Sixsmith was an extensive farmer and, in addition to farming, he kept traction engines and thrashing machines. He was a Protestant, a bitter Unionist and violently opposed, to the national movement. At the time of the strike, he came into conflict with the local trade union official, a man named William Kelly. Kelly was rather a decent type, unassuming in his manner, married with a young family. He was not a member of the Volunteers but politically he had Sinn Féin tendencies. Sixsmith blamed him bitterly for the fact that his (Sixsmith's) men were on strike and that his engines and thrashing machines lay idle. Late one night or in the early hours of the morning, a bomb was thrown through Kelly's sittingroom window. Beyond the broken glass in the window and some damage to the furniture in the sitting-room caused, by the explosion of the bomb, very little harm was done. Naturally, however, Kelly, his wife and family, all of whom were sleeping in the house at the time, received a bad shock. The incident was investigated by the R.I.C. at the time but no arrests were made.

Now, about the time of the Truce, I think some days before it, a couple of Volunteers called to another Protestant farmer, named Goucher, seeking a subscription for Volunteer funds. Mrs. Goucher, who met them, refused to give anything, slammed the door in their faces and the Volunteers then left. One of them is supposed to have remarked before leaving, "You may be sorry yet!"

A few days later, one of Goucher's cows was killed and left lying on its back in a field with its four teats cut away. The news of this outrage reached the ears of Gerald Brennan, who was then the Battalion O/C, before I heard of it. He instructed me to go to the district at once and to

investigate the occurrence. The remark supposed to have been passed by the Volunteer when leaving Goucher¹'s house made things look bad for us, but both Gerald Brennan and myself were certain that no member of the Volunteers would be guilty of such an act.

During the course of the investigation, I arrested a "character" of ill-repute, known locally as the Goose Kelly (no relation of Kelly, the Trade Union official), whom I suspected as being the one most likely to do such a deed. He was an employee of Sixsmith. He denied having any hand, act or part in the killing of Goucher's cow. We held him prisoner for some weeks and interrogated him from time to time. During the course of an interrogation, he admitted that it was he who fired the bomb through Kelly's window a few years before.

He stated that he did it at the instigation of Sixsmith. He said that the bomb was made in Sixsmith's garage, that Sixsmith and himself carried it to within a field of Kelly's house. There they detonated it and Sixsmith refused to go any further with him, but gave him a pound note and told him to go ahead by himself and to throw it through Kelly's window.

Sixsmith was then arrested and tried before an I.R.A. military court for his complicity in the bombing of Kelly's house. The members of the court who tried him were George O'Dwyer (the Brigade O/C and later a Chief Superintendent in the Garda Síochána), Liam Stack of Carlow (he, too, at a later date became a Chief Superintendent of the Garda Síochána) and a third, whose name I regret I cannot now recall. I was present at the court as a witness. Sixsmith admitted his guilt, and the court fined him a sum of £100 which he paid there and then from cash which he had with him.

We never discovered the culprits responsible for the killing of Goucher's cow.

During the Truce period, I acted as Quartermaster of the Brigade Training Camp.

This camp was situated at a place called Monawee, about midway between Castlecomer and Carlow.

SIGNED: James Brennan

(James Brennan)

DATE: 26th February 1955

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NO. W.S. 1102

WITNESS J. Grace
(J. Grace)