

ROINN  COSANTA.

BUREAU OF MILITARY HISTORY, 1913-21

STATEMENT BY WITNESS.

DOCUMENT NO. W.S. 1601.

Witness

Deputy Commissioner Garrett Brennan,
Garda Síochána,
Dublin Castle.

Identity.

Battn. Adjnt., 3rd Battalion, Kilkenny Bgde.
" Comdt., " " " "

Subject.

Part history of the 3rd Battalion,
Kilkenny Bgde., I.R.A., 1914-21.

Conditions, if any, Stipulated by Witness.

Nil.

File No S.2925.

Form B S M. 2

STATEMENT BY DEPUTY COMMISSIONER GARRETT BRENNAN,

Garda Slochána. Dublin Castle,
formerly Adjutant, and later Commandant, 3rd Battalion,
Kilkenny Brigade. I.R.A.

Part history of the 5rd Battalion, Kilkenny Brigade. I.R.A.:

I was born in 1894 in Castlecomer, Co. Kilkenny, a pleasant village of about 1,000 inhabitants on the river Deen. I was the eldest son of a family of ten - six boys and four girls - two of the girls being older than I. My father, Con Brennan, who was the son of a small farmer at Cruckawn, two miles from the town, ran two shops - a hardware and grocery. My mother was, of mining stock. Our family was popular amongst the farming class and amongst the miners of the nearby anthracite collieries. I was christened Garrett, but was known in the family and to friends as Gerald Brennan.

My father was versed in the local tradition and often spoke to us, children of the Cromwellian settlers who had been planted on the lands, of his family. He was a member of the Coiste Ceanntair of the Gaelic League and was responsible for bringing an Irish teacher - Con Horgan - from Ballyvourney, Co. Cork, to Castlecomer where a branch of the Gaelic League was started about 1905. One of my earliest recollections was to see Douglas Hyde arrive on an outside car from Kilkenny. He had come by train from Dublin to open and adjudicate at a feis in Castlecomer. The first feis in the county was, in fact, held at Coon and was organised by Fr. Delaney, the curate there, about 1904. With other boys of the national school, I stayed on for an hour after school three times a week to be taught Irish. The Rosary was recited in Irish in our family, although my parents or grandparents were not native Irish speakers. I learned enough Irish through the 'Módh Díreach' to enable me to pass through all grades of the secondary school course.

At the age of 13 I was sent to St. Kieran's College, Kilkenny, with a younger brother, and after five years there I was sent to Knockbeg College, Carlow. I went on to University College, Dublin, where I took an arts course. Two of my professors there were Eoin McNeill (Latin) and Thomas McDonagh (English literature). I played hurling and rugby with the College teams. John Ryan (later Dr. Ryan who attended Dan Breen in 1920 in the Mater Hospital), was captain of the hurling team, and a Presbyterian from the North of Ireland, was captain of the rugby team.

In November, 1913, with a number of other students of the University I attended a meeting at the Rotunda when Eoin McNeill launched the formation of the Irish Volunteers as a counter army against the Orange Volunteers of the North then being organised by Sir Edward Carson. I signed an application form to join the Irish Volunteers at the meeting, but I heard nothing more about the matter. I heard afterwards that only the students from St. Enda's College, Rathfarnham, which was run by Pádraig Pearse, were organised before 1916. There was no Volunteer company founded in U.C.D. until about 1917. About May, 1914, I was surprised to read in the papers that John Redmond, M.P., had taken over the Volunteers. There was a split amongst the leaders, which in turn split the Volunteers, throughout the country into two camps - the Redmondites and the Sinn Féin Volunteers.

On my return to Castlecomer on holidays in the summer of 1914-, I found a curious set-up. There had been a County Council election in which the local Unionist landlord, Capt. Prior Wandesforde, and a John Fogarty, a Redmondite supporter, were local candidates. The Sinn Féin Club and Volunteers' supported Wandesforde, while the Redmondite Volunteers supported Fogarty. The Sinn Féin Volunteers were supplied with arms for training under British ex-soldiers by Wandesforde, and the Redmondites drilled with wooden guns. The latter were mostly old men of the farming class. I thought that if the Redmondite party were to be licked, they should not be beaten with the landlord stick. My family were Redmondites and I gave them nominal support. I saw - no sign of any fight against England at that period, but it seemed to my immature mind that there was a civil war developing in the south, which, of course, would suit Carson.

In August, 1914, the World War broke out. All the British recruits were called up and the local drilling in both camps of Volunteers died off. John Redmond offered his Volunteers to the British army to defend Ireland from the Germans. That put him out of favour even with his own Volunteers. Wandesforde joined the British army with the rank of Captain, and he became soured because none of the Sinn Féin Volunteers joined up. He didn't influence his adopted countrymen. Except for a few here and there, even the local Unionists did not join up with him. A recruiting meeting held in Castlecomer raised only one man for the British army - he was of the tinker or travelling class.

A younger brother of mine, John, who was at school at Rochestown College, Cork, ran away from the school with the son of the French Consul and tried to enlist. He was too young and was not then accepted. He did a radio course at Cork and later joined the British army as a driver in the Transport Corps.

The arts course which I had studied, however, left no prospect for me except teaching in a secondary school, which I disliked. I went to Cork in 1915 and studied radio, and early in 1916 I joined the Marconi Company as Radio Officer. I served on cross-channel troop ships and on a hospital ship in the Mediterranean for two years. I got the radio news of the Rebellion in Dublin whilst off Malta. I got into several first-class arguments with the ship's officers over Ireland, and in June, 1918 I was ordered home overland from Marseilles, with another Radio Officer of German extraction. At Paris, we were met by two officers of the Sureté Nationale, who told us they had instructions to find us accommodation. We were taken to a hotel and left next morning for London. On arrival at Dover we were ordered aside while the other passengers went on. We were searched by Scotland Yard officers, as was our luggage, and we were questioned individually about our activities, sympathies, etc. Young Leidig, my shipmate, told me afterwards that they had asked him whether he knew if Brennan spoke or read German or had manifested any pro-German sympathies. We were allowed to go on to London and told to report at Scotland Yard every day.

I went there next day and refused to report any further. I demanded a permit to return to Ireland, which was refused. Detectives called at my lodgings - where there were a number of Irish people - checking on the list of lodgers. Once I answered the door and told the officers that Brennan had said he was going to Ireland that evening. Another officer came back next day and recognised me. He was very annoyed and told me they were considering interning me and that I was prohibited from leaving London while my position was being decided. In September, 1918, I was told I was free to join another ship, but that the Mediterranean or Ireland were barred to me for the duration of the war.

To get away from England I joined a ship going to the River Plate, where we arrived on Armistice Day, 11th November, 1918. I met a number of people in Buenos Aires of Irish extraction who flew the new Irish tricolour flag amongst the Union Jack and French flags. I returned to England in December but still could not get a permit to return to Ireland as the Defence of the Realm Regulation was still in force. I went on another ship to South Africa and India, returning by the Suez Canal. I returned to Castlecomer in September, 1919.

So far this statement has been all about myself, but I tell it to show the background of the period as far as I knew it.

At that period anyone who had had anything to do with the British forces during the war was somewhat suspect at home. I found on my return that my family had swung over to Sinn Féin. One of my friends was Pat Mulhall, draper, of Castlecomer, and another was Jeremiah Kelly,

grocer, who had been connected with the Sinn Féin movement and the Gaelic League from the start. My family were also on friendly terms with the farmers, of Coolade, about three miles on the north side of Castlecomer. In the townland of Coolade, most of the small farmers bore North of Ireland names - the Culletons, McGuires, O'Neills, Clancys, Dunphys and McDonalds. According to my father, the local tradition was that they came down with O'Donnell to Kinsale, and, on their retreat being cut off by the British line south of Dublin, they were sheltered by the local people, settled down and inter-married with the locals. Some of them were redheads. I knew them all well and, in particular, Seamus Culleton and Pat Dunphy.

I learned that Seamus Culleton was leader of the Coolade Volunteers which had been founded in 1914, with Pat Dunphy as second-in-command. This was the first Volunteer company formed in the Castlecomer area. They were mobilised for Easter, 1916, but the orders were countermanded. In 1917 Volunteers had been reorganised and eleven companies were formed in the Castlecomer area, known first as the North Kilkenny Battalion but later as the 3rd Battalion of Kilkenny Brigade. The first Battalion Commandant was Seamus Culleton, who resigned from that position about 1918 in favour of Pat Fleming of The Swan, on the border of Co. Laois. Seamus Culleton remained Vice Commandant of the battalion until 1920. Pat Fleming was arrested for drilling and wearing Volunteer uniform. While a prisoner in Maryborough Jail he wrecked the Jail furniture and was the first to go on hunger strike. He was transferred to Mountjoy gaol, from which he escaped and went to America where he remained until the Truce in 1921.

Pat Fleming was replaced as Battalion Commandant by George Dwyer of Coon, who had been a constable in the Dublin Metropolitan Police but had left and joined the Australian Police. He returned to Ireland about 1917. George Dwyer became Brigade Commandant on the arrest of Peter deLoughry, Brigade Commandant, and Tom Treacy, vice Commandant, after an inspection tour of the brigade area by Ernie O'Malley. The names of deLoughry and Treacy, both fine officers, were found on O'Malley on his arrest at the home of Jim Hanrahan, Commandant of the Thomastown Battalion. George Dwyer's name was also found on O'Malley, but he escaped the British raiding parties and went 'on the run'. Incidentally, deLoughry and Treacy had organised and taken part in the attack on Hugginstown police barracks (the first in Ireland which surrendered) in 1919. After the arrest of deLoughry and Treacy nothing went right in the brigade area.

Dwyer was replaced as Commandant of the 3rd Battalion by Michael Fleming, who had resigned from the R.I.C. and who was a brother of the former Commandant, Pat Fleming. Michael Delaney of Kiltown was Vice Commandant. Delaney was arrested about August, 1920, and sentenced to a period of imprisonment for possession of ammunition which was discovered, during a search of his house. Seamus Culleton then went back as Vice Commandant.

At Easter, 1920, the vacated R.I.C. barracks in the area at Corbettstown, and Newtown were demolished by Volunteers, as were other such premises all over the county. This indicated to me that the Volunteers were serious and were organised, and I applied to Michael Delaney to be permitted to join. In May, 1920, I was accepted as a member of 'D' Company (Castlecomer) and in a short time I was elected 2nd Lieutenant of the company to replace an officer who had been removed for using the Volunteer organisation to further his private ends.

About that time an order was issued from the brigade to all shopkeepers and to the people in general to boycott the R.I.C. On the morning the order was received I was serving behind the counter in my father's shop when two R.I.C. men came in for some item. I told them I would not serve them as the Volunteers had issued such an order. The shop was full of customers and the police left in a hurry. Later that day they returned with a Sergeant and demanded to be served. I again refused and one of them came behind the counter to take some article. The Sergeant, however, called him back and they left, the Sergeant saying to me, "We know all about you from London". I found, however, that they had been similarly refused in all but about four shops in the town. My father said nothing when I told him, except that they were bad customers anyhow, always leaving bills due when they were transferred.

The Volunteer company parades at the time consisted of drilling in close and extended formation in fields at night-time. There was no serious training in arms or otherwise. The company arms comprised about half a dozen shotguns, with a few dozen cartridges. After a short time I took my section separately. We got a supply of cartridges and loaded them with buckshot bound with molten candle grease. I trained a signalling section in Morse code with flash lamp for night work and flag semaphore for day work.

Information was conveyed from Brigade Headquarters that the British intended to call in all the shotguns in possession of farmers and others, and we decided to forestall them. About forty shotguns were collected, most of them surrendered voluntarily but a few had to be taken by force. A week later the R.I.C. started on their rounds to collect the guns, but they only got those held by Capt. Wandesforde. We had missed these - they were conveyed in a cart of his to the barracks early one morning.

Our intelligence system was very bad. Most of our information about the R.I.C. and military was rumour. One of the military Tommies, however, was talkative rather than friendly, and it was possible to get out of him what he knew about the night's intended movements. Two of the R.I.C. constables, Delaney and Butler, were friendly but reserved, and we never knew whether they were trying to get information or not. One of them, Delaney, warned me of an intended search of one of the Volunteers' houses, that of Dunphy of Kilkenny Street. Delaney, in fact, took the military to a house a few doors from Dunphy's in case the warning had not been passed on.

Butler asked me one day if I would like a cadetship in the R.I.C. He said they had got a circular from Headquarters asking if they knew any suitable candidates. He thought I would suit. I told him that I was not interested. At the time I was not known to them to be a member of the Volunteers, although they regarded me as a bit of a Sinn Féiner.

In September, 1920, the Brigade O/C planned an attack on a military foot patrol which usually moved out about thirty strong, in close formation, on Sunday nights along the Colliery Road towards Coolbawn, where they remained about 2 or 3 hours. The attack was to take place at the "Bull Gate"¹, about half a mile outside the town, from behind a wall. I asked the Brigade O/C how and when he would open fire. He said he would call on them to surrender and then fire. I suggested we should have a car parked on the road about 50 yards from the position with head lamps, focussed on the position, the lights to be switched on when the military came into the trap. He agreed and young Michael Fogarty was ordered to bring his uncle's hackney car to the position. John Corcoran and Tom Duffy, with myself, were the others detailed for the job. There were to be about twenty others, from Coon Company. I was not told the exact strength to be engaged.

With Duffy I was oiling up the guns, when word came about 8 o'clock that the operation was called off. The military in fact moved out about 9 o'clock, but turned off another road before reaching the position. They returned through a wood to their barracks. I heard afterwards that a note was found under the door of the Battalion Intelligence Officer's house in the following terms:- "Your game is known, look out". There was an investigation by the Vice Commandant, Michael Delaney, but I never heard how it ended. There were some doubts whether the note was written in the enemy camp. My view was that someone got the wind up, whether it leaked out to some shopkeeper who feared reprisals I cannot guess, but I felt that the note was written within our own camp. I thought also that the reason that the military turned off and returned, to barracks was

because there was a large crowd in the town of followers of Cloneen football team who had played a match that day in Kilkenny. They had arrived in Castlecomer about 8 o'clock and remained standing about. I could never get to the bottom of the incident. It shook my confidence in a lot of people.

Towards the end of September, 1920, I was asked by the Brigade O/C to take on the job of Battalion Adjutant and to organise the battalion communications. I attended my first Battalion Council meeting about two weeks later and found that the system of communication between the Battalion Headquarters and the companies was haphazard. There was no regular system of communicating. I arranged that each battalion officer should be responsible for passing dispatches from Battalion Headquarters to a number of companies, the Battalion O/C to do two - 'A' and 'L' Companies, the Vice Commandant to do three - 'B', 'C' and 'G', while the Battalion Adjutant would do six, - "D", "E", "F", "H", "I" and "K". Occasionally I duplicated the dispatches by other routes and tested the time taken to reach the company officer. There was always the problem of delay en route, the messenger having been at work, etc. when the dispatch arrived at his house for relay to the next point. It often put the Battalion Adjutant in a fix to get dispatch riders, for the town - cycles were then barred by the military unless under permit. Often we had to use the Cumann na mBan when the military were known, to be on patrol.

Battalion meetings were held every four or six weeks in an outhouse owned by Nicholas Dunphy in a farm in Crutt. The Battalion O/C never seemed to have planned ahead for any action. The talk was generally about what was going on in other areas. Some of the company officers and the Vice Commandant told me on a few occasions he never intended to do anything. I began to see that we would have to do something on our own initiative, but I felt that I could not force the pace, being only a short time on the staff.

I began buying gelignite from a few trusted miners, Mick Ryan and Tom Dowd of Upper Hill. The system of supply to miners in the collieries at the time was that they paid for whatever amount of gelignite the manager thought, they would need for the particular coal seam. With economy and skilful use, they were able to save about 1lb. per week.

In February, 1921, I got Michael Fogarty (1st Lieut. 'D' Company) appointed Battalion Engineer. He was a blacksmith and motor mechanic combined. He was aged about 18 years and was the only support of his widowed mother and a family of six younger than himself. He was a great lad. He started experimenting on hand grenades, made from barrel steel of 3" diameter which Fogarty screwed and capped at both ends. A 1/4 inch bolt held in position by a spring and passed through a hole in one cap acted as a firing pin. The container was ground to splinter. After several try-outs we got one which worked. The job was slow as the Battalion Engineer had to work on them after hours. He had a couple of employees, who were not trusted to that extent.

We also experimented with a mine made from concrete held in a 1/2 cwt. paint drum. The gelignite and detonator were contained in a 7 lb. paint tin in the centre. The concrete, with shrapnel iron, was poured in in three stages, leaving each lot about two days to set before the next lot was poured in. The mine was exploded by fuse. We tried it out in a wood. It brought down a tree and made a crater about 5 feet deep). There was one drawback, however. It could not be used with any accuracy against a moving target.

I asked a returned Yank who had some claim to medical practice with electrical massage, to make me an induction coil. He said he could not, and I asked him to order for me 1,000 yards of electric bell wire. He told me he dare not order that amount, and suggested a Ford car coil. I got one but it was defective. I think I must have been given a cast-off. There was an electric shot-firer to be got at the mines, but the Brigade O/C told me we were forbidden by G.H.Q. to raid the mines or to attack the military when delivering explosives to the mines. It seems that G.H.Q. had given this order as after Soloheadbeg ambush all supplies of explosives to quarries were cut off throughout the country. The Castlecomer mines were the only commercial firm then being supplied with gelignite, and Capt. Wandesforde had threatened to close them down if there was any interference. That would throw about 500 people out of work, including about 300 miners and about 200 carriers, as well as cutting off the fuel supply for an area of about 15 miles radius.

We next made, after several attempts a four-pronged spiker of British military anti-cavalry pattern from a drawing received from G.H.Q. The prongs were about four inches long and were so bent that no matter how the thing was thrown about it rested on three prongs while one prong stuck straight up. We supplied a pattern to each company. They were to be used on roads, frequented by military to puncture motor lorry tyres. Another idea was to string a wire hawser across the road from tree trunks at a level which would pull the military off the lorries. The Battalion Engineer measured the height of the cab of a military lorry with a lath laid carelessly beside it when it called to his uncle's garage for petrol.

The difficulty, however, was to get the military moving to any set time or plan. We lay for them on different roads but they never came that way. We had the idea that instead of shooting at pot-bellied, policemen, many of them of a harmless type, we should concentrate on British military. One coffin going back to England would be worth hundreds of police shot. The British Premier at the time always referred to the Irish shooting their own police force.

Two items of intelligence came our way at that point. A soldier having a drink one afternoon said they were going out that night to raid some farmer fellow. All companies were informed. The military raided for Jim Conway, O/C of 'K' Company (Muckalee), who had cleared out. They set fire to his haybarn. A few days, afterwards, Michael Cassidy, a farm labourer, was shot a few miles from Castlecomer, and a label was affixed "Spies Beware". Cassidy was fond of a drink and had boasted that he would stop the Volunteers. He used to call to a forge and the military called there also. Although he was shot in "D" Company area, none of the members, of that company or the Battalion Staff knew anything about his death until his body was taken in by the military. It was said later that he acted as guide for the military and police in raids around Coon area.

Another similar piece of information was received of another night raid five or six miles, out. The companies were again notified. In this, case it was a raid on a parish court where the Battalion Vice Commandant, Seamus. Culleton, and the O/C of "A" Company, John Fleming, Cloneen, were arrested. They got three months imprisonment. Neither had received the dispatch, which was delayed en route.

Instructions were received from the Brigade H.Q. to seize dog tax money when collected in March by the Petty Sessions Clerk. This was done at Castlecomer by Jim Brennan, O/C 'L' Company, who held up the clerk in the Courthouse and got away with about £80 in silver. In case of hot pursuit, he was to turn off through the Demesne, at the end of which he was to be met, by the Battalion O/C. The route was changed, however, by the latter and Brennan was told to cycle 1 1/2 miles further on, which was up hill, and turn up a by-road. He narrowly missed capture. The military were at a Point-to-Point meeting at Jenkinstown that day and arrived back about 15 minutes after Brennan had left. They followed him but missed him by about 2 minutes.

On the 9th April, 1921, with the Battalion O/C I attended a brigade meeting held at Rice's of Outrath, near Kilkenny. It was announced by the Brigade O/C that Bagenalstown R.I.C. barracks, was to be attacked on the following Saturday night (16th April). The Brigade O/C had promised

the Carlow Brigade help from the 3rd Battalion. I was ordered to go to Old Leighlin (12 miles from Castlecomer) on Tuesday night to meet the local O/C and arrange to be guided to Bagenalstown. A crossroads on a road from Carlow to Bagenalstown was fixed as rendezvous.

Our job was to hold that road against any reinforcements that should come from Carlow. Incidentally, when we were about to sit down to a meal word was received that the military were approaching. The council had to scatter.

The Battalion O/C and myself, together with the Brigade O/C, cycled back towards Dunbell, where we got supper about 11 o'clock at Mulrooney's, the first bite we had had since 8 o'clock that morning. While in Mulrooney's, a cavalry patrol of British military passed by. We stayed in Dunphy's, of Freynestown that night. I, having lost the toss for a bed, slept by the fire.

On Saturday night, 15th April, I took twenty men from 'D' and 'C' Companies to Old Leighlin. We had only shotguns and our wits to rely upon, as we had no plan of the intended operation. It was a glorious moonlight night. I sent out four scouts in advance with instructions to fire on any enemy if they could not get back word by runner of enemy ahead. When we got within 200 yards of the Carlow Road a runner came back to say that there was an armoured car at the crossroads. We next saw the lights of other vehicles along the road and searchlights stabbing the ground at various points. We halted at the point where the guides from the Carlow Brigade were to meet us. None came. After waiting for three hours, from 11 p.m. until 2 a.m., we came to the conclusion that the area was flooded with British military. We then withdrew, and arrived back in our own area about 5 a.m. On the way to Old Leighlin one of the boys had a mouth organ, and as we stepped out from the hills of Coon he played "As down the glen rode Sarsfield's men". He did not dare to play us on our way back home, for after such a disappointment we were humbly silent. With me on this expedition were John Corcoran (Captain), James Doyle (2nd Lieut.), Tom Duffy (Q/M) and John Ferris, all of 'D;' Company (Castlecomer), and Frank Cleere (Lieut., Paddy Brennan (Little) and 14. other members of 'F' Company (Coon). James Doyle suggested that as we were out we should stay out and form our own column. This was the only sensible remark I heard about the whole job, but it could not be acted upon as no arrangements, had been made for billeting and the column from the 5th Battalion (Graiguenamanagh), used the Coon area, which was the only suitable area in the 3rd Battalion for billeting a column.

The newspapers on Sunday carried an account of this British military activity in the Bagenalstown area. As far as I remember, it was an official statement which was issued to the newspapers and was to the effect that the British authorities had received information about the proposed attack and had taken steps to prevent it. I heard later that the information got out through loose talk in a publichouse, which reached the ears of the R.I.C.

Ambush at Uskerty. Castlecomer. 2nd May. 1921:

On the first or second day of each month the R.I.C. officer at Castlecomer, with one lorry of military, did a tour of the Muckalee/Coon area to pay ex R.I.C. pensioners. Owing to I.R.A. raids, on the postal correspondence to R.I.C., payment to pensioners was made in cash at the period.

On the 2nd May, 1921, an ambush for the R.I.C. military party was laid at Uskerty Wood, about 2 miles from Castlecomer. A tree had been felled across the road. The attacking party was led by the Brigade O/C, and comprised about twenty of the Graiguenamanagh (5th Battalion) Column with rifles and ten shotgun men of "F" (Coon) Company, 3rd Battalion. The enemy party were expected to come direct from Castlecomer, and the attacking party was disposed on that presumption. A scout, however, reported that the military and police were drinking in a publichouse known as the "Salmon Pool", about a quarter of a mile on the Coon side of the ambush position. The attacking party were in the process of changing over to the other side of the felled tree when the party arrived. Fire was opened on them and the British dismounted and replied. Neither side, however could see the other from their positions, and it was blind firing on both sides - The attacking party withdrew.

A scout, Jim Comerford O/C 'F' Company, was captured by the British and taken to Castlecomer barracks. On arrival at the barracks a Black and Tan asked him how he liked the fight - Jim said, "Fine", and straight away got a blow of a rifle butt which smashed his teeth. An old R.I.C. man, however, interfered and Jim was released on account of his youth and probably his influence. He was then only 18 years, and had been elected captain of a company of 70 men. Jim Comerford went to U.S.A. in 1922 and later, became a Judge of New York City Courts and President of the United Irish Counties Association there.

As the British forces at Castlecomer moved out only in the daytime, and then always in two or more vehicles, and their movements could not be anticipated, I considered they might be drawn out at night-time and arranged: -

(a) A sniping attack with hand grenades and shotguns on Castlecomer R.I.C. barracks on the night of 8th May, 1921. The barracks was a three storey building (built as a military barracks after 1798) It was enclosed by a 10 foot wall and was situated in grounds of about two acres. A wooden gate 10 feet high was always kept locked, and barred. A sentry was posted at a wicket gate, in which there was a slide to view visitors, before admission. A wall on the opposite side of the road covered a short avenue approaching the gate. The attacking party comprised six men of 'D' Company and myself. Two of the party approached the gate and knocked, but there was no reply to several loud knockings. It transpired later that the sentry was playing cards in the main barracks at the time. Getting no reply, the hand grenades were thrown on to the roof of the barracks, and a few shots fired. Machine-gun and rifle fire opened up from loop-holes and windows in the barracks. After about half an hour of desultory fire the attacking party withdrew. The British did not move out until after daylight about 6 a.m. It was, expected that they would come out under cover of darkness and be met by fire from attacking party across the road.

A few days after this a carpenter and baker were overheard discussing the attack in a publichouse frequented by military and police. They were arguing about the position of each man of the attacking party, and knew their names.. It seemed that there had been loose talk at least by some of the party.

(b) A similar attack was opened on Clinstown R.I.C. barracks, halfway between Ballyragget and Kilkenny, on the night of 17th May, 1921, by Nicholas Maher, Captain of "I" (Conahy) Company, and ten men. This barracks was a two storey building near which there was no cover except a low wall on the opposite side of the road. The telephone wires were left uncut in the hope that the British military would get word of the attack and come from Castlecomer to aid the R.I.C. at Clinstown. An ambush party was laid at Dysart for the military but they did not move out. Two days, later they visited Clinstown.

(c) Ballyragget R.I.C. barracks was- similarly sniped at on the night of 23rd May, 1921, by "C" (Ballyouskill) Company. Jack McKenna, Battalion Q/M, and Mick Gough, Company Captain, were in charge. The Ballyragget Company ("G" Company) acted as, scouts, and guides.

An ambush party was in position at the Seven Crossroads on the road from Castlecomer to Ballyragget again in the hope that the British military from Castlecomer would come out, but again they remained in the barracks. The ambush party at the Seven Crossroads had lain

petrol/paraffin soaked strips of sheeting to light up the enemy position on the road when the attack was opened. This was another disappointment.

(d). Seeing that there was little hope of getting the British out at night, a ruse appeared to be the only method of attack. As, a rule, on Saturday afternoons, a laundry van with a crew of two British soldiers travelled from the military barracks, in Kilkenny to the military barracks at Castlecomer. A small party were posted at the railway gates, at Corbettstown to seize the van. Two of the attacking party were to dress up in the uniforms, of the British soldiers, and drive the van around to Clinstown R.I.C. barracks where, it was thought, they could gain admittance under this disguise. A fuse mine was to be carried enclosed in a box labelled O.H.M.S. addressed to the Sergeant, R.I.C., Clinstown. The visiting "soldiers" were to say that it was from the Colonel at Kilkenny military barracks and that a military officer would call in a few days to instruct the R.I.C. on its use. Having thus gained admittance, it was hoped to hold up the R.I.C. garrison, sprinkle the place with petrol and set it on fire. The mine was expected to explode in the fire.

On the first Saturday the waiting party was posted at Corbettstown, but the military van did not come. In fact, it went on another road via Ballyragget. On the next Saturday the party lay on the Ballyragget, road, but the military van came by the original route via Corbettstown and the main Kilkenny/Castlecomer road. On the third Saturday the van was followed by a lorry load of Black and Tans from Kilkenny, and the small attacking party of four men could not hope to deal with those numbers. For some reason or another, the object of which was not discovered, six of the Kilkenny Black and Tans, with rifles, patrolled the streets of Castlecomer in pairs, for about three hours on that Saturday afternoon while the van and lorry were in the barracks. At the same time an R.I.C. sergeant from Castlecomer stood on observation at the corner overlooking the four streets of the town. It looked as if the enemy were getting information about our plans, and an old Fenian said that the family of one of the prominent men in the I.R.A. had been traitorous in the Fenian days. This old man said the I.R.A. men could be no good. Strange how tradition dies hard. After that we never took this man into our confidence. He was gradually edged out of the organisation.

(f) It was proposed at a Battalion Council meeting that the R.I.C. and military officers be attacked in a publichouse in Castlecomer where they drank once a week at night. Military patrols in rubber shoes patrolled the streets when the officers were inside. Access to the publichouse could be got by an attacking party by scaling about six garden walls at rear.

It was pointed out, however, that the publican's wife was a mental case with six young children, and that the I.R.A. would be blamed if the woman became violent and hysterical and had to be sent to the asylum, and also that it would not be fair to deprive the children of their mother's care in this manner. All the officers agreed that such an operation could only be described as inhuman and the plan was not further followed up.

The most active of the R.I.C. Sergeants had a wife who was also mental. She went about the town abusing her husband and accusing him of associating with other women, which was not at all true. Everybody felt that this was punishment enough for the man. Another active man was a young constable who never stirred out alone, and only came out of the barracks when acting as a guide for raiding parties of military.

At irregular intervals, the police and military would come out on foot in extended formation before dark, hold the town for a few hours and search passers-by. On one of these occasions, Michael Delaney, Kiltown Battalion, the Vice Commandant, was intercepted returning from a Feis at Coon. Some documents were found on him and he was arrested. In a search of his house some ammunition was found and he was sentenced to 2 years imprisonment. Following the Truce in July he was released.

The ambush at Coolbaun - Saturday. 18th June. 1921.

I.R.A. casualties - 2 killed. 1 wounded?

The Brigade Commandant had been in Dublin during the fortnight prior to 11th June, 1921, and had called a meeting of the 3rd Battalion Staff for Monday night, 13th June, who met him at the house of Fr. McNamara, C.C., Moneenroe, (known locally as Gazebo). The priest was not at home, but his housekeeper asked no questions, as Fr. McNamara was a Parish Justice in the Sinn Féin Courts and friends called at all hours.

At the meeting were: - Brigade Commandant (George O'Dwyer), Battalion Commandant (Michael Fleming), Batt. Vice Comdt. (James Culleton), Batt. Adjutant (Garret (Gerald) Brennan - myself), Batt- Q/M (Jack McKenna). The Brigade Comdt. announced that he had received permission from G.H.Q. to attack the British forces when escorting explosives to the coal mines or when returning from there, as they had often continued on after leaving the explosives at the mines, making raids on houses around the area.

As I have already mentioned, we had been forbidden by G.H.Q. to attack the British forces when on explosives escort duty, for fear of having the mines closed down. Such a threat had been made by the mine owners after the ambush of the police escort of explosives to a quarry at Soloheadbeg, Co, Tipperary, when supplies were cut off from all commercial undertakings except Castlecomer mines.

The Brigadier also announced that 2 dozen hand grenades would arrive by rail at Attanagh station during the week consigned to a local Unionist farmer. These would be collected by the Ballyouskill CC); Company. The railway porter there was a Volunteer and he would inform the company when the box arrived. The grenades were to be taken to Coon where the Brigadier was staying. He also said he proposed to attack the British escort at Coolbaun on the following Monday morning, June 20th, using a road mine to destroy the first escort lorry, leaving the police car (which always accompanied the lorry) and a second military lorry (which sometimes also travelled) to be dealt with by 20 riflemen of the 5th (Graigenamanagh) Battalion Column and 44 men of the 3rd Battalion armed with shotguns. He produced a drawing of a road mine which was to be actuated by a spring mechanism released by a wire encased in gun barrelling under the road. He said the Column was due in Coon ("F" Company) area over the week-end 18th-20th June.

The proposal was objected to by the Battalion Staff on two grounds: -

- (a) That Monday, 20th June, was "Idle Monday" in the mines, - this was a fortnightly lay-off day - and that no explosives would therefore be delivered over the week-end Saturday/Monday 18th/20th June, and
- (b) That the suggested position was, entirely unsuitable in so far as the party to be posted on the south side of the road would be on sloping ground behind a 6 foot wall and earth bank on which there was no foothold. On the north side of the road where there was, higher ground, trenches would have to be dug on the exposed hilltop, and, in any case, only about a dozen men could be posted there with a limited field of fire.
- c) Doubts were expressed also as to whether the mechanism of the mine of which he had the drawing would work without a good deal of experiment.

After a good deal of argument, which he brushed aside, the Brigadier said his order was final but consented to inspect an alternative site suggested by the Battalion Adjutant, namely, at the Protestant church about a quarter of a mile from the town of Castlecomer, where men could be posted on three sides, of a "T" road junction. There riflemen could be posted behind a low wall at the junction of Smithstown Road in the grounds of the church behind the barred gate protected by sandbags, and on the high ground to the right rear of the approaching British forces. The flanks of the attacking party could be protected by walls: and covering parties in the adjoining woods.

At daybreak on Tuesday, 14th June, the Battalion Commandant left to go home, and the Brigadier, with the Battalion Vice Commandant, the Battalion Q/M and myself, left by cycle to inspect this position - To get his mind off the Coolbaun position, we piloted the Brigadier by a back road past the Coolbaun position to half a mile west of same, and we told him that there was no position between that and Coolbaun Cross suitable for an ambush. He insisted, however, on going back by the main road to inspect his own original position. The saucer-like position of the attacking party was pointed out to him, with the clefts for drainage purposes in the high road bank in which the enemy could take cover and bomb out the attackers, also, that attackers could not see over the wall (a broad road bank unless they lay on top of it, which they could not do without exposing themselves to the approaching military. The defects of the position on the higher ground at the opposite side of the road, which would hold only a dozen riflemen with about 30 yards field of fire along the road bend was also pointed out. After a brief inspection of the position, the Brigadier said "This is the spot"¹ and turned on his heel on the road to mark the spot.

The staff said, "Very well, but come along to the other position before you finally decide". We cycled towards the town - it was now getting on towards 4 a.m. - and reached the proposed position at the church in 10 minutes. The advantages of this position - not ideal, but, in the opinion of the staff, more suitable - were pointed out. He inspected this, position and without giving any further reason said again, "The attack will be at Coolbaun"

The Brigadier was again reminded that Monday was "Idle Monday" at the mines, and he said he would enquire further into that. We parted - the Brigadier- by the Smithstown Road alone to Coon, the Battalion Vice Commandant and Q/M back through Moneenroe to Crutt and Ballyouskill, and myself back to Castlecomer.

Later that day I sent a dispatch to all companies to be prepared to send four men to a point named at short notice in accordance with arrangements made for such orders at a previous Battalion Council meeting. I also met the Battalion Engineer, explained the drawing of the mine mechanism to him and told him that it was a rush job required by the week-end.

On Wednesday or Thursday no word came from the Brigadier. The engineer had brought forward his efforts, two of which would not work easily. New springs, were obtained and a third effort was more successful. He was told to make one of that pattern.

On Friday morning about 12 noon a dispatch from the Brigadier dated Tuesday, 11th June, was delivered to me. It was not marked "urgent". When the messenger boy delivering milk at the creamery, who carried it, was asked when he got it, he said "this morning". Enquiries later showed that it was given by the Brigadier to a member of "F" (Coon) Company, who did not think there was any urgency about it and held it over until the next creamery delivery on Friday as he could not find anyone going to town in the meantime.. The dispatch read: -

Brigade H.Qrs.,
11th June, 1921.

To Adjutant,
3rd Battalion.

Mobilise on Saturday at 4 a.m. at point arranged.

Meet me 2 a.m. with engineer.

Brigade Commandant.

Later the Brigadier explained his reason to me for bringing the date forward. The column, which was not due until Saturday, had arrived unexpectedly as they were unable to find billets in the 4th Battalion (Paulstown) area.

On receipt of the dispatch, I wrote dispatches to ten companies directing them to send four men each to Coolbaun, arriving at 4 a.m. next day, Saturday, and a separate dispatch to the Battalion Commandant, Battalion Vice Commandant and Battalion Quartermaster. The dispatches to 'A', 'B', 'C', 'E' and 'L' Companies were sent via 'E' Company (Loon). The Battalion Commandant was also to relay the dispatch to 'A' and 'L' Companies, and the Vice Commandant to 'B' and 'C' Companies.

Separate dispatches were sent direct, to 'F', 'H', 'I' and 'K' Companies. The dispatch to 'L' Company was duplicated via 'H' Company in case of mishap en route. 'H' Company was ordered to bring explosives and a mine laying party of 12. "G" Company (Ballyragget) was not notified, as they had no arms and were too far away. The dispatches were sent off from 2 p.m. according as cyclists could be found. The dispatches to 'H' and; "L" Companies were sent by members, of Cumann na mBan and were about the only ones delivered on time.

'A' (Swan) Company did not turn up. They never got their dispatch. It was held by the Battalion Commandant. With 'E' Company they were to be posted, along the River Deen to cover a footbridge at Boran's, Loon, but they were not so informed in the dispatch.

"E" Company did not turn up either. Their explanation was that they had been to Attanagh railway station with Ballyouskill Company on the previous Monday night and thought one night in the week was sufficient when they all had to work next day after a night out on Volunteer work.

'K' (Muckalee) Company also failed to report. They were to hold a position on the south flank on Yellow Road in case the lorries came that way. The dispatch was delivered to the 1st Lieutenant, but he took no action as the Company O/C was away.-

Apart from the engineer - Michael Fogarty - Tom Duffy (Coy. Q/M), Joe Dwyer and Joe Doyle, no other members- of 'D' (Castlecomer) Company were notified. Some of the mine gear was sent by Dwyer, and Doyle went to meet "K" (Conahy) Company at Dysart and pilot them by back route to Coolbaun. Tom Duffy also met them at Dysart with shotguns. The engineer, Michael Fogarty, went direct to Coon, where he met the Brigadier and explained the mine mechanism to him. I also went direct to Coon, where I met the Brigadier with some of the column members and local company men. All set off about 3 a.m. for Coolbaun. On the way a hand grenade was tried out over a ditch. It failed to explode and it was found not to be detonated. A search for the detonators was then made. These were found coming by separate carrier - a safety precaution no doubt. Half a dozen grenades were then detonated and sent on in advance by individual scouts.

The party arrived at Coolbaun about 4.45 a.m. Most of the others had already arrived, and the mining party was, digging the road. The Brigadier allotted positions to the different units. Riflemen in twos and threes, amongst local men with shotguns were posted along the south wall of the road extending over a front of about 300 yards. Three men with police carbines were posted at the junction of the main road and Rock Lane. Scouts were posted at the suggestion of the Battalion Adjutant on the high ground on the north side of the road about 300 yards out on the flank in charge of Capt. Jim Brennan ('L' Company), and on the south side on high ground overlooking wood in charge of Capt. P. Dunphy ('B'

Company). These had field glasses and could see into the Barrack Square. I was posted to operate the mine, assisted by Doyle and Duffy of 'D' Company. After the mine was laid, Dwyer and Fogarty were ordered to go home by the Brigadier as they both had to supervise work at home from 8 a.m.

At about 6 a.m. country carts and coal carts started arriving from the colliery direction. It was market day in the town. All the carts were corralled in a field nearby with their owners. The corral was in charge of 'K' (Conahy) Company, who were strangers to the cart owners but who also did not know the local lay-out. By 7 o'clock there were about 50 carts unyoked in the field. About that time, too, a farm labourer came along and he was allowed to continue to his work. He was employed by a Miss Dreaper, a spinster of about 40 years who, with her unmarried sister, worked a farm about 400 yards north of Coolbaun. Both were of the hunting class and strongly Unionist in outlook. Had a local Volunteer been assigned to the car corral, he would not have allowed the workman through. He was of the same political outlook as his mistresses.

At 9 o'clock tea, bread and butter arrived from Castlecomer by cart driven by Johnny Dunphy, an employee of my father, and sent out by the Cumann na mBan, to whom a request was sent through Dwyer and Fogarty. While supervising the distribution of the food, I found several men smoking, against orders. There was a cloud of smoke rising through the trees. I also found three men asleep and went round again to warn all the others.

About that time an aeroplane came from the direction of the Curragh, circled overhead and flew back towards Dublin I remarked to the Brigadier that this was ominous, and suggested that the plane could have spotted the car corral, if indeed they had not seen other indications of our position. A few minutes later *B* Company scouts on the south flank reported that they had seen through their field glasses the lorries pulled up on the Barrack Square and troops moving about in the barracks. Word was passed about to all parties to get ready as the military could reach our position in about ten minutes.

At 10 o'clock scouts came in from the north flank to report that there were six or seven police approaching through the fields. At the same time word came in from the east end of the position that there was a party of police at Coolbaun Cross, and immediately afterwards, word came that military were seen coming up by the stream through the wood on the south-west from the direction of Castlecomer.

The Brigadier consulted the Battalion Adjutant, who agreed that we were almost surrounded. The Brigadier then blew a whistle and through a megaphone announced several times: "We are surrounded on all sides. Retreat by river to south". There was a panic scramble everywhere to get out of the position. Just then machine-gun fire was opened by the military from the wood on the south west. Men rushed without thought of cover over the stream bed or by the foot bridge on to the higher ground on the south.

With Doyle I went back to collect half a dozen grenades forgotten by our party. I decided to explode the mine rather than have it dismantled by the military. Although I chucked the wire several times, the mine did not go off. (It was, recovered", later that night by the men of 'H' Company who had" laid it).

One of the riflemen who was posted at Coolbaun Cross told me later that day that he had the policemen in his rifle sights, pulled the trigger but nothing happened. He could not operate the rifle. On examination it was found that the rifle was at half cock.

The other scouting parties on the flanks had no instructions to fire on enemy approaching within firing distance of the position. Their only instructions were to report back by runner. One member of the column who was posted at the extreme west of the position was killed, and another wounded by machine-gun fire from the south-west to their rear. Another got over the wall on to the roadway but was confronted by a policeman, also on the road, at a distance of about 200 yards. The policeman (a Black and Tan) dropped flat and fired with deadly effect. The names of the killed were: Seán Hartley and Nicholas Mullins, and the wounded man was Seamus Doyle, all of the Graiguenamanagh area and all members, of the column. The three were conveyed to Castlecomer barracks in carts by military and police.

The Volunteers and column scattered into small groups moving towards Coon, where they were met by the Brigadier. The Adjutant of the 3rd Battalion was supplied with four grenades there to attack the military that night in Castlecomer. When he arrived about 11 O'clock he was told that the military had left on foot again and had gone towards Coolbaun. They did not return before 4 a.m., when it was, daylight.

Meanwhile, lorries of military had come by back roads from Kilkenny and searched Coon area during the night. The main road from Kilkenny to Castlecomer had been blocked by felled trees at Dunmore. When returning about 7 o'clock, the military rounded up a few men in Castlecomer and took them with them to cut up the fallen trees. My house in Castlecomer was, raided by military and police about 11 o'clock on the next day, Sunday, as were also some of the houses of well-known Sinn Féiners.

The military at Castlecomer got their information that a party was mine laying at Coolbaun in this way. The farm labourer told his mistress - Dreaper - of being held up at Rock Lane. She set off on foot by the fields and by the foot bridge over the Deen River at Boran's Cross and by the Loon Road to Castlecomer Barracks, where she was seen to arrive about 9 a.m.

The four men, each from 'A' and "E" Companies, who did not turn up were to have been posted from Coolbaun, along by the river to Coon, the footbridge and other approaches from the Loon Road. The 'E' Company men had been out the previous two nights in Ballyouskill. They did not, of course, know what the intended action at Coolbaun was to be. The 'A' Company men never got the dispatch. There were not sufficient men at Coolbaun to cover all points of the approaches, in the absence of the companies who failed to turn up.

The military, led by Lieut. Boville, set out on foot, about 40 strong with 10 or 12 police and Black and Tans. They walked in open formation through the town, carrying a machine-gun between them, and continued out the road for about a mile as far as the "Bull Gate". There they divided - the military going by the back of the stream and wood on the right and parallel to the road, and the police through fields parallel to road on the left or north side. The movement must have been perfectly timed - the police appearing first on high ground to the north and east of the position. A few minutes later the military appeared in the wood about 200 yards on south west.

On Miss Dreaper's arrival at the barracks at Castlecomer, it is possible that word was phoned to the Curragh, from which a spotter plane was sent. All phone communication had, however, been severed during the week and this unlikely. The aircraft may have been on its way to Cork and turned back to report when the crew saw the car corral at Coolbaun with several men in positions exposed to view from the air.

Miss Dreaper's house and farm buildings were burned down that night by 'H' Company. She and her sister were first forcibly removed. They tried to cling to furniture, knowing that the house would not be fired while they were in it. The stock was also removed from the outbuildings.

On the 7th July about 500 British troops arrived in Castlecomer from the Curragh by foot, motor cycle, horse and lorry. They had combed the battalion area to the east and south but drew a blank. They then went on to Kilkenny.

This was, the last operation undertaken in the battalion area before the Truce on 11th July, 1921.

In explanation of the Battalion Commandants failure to turn up at Coolbaun, it should be mentioned that at about 5 a.m. that morning a messenger came from "A" Company with a dispatch for the Brigadier, The messenger was surprised at finding the men in position as he had been told nothing of the intended attack. The dispatch, which was shown to me by the Brigadier, read: -

"To Brigade Commandant,
Sorry, I don't believe in your action.
Wishing you luck.
Commandant,
3rd Battalion".

I suggested that a party be sent to arrest the Battalion Commandant. In the circumstances which followed this was not possible. I was, promoted Battalion Commandant there and then.

A week later the O/C 'H' Company sent a dispatch to me, as the new Commandant of the battalion, to say that his men refused to take any further orders from the brigade. I visited the company at once and found them in a mutinous frame of mind. After a good deal of argument, the company agreed to take orders from or through me as the new Commandant of the Battalion. I sent a report of this matter to the Divisional Commandant and a copy of the report to the Brigade; Commandant. As far as, I am aware, no enquiry was held or any action taken against the former Commandant of the battalion.

I might also mention here that before the ambush at Coolbaun to which I have just referred I was called to Dublin and in an office in Suffolk Street I met the late Mr. Kevin O'Higgins, T.D. He told me that the Dáil Éireann Department of Local Government were anxious to recruit some Local Government auditors, and asked me would I be prepared to undertake such work on a full time basis. I thanked him but declined the offer, pointing out that we were contemplating some operations against the British military and Black and Tans and that for the moment at any rate I could not disassociate myself from the work of the battalion.

After the Truce there was a rush of recruits to join the I.R.A. Although ordered by the brigade to take them in, some companies refused to do so. A Brigade Training Camp was set up in the battalion area. I went to the Divisional camp in the Galtees conducted by the Divisional O/C, Ernie O'Malley. The camp included officers from Tipperary, Kilkenny and East Limerick, most of whom had been on Flying Columns and otherwise engaged with the British. During the camp training, which lasted two weeks, the trainees were asked to write a report on the toughest spot they had been in. One lad from South Tipperary wrote two lines: -

'This is the toughest spot I've ever been in.

Signed: Garnett Bennett
Date: 30th March 1957

Witness: J. Grace
(Investigator).

BUREAU OF MILITARY HISTORY 1913-21 BURO STAIRÉ MILEATA 1913-21 No. W.S. 1,601
