

ROINN COSANTA

BUREAU OF MILITARY HISTORY

STATEMENT BY WITNESS

DOCUMENT NO. W.S 1,360

Witness

Colonel James Delaney,
5 Grosvenor Terrace,
Monkstown,
Co. Dublin

Identity

Member of Brigade Flying Column;
Brigade Musketry Officer;
Director Army Ordnance.

Subject

Purchase of arms and ammo. London, and their transfer to Killkenny, 1920-
1921

File No. S 2681

Statement by Colonel James Delaney,
5 Grosvenor Terrace, Monkstown, Co. Dublin WS 1360

My association with the Irish Republican Army began in May, 1920, when a number of Irish political prisoners were on hunger-strike in Wormwood Scrubbs Prison, London. I was living in London at the time, and in the precincts of the prison I saw the clashes which took place between members of the London Company of Irish Volunteers and rowdies who went there to break up demonstrations by women folk of Irish origin who gathered each evening to recite the Rosary near the prison gates. Amongst the prisoners who were on hunger-strike there was one whom I had known from my boyhood days. He was Mr. Thomas Treacy of Dean St., Kilkenny.

The prisoners were released after about two weeks on hunger-strike and I visited Mr. (Tom) Treacy in a hospital at Highgate where he was recuperating. I asked him if there was anything I could do in London to assist the movement at home, and he enquired if there was any prospect of getting revolvers and ammunition in London and getting them across to an address or addresses in Kilkenny which he would send me after his return home. I agreed and, after arranging a code by which we would correspond, we parted.

At the time I was familiar with two Irishmen named Lynch and Cooley. Both were ex-members of the London police, having been dismissed from the police force for going on strike. They put me in touch with a London Irishman, a bookmaker by the name of Conroy, as a man who might be able [2] to procure arms for sale. Through Conroy I contacted a Jewman named Ginger Barnett in Petticoat Lane in the East End and a halt-caste named Darby the Coon. The latter could best be described as a gang leader. Meanwhile, Tom Treacy had sent me £100 to start off with.

With the assistance of Barnett and Darby the Coon, I would say that I managed to purchase two or three revolvers or automatics each week. Sometimes they sold them to me direct, but mostly, with one or the other, I visited sailors lodging houses in Petticoat Lane, Limehouse Causeway, Pennyfields (Chinese quarter) and negro lodging houses in Cable St. in the East End. Sailors whom I met in those places were the principal source of supply, and I paid anything from £2 to £4 for each revolver according to its size and condition.

I was staying at the time in a boarding house in Grosvenor Road near Victoria Station, but I never brought any of the revolvers there. As I got them I handed them over to a Kilkenny girl by the name of Annie O'Gorman who would be waiting to meet me at the Marble Arch. Later, in her residence, I would wrap the revolvers up in twelve yards of tailors wadding and post the parcel to Kilkenny. I never sent more than one at a time. At first, in accordance with the arrangements I had made with Tom Treacy, I addressed the parcels to The Secretary, Electric Lighting Scheme, Town Hall, Kilkenny. This was, of course, a fictitious address, but the Town Clerk in Kilkenny, who knew nothing about the contents, had been advised by Tom Treacy or the late Leo Dardis to bring all parcels so addressed to the late Peter de Loughry in Parliament St. Later, on instructions from Treacy, I sent the parcels to other addresses in Kilkenny, including that of a cousin of my own. [3]. This plan of purchasing the arms in London and getting them across worked well until November, 1920. Then I was introduced by a most reliable Irish girl who was a friend of Annie O'Gorman, to an Irishman whose name I cannot now recall. This man told me that there were a couple of hundred revolvers in a military store near Victoria Station. He said they were revolvers which had been handed in by Australian soldiers before their return to Australia; that he knew one of the storemen intimately and that the latter was prepared to bring out some of the revolvers and sell them. I told him that I would buy one after he said that he would act as the go-between between the storeman and myself. He got me one and after paying him for it I had £50 on hands, so I told him that I was prepared to take a further 25 at £2 each.

He agreed and I made a further appointment to meet him again at 7 p.m. at Trafalgar Square. He was under the impression that I would bring the money and an empty suitcase for the guns to Trafalgar Square. He kept the appointment but I had neither the suitcase nor the money with me.

After greeting me, he excused himself for a moment and crossed the road. I was immediately apprehended by two detectives who came from behind me. They searched me and then took me to Scotland Yard. One of the detectives was Chief Inspector McGrath of the C.I.D. He questioned me for four hours and took a statement from me, in which I denied point blank that I had any interest in purchasing arms except that I was going to Belfast and that, if I could get it, I was prepared to buy one revolver to protect myself from both sides while in Belfast. He took my keys and my address and I was then put in a cell in Canning St. police station

The next morning I was taken again to McGrath's office. He handed me back my keys and £50 which I had locked up in my suitcase in my room of the boarding house in Grosvenor Road and told me I was free to go. They (the C.I.D.) had searched my room during the night but had found nothing which would in any way incriminate me. At the time I had seven revolvers with Annie O'Gorman.

The first thing I did after leaving Scotland Yard was to change my digs from Grosvenor Road to ones in Edgeware Road. I also decided to leave London and to go home to Kilkenny. I got in touch with Miss O'Gorman and met her at the Marble Arch, when I explained the position to her. I told her I would take three of the revolvers with me, and I asked her to wrap up the other four exactly as she had seen me do it and to post them singly to addresses in Kilkenny which I gave her.

One of the revolvers which I took with me was a Webley Service revolver and I fastened it between the back buttons of my trousers with the barrel pointing up my back. Another was a short parabellum, which I broke down into its component parts and sewed them into the hem at the bottom of my overcoat. The third was a small 32 automatic, and this I sewed into a shoulder pad of my overcoat.

I travelled via Holyhead and Dunlaoghaire, and except that my luggage was searched at Holyhead I reached Kilkenny without incident, where I handed over the three revolvers to Tom Treacy and gave him an account of what had happened to me in London. As regards the four revolvers which I had left behind with Miss O'Gorman, one reached its destination safely. The second one she sent reached the sorting office in the post office, Kilkenny. Here a post office assistant named O'Driscoll saw the butt of it protruding from the wadding and wrapping. He handed the parcel over to the Postmaster, who reported it to the R.I.C.

It was addressed to a girl in the Cloth Hall, Kilkenny, who knew nothing about it beyond the fact that when the parcel arrived she was to hand it over to Kieran Tobin, who was then a Volunteer officer in Kilkenny. This discovery led to the girl's arrest, and it must also have led to the discovery in the post of the other two, for although both were posted in London by Miss O'Gorman they were never delivered in Kilkenny. Thus finished until after the Truce the purchasing of arms by me for the I.R.A.

A few weeks after my return to Kilkenny I made application to be posted to an active service unit. However, the rearrest of Tom Treacy and the arrest of Peter de Loughry and several other officers of the Kilkenny Brigade resulted in delay. There were two active service units in the Kilkenny area at the time. One was based on the Callan-Tipperary border, and the other was in South Kilkenny, based on Graiguenamanagh. The Kilkenny City Battalion had no active service unit and there was no section from Kilkenny City serving with either of the two brigade active service units. Eventually, about February, 1921, the late Leo Dardis, who was then Vice Commandant of the Kilkenny Brigade, told me that arrangements had been made to have me posted to the active service unit in South Kilkenny and that I was to proceed to

Graiguenamanagh. He arranged an appointment for me with Martin Mulhall of Goslington, who was then Commandant of the 1st Battalion, Kilkenny Brigade. I met Mulhall near his own house on a Saturday night. He administered the oath to me, issued me with a rifle and 50 rounds of 303 ammunition and gave me a guide to conduct me part of the way to Graiguenamanagh.

Other guides took me over in turn and I covered the fifteen odd miles on foot, reaching Graiguenamanagh on Sunday morning. On arrival I was informed by the local Battalion Staff that the column was then away on operations in North Kilkenny and that I was to await their return and stay in the meantime at Keating's of Ballyheagan. In about three weeks the column returned. The late George Dwyer, then the Brigade Commandant, normally was in command. He was, however, absent in Dublin and Michael O'Carroll of Graiguenamanagh (now of Thomastown, Co. Kilkenny) was acting as column leader. The strength of the column when I joined it was eleven men, excluding the Brigade O/C, George Dwyer. Their names were as follows:

Michael O'Carroll, Graiguenamanagh

Jack Walsh do.

Christopher Doyle do.

James. Doyle do.

Robert Doyle do.

Patrick Quinn do.

Martin Bates, The Rower

Michael O'Hanrahan, Inistiogue

Jack Hartley, Glenmore

Nicholas. Mullins, Thomastown

James Purcell, Goresbridge.

Some weeks after the return of the column to Graiguenamanagh the following men reported for duty from the Kilkenny City Battalion:

Edward Holland, Tullaroan

John Wall, Threecastles

Kieran Cody, Kilkenny

John Keane, Kilkenny

Michael Ruth, Kilkenny

Michael McSweeney, Kilkenny

Kieran Tobin, Kilkenny.

Life on the column was very uneventful until about June, 1921. We spent a lot of our time on the slopes of Brandon Hill, the roads around which were used by the Auxiliaries from Woodstock House, Inistiogue, but we could never catch them in an ambush position. Then early in June, 1921, we moved on foot up into North County Kilkenny.

The route as we went would, I should say, be approximately 35 miles. I am not familiar with the place-names around North County Kilkenny, but, as far as I can remember, it was near Coon we met George O'Dwyer. He told us that he proposed to attack on the following Saturday morning a party of British troops which usually (on Saturday mornings) escorted explosives from Castlecomer military barracks to the coal mines. This party generally consisted of a military lorry with the explosives and followed by an escort of troops in two Crossley tenders. The point selected for the ambush was at Coolbawn, about a mile from Castlecomer on the main Castlecomer-Athy road.

For this operation about 30 local Volunteers, armed with shotguns, were mobilised to reinforce the column. About 3 a.m. on the Saturday morning work began on the laying of a mine in the centre of the road. This task was completed by 6 a.m. when all parties moved into their positions. I was put in charge of a party of 10 men, some of whom were members of the

column and the remainder local men with shotguns. My position was in the centre of the ambush but about 60 or 70 yards to the left of where the mine had been placed on the road. On my right and almost opposite to the mine, George O'Dwyer and Gerald Brennan (now Deputy Commissioner of the Garda Síochána) occupied a position with a similar party, and a third party of about the same strength were on my left. Nicholas Mullins, Jack Hartley and James Doyle of the column were with this latter party. All three parties were behind a low wall or bank on the right-hand side of the road as one comes from Castlecomer. To our rear there was a steep decline in the ground towards a ravine, beyond which the ground rose sharply to a height. Here, too, there was an abundance of shrubbery and small woods. On the opposite side of the road there was a steep incline in the ground up from the roadside.

Scouts were placed on the high ground on both sides of the ambush position and, with the aid of field glasses, kept the military barracks in Castlecomer under observation.

The lorries were expected to leave Castlecomer about 10 a.m. and the plan was that the party on my left would allow the first two to pass them and attack the third. I was to allow the first lorry to go on to the mine and attack the second one. The mine was to be exploded when the first lorry came over it, and it (the lorry) would then be attacked by the party on my right. This plan looked reasonably good to me, provided, of course, that the lorries came the way we expected them to come. In addition to my rifle and revolver, I had 6 grenades (G.H.Q.pattern) which I proposed to use myself. The range to the centre of the road from my position was about six yards. Our total frontage along the right side of the road was about 300 yards.

From early morning horse-drawn carts of coal from the coal mines came along the road. These were diverted down a side road on our right, where the horses were tied and the drivers were taken to a house and kept under guard. Similar precautions were taken in the case of any other people who came along.

The morning wore on but no sign of the lorries coming. The scouts, however, kept reporting to O'Dwyer that the lorries were in the barracks and were moving around from building to building as if loading up. Nothing happened until the early afternoon, and then the first intimation I had that all was not well was when I heard a shout from a member of the column on my right: "Retire, we are surrounded on all sides". Almost simultaneously there was a burst of fire opened by British troops from a wood on my left rear. I imagine it was this first burst of fire which killed Nicholas Mullins and Jack Hartley, whom, as I have already mentioned, were with the party on my left.

I collected my rifle and the grenades and, bringing my ten men with me, I ran down the incline and into a wood at my rear. This wood had not yet been occupied by the British troops and, passing through it, we reached the high ground beyond the ravine. Here my party was joined by some other members of the column, including George O'Dwyer and some of the local men. We entered a grove of yew trees and lay down. Beyond this grove it was all open country and we could not move out, so we remained there until darkness came that night. It was surprising that the British troops remained unaware of our position in this little isolated grove. There were at least 20 men in it and it was not more than 300 yards from the ambush position.

We could hear lorries on the road as more British troops arrived from Kilkenny and other towns within a radius of 12 to 15 miles. We heard them firing and exploding the mine on the road, but they made no move to come near the grove where we lay. After dark we moved away across country towards the County Carlow border, where we remained for the remainder of the night. In addition to Mullins and Hartley, we suffered one other casualty - James Doyle - who apparently tried to cross the road and was seriously wounded and captured.

A word of explanation as to how the British troops came to surprise us is necessary. Subsequently I learned the facts. Our guards who were looking after the civilian detainees down the side road permitted a workman to proceed to his place of employment which was only a very short distance away. This man told his employers - two sisters named Dreaper - that he had been held up by armed men on the road and, I presume, he gave them an account of all he had seen. One of the Miss Dreaipers went on horseback along the railway line into Castlecomer and informed the British military of our presence on the main road. The British officers in Castlecomer must have had little difficulty in guessing what we were waiting for and laid their plans accordingly. The fact that the lorries which usually carried the explosives and escort moved, around the barracks in their normal way would indicate that the officers knew, or assumed, that the barracks was under observation. The troops, who came out of the barracks on foot and surprised us must have been got out secretly and in small parties, for our scouts noticed no massed movement of troops leaving the barracks. Miss Dreaper's house was subsequently burned by the I.R.A. as a reprisal for her act of treachery.

After Coolbawn, O'Dwyer divided the column into sections.. The Kilkenny City members of it were formed into one section, and he placed me in charge of it with the rank of Lieutenant. There were, however, no incidents worth recording from then until the Truce in July, 1921.

Shortly before the Truce he again promoted me, this time to the rank of Captain, with an appointment as Brigade Musketry instructor. During the Truce period I was the chief instructor at the brigade training camp, and during this period I also paid two visits to London to purchase arms for the brigade. During my first visit I purchased about 30 or 40 revolvers. I was in London on my second visit when the Articles of Agreement were signed on December 6th, 1921.

On the following morning I received a message from George O'Dwyer to return to Kilkenny at once and not to make any further arrangements regarding the purchase of arms. After the Treaty was signed I acted as Brigade Liaison Officer in Kilkenny and continued to act in this capacity until March, 1922, when the British forces evacuated Kilkenny military barracks. I then reported at Beggars Bush Barracks, Dublin, where I was given a commission in the Regular Army.

Signed: James Delaney Colonel
(James Delaney) Colonel.

Date: 2nd March, 1956.
2nd March 1956.

Witness: J. Grace
(J. Grace)

