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**STATEMENT BY WITNESS  
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**Witness**

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**Identity**

Capt., Grauguenamanagh Coy., Irish Volunteers  
Column Leader

**Subject**

Activities of 4<sup>th</sup> and 5<sup>th</sup> Battalions,  
Kilkenny Brigade and Brigade Column,  
1918 - 21

File No. S 2934

Statement by Michael O'Carroll,  
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I was born at Newtown, Graignamanagh, County Kilkenny, in the year of 1900. My parents died whilst I was still a schoolboy and my brother Robert, who was some years older than me, then took over the management of our farm, I attended Graignamanagh Boys' National School until I was sixteen years of age and I was then apprenticed to the Grocery, Bar and Hardware business at the late Miss Moran's of the Anchor Hotel, Graignamanagh.

In the springtime of 1918, I joined the local (Graignamanagh) Irish Volunteer Company. The Company Captain at that time was the late Christopher Ennis - popularly known as "Kit" Ennis, and amongst its other members were James Ryan of Knockeen, John Cottrell, the late Jack Walsh and James O'Hanrahan. The latter was then the Company Adjutant and incidentally he is now (April 1957) Adjutant-General of the Army. At the time I joined, the strength of the Company was in or about twelve men but, during the following three years, its numbers steadily increased and by 1921 it had reached a strength of approximately 75.

Arising out of the British Government's decision to extend the Conscription Act to Ireland, Volunteer activity suddenly sprang to life during the summer months of 1918. In our Company area parades for drill and training were held openly; many new men were enrolled into the Company; and shot guns and ammunition were collected from farmers. In some cases it was necessary to raid the houses and to take the arms by force or threat. Over a period anti-Conscription meetings were held on Sundays and at night time not only in Graignamanagh but in the nearby towns and villages such as Borris, Bagnalstown, Thomastown and Inistiogue. These meetings were usually addressed by speakers from Dublin including Sean Milroy and Seán O'Mahony as well as by local speakers. They drew large crowds and were generally referred to as "Monster Rallies". The Volunteer Company attended and its members acted as police or stewards to maintain order.

The various Companies were about that time organised into Battalions and for a time our Company was attached to the 4th or South County Kilkenny Battalion with Martin Kealy, Blanchfield's Park, Gowran, as Battalion Commandant. As far as I can now recollect it was about that time too that I was first elected a Company officer with the rank of 2nd Lieutenant. James Ryan of Knockeen was the 1st Lieutenant and as I have said "Kit" Ennis was the Company Captain.

The Battalion Council meetings were held in various places at regular intervals. I remember attending some at which Kealy presided and which were held in the ruins of an old church in St. Michael's churchyard near Graignamanagh.

Early one morning in the month of July 1918, the R.I.C. raided the homes of five members of the Company, those of "Cox" Mahon, Patrick Whelan, Denis Byrne, Michael Butler and Richard Curran. Mahon succeeded in escaping but the other four were arrested and taken to the Barracks. These raids took place about 5 a.m. Whelan's brother went to the chapel and sounded the alarm by ringing the chapel bell. These arrests and escapes created a great deal of excitement in the town that day and there was what I might call an unorganised demonstration by supporters around the barracks. The R.I.C. at the time depended on local hired transport to take prisoners to Kilkenny Jail, but on that day they failed to entice any ear owners to drive the prisoners and their escort. Volunteers went to the premises of firms with horse transport for hire and cut the harness to prevent the R.I.C. from obtaining the use of horses and sidecars. A large force of R.I.C. in charge of a District Inspector arrived in the town during the day and took the prisoners to Kilkenny. The prisoners were subsequently tried in Thomastown and in Kilkenny and sentenced to terms of imprisonment on charges of illegal drilling. Crowds of unarmed people who demonstrated in the prisoners' favour on the Court days in Thomastown and in Kilkenny were attacked and batoned by the R.I.C. Following these incidents, the R.I.C. confined themselves to the barracks or its vicinity and were, to a big extent, ignored by the majority of the townspeople.

Beyond the usual routine common to Volunteer Companies of the time, there was little activity worth recording during 1919. There were the usual parades for drill, a constant effort to secure arms or military equipment of any description and a share of organisation work. An additional section of the Company was formed at Raheendonore about three miles from Graignamanagh, and Ennis and myself frequently went there on Sundays, half-holidays or at night-time to train its members. This section at Raheendonore became an independent Company in a later reorganisation in 1920.

One morning, sometime in 1919, the R.I.C. raided the Anchor Hotel in an attempt to capture Jimmy Hanrahan, the Company Adjutant. He was a step ahead of them and escaped by the rear whilst they were coming in by the front doors. On 9th March, 1920, Hugginstown R.I.C. barracks - about twelve miles from Graignamanagh - was attacked and captured by a party of Volunteers drawn principally from Kilkenny City and Callan areas.

Almost immediately afterwards the R.I.C. garrison were withdrawn from Inistiogue. On the night of 4th April, 1920, our Company travelled to Inistiogue and assisted the local Volunteer Company in demolishing the empty barracks and setting it on fire. Soon afterwards the R.I.C. garrison were evacuated from the village of The Rower and on the night of 16th May, 1920, we assisted The Rower Volunteers to demolish the barracks there in similar fashion.

The question of capturing the R.I.C. barracks in Graignamanagh was at that time being considered by the Company Officers. It was then the only enemy post in the area from Goresbridge in the north to New Ross in the south and from Thomastown in the west to the borders of County Wexford. It was strongly fortified; the windows were steel-shuttered and the door, which was kept closed and bolted, was only opened slightly and on a chain to callers. It was garrisoned by a force of ten or eleven R.I.C. constables and a sergeant. Kit Ennis had, however, managed to contact one of the constables - a Kerryman named McCarthy - who was disposed to be friendly. McCarthy was prepared to open the door to a raiding party. This operation fell through, for, as far as I can recollect, the Brigade Headquarters had not given Ennis sanction to go ahead with it. The R.I.C. evacuated the barracks in June 1920.

i

The next step was to demolish the barracks. It was a powerful stone building, situated in the centre of the Main Street and flanked on one side by a bakery and bread-shop and on the other side by a chemist's shop. To destroy it by fire was out of the question. The assistance of some of the outlying Companies was obtained to block the roads leading into the town and on a summer's night the Company, armed with pick-axes and crowbars, attacked the barracks. By morning it had been reduced stone by stone to a heap of rubble.

The Petty Sessions Court records and Income Tax records were taken from the Courthouse and destroyed on or about the same night.

Early in July, 1920, as part of a reorganisation scheme of the Kilkenny Brigade, the 5th Battalion was formed. It comprised the Volunteer Companies of Graignamanagh, Raheendonore, The Rower, Thomastown and Inistiogue. "Kit" Ennis was appointed Commandant of the 5th

Battalion at its formation and continued in that post until he had to leave the area about two months later. He was succeeded as Company Captain by James Ryan and I succeeded Ryan as 1st Lieutenant

Meanwhile a Sinn Féin Court, with the late Jerry Ryan, Creamery .Manager, as presiding officer, had been set up and four or five members- of the Volunteer Company were detailed to act as Republican Police. One of the first cases to come before the Sinn Fein Court was when we received information through the Post Office that an appeal had been sent to the British Military Authorities to send a military garrison to Graignamanagh to replace the R.I.C. who had been evacuated. Suspicion fell on two men - a local Justice of the peace, and the Chemist whose premises were next door to the barracks. Both men were arrested by the Republican Police and taken to the Courthouse where a public sitting of the Sinn Fein Court took place.

It was, however, impossible to produce evidence to pin point guilt on either man and both were discharged with a warning to be very careful as regards their future conduct. Soon afterwards a detachment of the Devonshire Regiment, about fifty strong, arrived in the town and took over the Courthouse and a couple of large private houses in Chapel Street, They fortified both posts with sandbags and barbed wire.

In July and August, 1920, a few Incidents occurred which it is not now easy after such a lapse of time to place in order of sequence. Under the guise of collecting for the maintenance of the Volunteer Police Force, Ennis and I made a house to house collection which, with a collection at the chapel gates in Graiguenamanagh and Skeoughvoshteen, raised a sum of something between £110 and £120. Actually we required the money for an arms fund.

We then went to Dublin and in a house in Parnell Street we contacted the Quartermaster-General, Sean McMahon. There was same question about selling us arms without the prior sanction of Michael Collins. This difficulty was ironed out during the day for I remember that when I saw Collins that night in Vaughan's Hotel he had given sanction for the sale to us of nine rifles, 300 rounds of .303 ammunition, a Peter the Painter (German automatic pistol) and some ammunition for the Peter. We paid £9 each for the rifles and £12 for the Peter the Painter. Ennis returned to Graignamanagh next day and I remained over in Dublin to arrange for the transport of the rifles and ammunition. It took me about a week before I eventually got them away on a Grand Canal Company's barge on which some Graignamanagh Volunteers were employed as boatmen. The rifles and ammunition were consigned as hardware and bore the printed labels of E. A. Hughes, Hardware Merchant, Graignamanagh, but prior arrangements had been made for Volunteers to remove the goods from the barge when it arrived in the vicinity of Graignamanagh. I carried the Peter the Painter back with me.

As I have mentioned a detachment of the Devonshire Regiment had occupied posts in the town. Being strangers to the district and minus the assistance of the local R.I.C, they could have been harmless enough, at least for a time. An ex-British soldier named Kenny, who resided with his father — a blind man — in Harristown, consorted with them, gave them information and accompanied them on their raids. He pointed out to them the residences of some well known Sinn Fein and Volunteer men including Jerry Ryan's place at the Creamery and Robert Wallace's shop and premises in Upper Main Street. Jerry Ryan escaped before the Creamery was surrounded and, not finding Wallace at home, the Devons wrecked the shop. Then one morning some of the Volunteer Officers learned that Kenny had left the town. A small party of Volunteers went in pursuit of him and captured him near Thomastown. He was brought back to Graignamanagh, tried by hurriedly assembled Courtmartial and sentenced to death. After receiving the Spiritual Rites of the Church he was executed that night by drowning in the River Barrow. The reader may wonder why Kenny was executed by drowning rather than by shooting. The fact of the matter is that where he was held a prisoner was in a small hut known as Blanchfield's eel house on the banks of the River Barrow and within easy gunshot sound of the military post. Again it was thought that as his body would not be found, his sudden disappearance would be a mystery to the enemy forces. Kenny's execution took place on 31st August, 1920.

Following Kenny's disappearance from the scene there was a great deal of activity by British forces in the area. Determined efforts were made to capture Ennis and Jack Walsh's house and my own home, both in Newtown, were frequently raided. Ennis had to leave the district and go to Dublin. From then until after the Truce I took the precaution of not sleeping at either my home or my place of business. James Hanrahan of the Inistiogue Company was appointed Battalion Commandant in succession to Ennis. About that time too (August 1920) we arrested another Justice of the Peace, a Captain Howlett who resided at The Rower about four miles from Graignamanagh. Howlett was an ex-British Army Officer and The Rower Volunteers were under the impression that he was a danger to the Movement and had or was likely to assist the enemy. It was at their instigation that we agreed to arrest him. To give him the impression that he was being brought a long distance from his home he was blindfolded after arrest and driven in a motor car around the roads for some time before being brought to an unoccupied cottage at Ballyheagon, known locally as Dan O'Neill's cottage. He was held prisoner there until the following Saturday night when a Court, presided over by Seamus Lennon, T.D. for South Carlow, sat to try him. The Court was held in the cottage where Howlett was detained and in his own defence he made one of the finest speeches it has ever been my lot to listen to.

As the witnesses from The Rower failed to prove their case, he was acquitted and discharged after, I believe, promising<sup>1</sup>to resign his Justice of the Peace-ship. He was then blindfolded again and taken by the same roundabout way to a point near his home. After the evacuation of the R.I.C. from Graignamanagh, patrols of R.I.C. men and Black and Tans from Goresbridge visited the district at irregular intervals. They were an uncouth lot and went out of their way to be rude and offensive, especially to women, during raids on houses. One» a Sergeant, was, particularly noted in this respect. One night James Ryan, Christy Murphy and two other members of our Company went to Goresbridge with the intention of shooting the Sergeant, After watching the barracks for some time the door opened and a figure in dark clothes emerged. Ryan told me, on his return, that they were certain it was the Sergeant and as they were about to open fire they flashed a light on the figure to outline the target better and then, to their surprise and shock, discovered that it was a local priest who had been to the barracks on a sick call.

In September, 1920, the Auxiliaries arrived in the Battalion area and occupied Woodstock House, Inistiogue, which they turned into an impregnable fortress and established a divisional headquarters there. It was probably about the same time that the detachment of the Devonshire Regiment was withdrawn from Graignamanagh. The strength of the first Company of Auxiliaries to arrive in Woodstock was 87. It was "H" Company and was composed mainly of ex-British Army Officers who had served in the 1914-1918 Great War. They were armed to the teeth and in fast Crossley tenders they made spasmodic raids by day and night. In one of these raids on my home my brother Robert was taken prisoner, detained in Woodstock and with other prisoners used as a hostage. On one occasion a raiding party of Auxiliaries, when leaving Woodstock, took seven prisoners with them as hostages. The prisoners were tied together in a lorry and to deceive any would-be attackers the Auxiliaries placed Glengarry caps on the heads of the prisoners. On the journey one of the tenders back fired and an auxiliary immediately shot one of the prisoners through the head. The victim was a chap named Glendon from the Three Castle district

and at the time he was shot he was tied next to Robert in the lorry.

During another of these surprise visits by the Auxiliaries, James Ryan and I had a narrow escape from capture. The Auxiliaries arrived late at night and immediately floodlit the streets with their searchlights. Ryan and myself were near the Commercial Hotel and James Hughes, the proprietor, admitted us to a room where we had slept on previous occasions. The Auxiliaries entered the hotel after us. We tried to get out by the back but found they had posted a party with a machine gun on a bridge and covering the rear of the premises. We were both armed with revolvers but fortunately the Auxiliaries did not proceed beyond the hotel bar. We listened all night to their carousals until, having drunk all the spirits and wines they could lay their hands on, they departed in the early hours of the morning.

The question of attacking the Auxiliaries in Woodstock was apparently considered by the Brigade Staff for sometime in October, 1920, we received instructions to have the Company and all available arms and ammunition held in readiness in the event of an urgent mobilisation. It was generally accepted that Woodstock was the objective.

Then came the arrest of the Brigade and Brigade Vice-Commandants followed closely by the visit of Ernie O'Malley to the area. O'Malley had come from G.H.Q. to advise on, or to take charge of the proposed attack on Woodstock. On his first morning in the Inistiogue area he was captured by the Auxiliaries at the home of James O'Hanrahan, the Battalion Commandant. O'Hanrahan and Ned Holland (O'Malley's guide) were captured at the same time, A list of names and addresses found by the Auxiliaries in O'Malley's possession led to a swoop by the British forces and to the capture of a number of the Brigade and Battalion Officers,

Within a month or two of these arrests a meeting of the remaining; Battalion and Company officers of the 5th Battalion was held at Coolroe at which Jack Walsh of Graignamanagh was elected Commandant of the Battalion in succession to James O'Hanrahan.

George O'Dwyer, then newly appointed Brigade Commandant, paid us a visit and discussed the question of getting a flying column organised. As a result a special parade of "A" (Graignamanagh) Company was held shortly before Christmas of 1920 at Butler's cottage, Tinnehinch. George O'Dwyer attended and Volunteers for a Column were asked for. From those who volunteered six were selected. They were Jack Walsh (the Battalion Commandant), James Ryan (the Company Captain), Robert Doyle, James Doyle, Christopher Doyle and myself (Michael O'Carroll). Patrick Quinn volunteered soon afterwards and was accepted.

There was a short discussion about appointing a Column leader. O'Dwyer was anxious that I should take it on. I felt a bit young and inexperienced for the job and suggested Walsh. He declined saying that there was an order in force which required Battalion Commandants to remain in their areas and I then agreed to act as the Column O/C,

That was one of my first meetings with George O'Dwyer, but in the months that followed I came to know him fairly intimately. His position was a most unenviable one. Having returned from Australia only about two years previously he had very little knowledge, outside his own Castlecomer area, of the Brigade organisation and he was handicapped by the fact that he was appointed Brigade O/C at a time when practically all the senior officers had been arrested.

The 7th (Callan) Battalion, which was well armed and had an active A.S.U., did not co-operate with him but worked in unison with their neighbouring Tipperary Brigades. On the other hand G.H.Q., peeved that their ace organiser, O'Malley, had been captured in the Kilkenny Brigade area, were pressing him to bring off some spectacular operations in retaliation, but for George things never seemed to go right.

The Column went into billets and training in the Ballyheagon and Coolyhune townlands and a Column Headquarters was set up at Dan O'Neill's cottage. We were joined by a further four men.

They were Martin Bates of The Rower, Michael O'Hanrahan of Inistiogue, Nicholas Mullins of Thomastown and James Purcell of Boheree/ Paulstown. The capture of James Ryan by the Auxiliaries reduced our strength to ten. After his arrest I succeeded him as Company Captain.

One night prior to Ryan's arrest a party of military, accompanied by four or five R.I.C. men, arrived in Graignamanagh in lorries. The R.I.C. men, at least two of whom Constables Supple and Murphy (Red Murphy) had been members of the former garrison in the barracks, went into Boland's publichouse in Tinnehinch to drink, the military remaining across the bridge in Graignamanagh. The news that the R.I.C. men were in Boland's was brought to us at Ballyheagon by a local Volunteer. Ryan, myself and two other members of the Column went to Tinnehinch with the intention of attacking the R.I.C. at the Cross when they left the public house.

Mrs. Boland, by the way, was one of our best supporters and they may have gone there to spot as well as to drink. It was well over a mile from Ballyheagon to Tinnehinch and by the time we got to the Cross the R.I.C. men had left and rejoined the military.

Later that night we learned that the police and military were remaining overnight in the town. We assumed that they would move off early next morning and as they arrived via County Kilkenny we considered that they would take their departure by a County Carlow road. About 4 a.m. the Column occupied an ambush position in Clashganny wood. As our strength was not sufficient to take on such a big force our intention was to attack the last lorry. However, it all came to nought for they left the town by another road. Actually they had a choice of six roads by which to leave.

A few days later Ryan was captured in Tinnehinch by a party of Auxiliaries in one of their sudden swoops. He endeavored to get away and was fired on. Hearing the shooting we assumed the Auxiliaries were in town. The Column assembled and took up a position in a laneway running parallel with the roadway at Ballyheagon and with a good line of retreat towards Coolyhune Hill. We were, of course, unaware of Ryan's capture. Again we were doomed to disappointment for, after capturing the prisoner, the Auxiliaries returned immediately by the Inistiogue road to Woodstock.

Our next attempt to ambush the Auxiliaries was made at a place called Baltiglea about 2 miles from Graignamanagh on the Graignamanagh-Borris road and at a point where a branch road leads to Gowran. At that time the only enemy post in our Battalion area was the Auxiliaries' divisional headquarters at Woodstock and our intelligence system depended solely on the observation of the Volunteers. There was no means of obtaining prior information of enemy movements and lack of good information was our biggest handicap. Thinking that we could lure a party of Auxiliaries from Woodstock at night time, arrangements were made with the 4th (Paulstown) Battalion to stage a feint attack on Gowran R.I.C. barracks on the night of 13<sup>th</sup> February, 1921. Quite a lot of time and organisation went into the preparation of this operation. A road mine was prepared and placed in the road at the ambush site. All roads leading from Inistiogue to Gowran except that via Graignamanagh and Baltiglea were blocked at numerous points. The Column was supported at the ambush position by units of the Graignamanagh and Clashganny (Carlow Brigade) Companies.

About 10 p.m. the 4th Battalion men commenced the attack on Gowran R.I.C. barracks. From our position we could see the Verey lights sent up by the R.I.C. garrison for assistance. Throughout the night, even when the feint attack on the barracks had ended, the Verey lights continued to go up but failed to draw the Auxiliaries from Woodstock. Later I learned that they did make a move to go out but at the gates of Woodstock demesne they were warned by a woman that the roads were blocked and they returned to their post.

Then followed a series of somewhat similar disappointments. For instance, whilst in the 4th Battalion area we received information that it was the practice of the R.I.C. and Black and Tans in Goresbridge to go out to clear road blocks. An ambush position was selected at Kellymount and trees were felled across the road. We remained in the vicinity for a couple of days but no police came to remove the trees. We also received information that a police party patrolled the road from Goresbridge to Barrowmount at night-time. This, too, led to nothing; for on any nights that we were in position there, no patrol made its appearance.

Next came the proposed attack on Bagnalstown R.I.C. Barracks. This, I understood, was to be a joint operation to be carried out by the Kilkenny and Carlow Brigades. From the size of the town and the fact that it was a District Headquarters of the R.I.C. to which garrisons from small evacuated barracks had been withdrawn, I imagine that the strength of the garrison there must have been in the region of fifty men. I was not familiar with the plans for the attack but on orders from the Brigade O/C., the Column, with units of the Graignamanagh and Clashganny Companies, marched the fourteen odd miles to the assembly point which was on the banks of the River Barrow near the Royal Oak bridge, about a quarter of a mile from Bagnalstown. There final instructions were to be given. It was Saturday night, 15<sup>th</sup> April, 1921.

After arriving at the assembly point we discovered that the road from the Royal Oak bridge to Bagnalstown was occupied by British military accompanied by an armoured car with its head lamps turned off. Scouts reported that the streets and road leading into the town were held by the military who had arrived there earlier that night.

It was plain to be seen that the British forces had received advance information of the proposed attack, a circumstance which, as far as I know, was never clearly explained. The attack, of course, had to be called off and we withdrew through Borris to the village of Ballymurphy where we arrived in time to hear Mass on the following (Sunday) morning. After a short rest there we returned to our usual billets near Graignamanagh.

Large forces of British military then moved into the area and carried out an extensive round-up. This did not worry us unduly for we kept outside the enemy cordons. I decided on moving the Column down into South County Kilkenny, but the Brigade O/C. cancelled this decision. Re always appeared to be keen on carrying out an operation in the north of the county.

On 2nd May, 1921, whilst in the 3rd (Castlecomer) Battalion area, the Column occupied an ambush position at Uskerty on the Coon/Castlecomer road. The lay of the countryside thereabouts was unfamiliar to us, it being about twenty-five miles from Graignamanagh, and we were guided to the ambush position by the local Company Captain, James Comerford, who later left it to act as scout. Including the Brigade O/C, our strength was twelve. The others being ten Column men and a Volunteer named Deacon who had come from Graignamanagh with us. All were armed with rifles but with only ten or twelve rounds of .303 ammunition per man. We had been hoping for some time previously to ambush or capture a small party of police or military so as to supplement our small supply of .303 ammunition and the information we were given led us to expect on that day a small party of R.I.C. men or Black and Tans travelling from the Castlecomer direction in one lorry or tender. A tree was felled across the road near a sharp bend or turn and six of us, with the Brigade O/C., took up a position on rising ground near the barricade, and from where we held a commanding view of the road along which we expected the lorry to come. The remaining five members of the Column occupied a position about 250 or 300 yards further along the road in the direction of Castlecomer. While we were in position a British Army aeroplane flew overhead a few times and then disappeared.

After a wait of about two hours enemy forces arrived, but not from Castlecomer as we expected them but, altogether to our disadvantage, from the opposite direction. At a first glance I saw two lorries of police and a private car in which a District Inspector was seated. Next I saw a big Leyland lorry with military. The first big difficulty was to warn our second party for I realised that from their position they could not have seen what had happened. I decided to fire a few rounds per man at the police and military and to move immediately from our position back along our line of retreat. Our fire was answered by rifle fire and rifle grenades. I could hear an officer shouting orders and in a matter of minutes rifle grenades were bursting in the position which we had evacuated. Warned by the firing, our No. 2. party also withdrew from their position and in all the circumstances I considered that we were fortunate to get away from the position without suffering any casualties. As far as I am aware the enemy suffered four casualties, three soldiers being killed and the District Inspector wounded whilst he was still sitting in the car. It was the practice of the British Authorities at the time not to disclose their casualties, but three coffins were seen leaving Castlecorner military barracks a day or two later. As the soldiers dismounted from the lorry they came directly under our fire at about forty yards range and, personally, I can vouch for one who, having lost his rifle in the scramble, was shot as he tried to recover it. The fact that they made no effort to surround or pursue us would also indicate that they were pretty badly hit. James Comerford, who had been with us earlier in the day, was a prisoner in one of the lorries during the firing, and he subsequently agreed with my view that the British casualties were three dead and one wounded.

On our return to Graignamanagh after the incident at Uskerty we were joined by eight men from the Kilkenny City Battalion who reported for duty with the Column. They were

James (Matty) Delaney,	Kilkenny.
John Keane,	Kilkenny.
Michael Ruth	"
Michael McSweeney,	"
Kieran Tobin,	"
Edward Holland,	Tullaroan.
John Wall,	Threecastles.
Jack Hartley,	Glenmore,

Towards the middle of June, 1921, I received orders from the Brigade O/C. to bring the Column again to the 3rd Battalion area. We arrived there about two days later having covered the distance of approximately thirty-five miles on foot. We met George O'Dwyer, as far as I can now recollect, near Coon. He told me that he proposed to attack a party of British troops escorting a supply of explosives on its route from Castlecomer military barracks to the coalmines. The ambush was to take place on the following Saturday morning, 18th June. He had already selected the site at Coolbawn. I understood at the time that he intended to carry out the operation with men from the local (3rd) Battalion and that he required the Column to stand-by as a reserve in case things went wrong. If that were so, then he changed his mind later.

In the early hours of Saturday morning we moved to Coolbawn where a number of local Volunteers, armed principally with shot guns, were assembling. O'Dwyer, the Brigade O/C., took complete charge of the operation. A mine was placed in the road and by 6 a.m. all parties had moved into their positions. The military party was expected to travel in three lorries and, accordingly, the attacking force was disposed in three sections of approximately twelve men each and made up of approximately equal numbers of Column men and local men. Our position

was on the left-hand side of the road about one mile from Castlecomer as one approaches Castlecomer from Athy and there was a distance of sixty or seventy yards between the sections. To our rear there was a steep decline in the ground towards a dried-up river bed and behind that again there was high ground covered with shrubbery, and some small woods. The plan of attack was simple enough. Nos. 2 and 3 sections were to allow the first lorry to pass them. The mine was to be exploded when the lorry reached it and it would then be attacked by No. 1 Section. No. 2 Section was to attack the second lorry which No. 3 Section would allow to pass, and No. 3 was to attack the third lorry. As the lorries travelled approximately sixty yards apart, it was expected that all three would be attacked simultaneously. A small number of hand-grenades, which had been supplied by G.H.Q. for the operation, were issued to each of the three parties. My position was with No. 1 Section,

It was market day in Castlecomer and as carts and people came along they were diverted down a side road to our right. The horses were unyoked and tied in a field while their owners or were kept in a house under guard. A special party from the local battalion had been detailed for this work. Their orders were not to allow any civilians to pass.

The lorries were expected to arrive shortly after 10 a.m. but the morning wore on without any sign of their coming. There was no undue cause for uncertainty or worry for I understood that there was a complete screen of scouts all around the ambush position. Some of these had the military barracks in Castlecomer under observation with field glasses and from time to time reports came in to O'Dwyer that lorries were moving around the barrack as if loading up.

I would say that it was early in the afternoon when scouts rushed in to say that police and military were advancing in extended formation from two or three different points. O'Dwyer then issued orders to withdraw to the south. Almost at the same moment fire was opened by British troops from a wood at our rear, but to the left of our position. This first burst of fire hit No. 3 section badly. Jack Hartley was killed instantly and two other members of the Column, Nicholas Mullins and James Doyle, received serious wounds. Both got out on to the road.

There was a certain amount of confusion. With my party I retreated to the cover of the shrubbery and from there to the shelter of a grove of trees which was not more than 300 yards from the ambush position. There we were joined by about twenty others and there we had to remain until darkness fell that night. To move further away would have meant moving out into open country where there was little cover.

One of the most surprising things about the whole affair was why the enemy forces did not surround that grove or enfilade it with machine-gun fire. They appeared to concentrate more on the road and its vicinity. We could hear their cheers when they found Hartley's body and the two wounded men. Nicholas Mullins died from his wounds that night in Castlecomer barracks. James Doyle survived and was a prisoner in Waterford Prison until his release in December 1921.

During the afternoon there was much military activity in Coolbawn. We could hear an almost endless stream of lorries bringing more troops to the scene, but at no time did they approach the grove where we lay under cover. That night we moved off cross country and local scouts guided us to The Lotts on the borders of County Leix.

The information about our presence at Coolbawn was conveyed to the British military officers in Castlecomer by a Miss Dreaper who in turn had got the information from one of her workmen, presumably in explanation of his late arrival for work that morning. This workman had been detained by the Volunteer party who were looking after the civilian prisoners but on pleading his anxiety to get to work he was permitted by them to pass on to his employer's place which was only a short distance away. As a reprisal for her act of treachery Miss Dreaper's residence was later burned to the ground by local Volunteers.

During the week that followed hundreds of British troops from The Curragh, Kilkenny and Waterford carried out an extensive round-up along the County Kilkenny and County Carlow border. Guided by local scouts the Column returned by easy stages from The Lotts to Graignamanagh and were there when the Truce was declared in July 1921.

That more or less completes my recollections of the period. There were many minor incidents such as raids on mails, blocking of roads, censoring of correspondence, and warning jurymen not to attend the Assize Courts which I have refrained from mentioning as they were a general feature of Volunteer activity of the time.

During the Truce period I spent a month in the Brigade Training Camp at Monawee and later instructed at our own (5th-Battalion) camp in Raheenonore. On the taking over of Kilkenny Military barracks from the British in March 1922, I reported there for duty with the National Army and was appointed Commandant of the 5th Battalion.

Signed : Michael O'Carroll

30-4-'57