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STATEMENT BY WITNESS

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Witness

Thomas Meagher,
Bridge St.,
Callan,
Co. Kilkenny

Identity

Adjt., 7th Battalion, Kilkenny Brigade.

Subject

“G” Coy., 7th Battn., Kilkenny Brigade
and
Active Service Unit, 1917 - 1921

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Statement by Mr. Thomas Meagher,
Bridge Street, Callan, County Kilkenny WS 1672

I was born on the 9th January in the year of 1893 at Roscrea, County Tipperary. About six years later our family moved to live in Kilsheelan, County Tipperary, where I was reared and went to school. My father was a carpenter by trade and at the age of 16 years I was apprenticed to the same trade and served my time in Fethard, County Tipperary. Having completed my apprenticeship I came to work in Callan, County Kilkenny, where I have since lived.

I joined the National Volunteers - Redmond's Volunteers as they were later known - in Callan in 1914 and remained a member of that organisation for something like two years. During that period I attended all the usual parades and drills and was present with the Callan contingent in the Phoenix Park, Dublin, when a parade of National Volunteers from all parts of Ireland was reviewed by the late John E. Redmond on Easter Sunday, 1915.

It was, I think, some months after the Rising of 1916, that a meeting of the National Volunteer Company was held in the Town Hall, Callan, and at which the question of severing our connection with the National Volunteers and of joining the Sinn Fein Clubs and Irish Volunteers, then in course of reorganisation, was discussed. Led by the late Father Delahunty, C.C., and by the late John J. Dunne, all present were unanimous in favour of the change over. A small group of about ten men in the town endeavoured to revive interest in the National Volunteers, but their efforts were short-lived. We made sure to secure possession of the arms, approximately twenty-five Martini rifles, which had been supplied to us as a Rational Volunteer Company some time prior to the Rising.

With the exception of parades for drill and training there was very little activity of note which I can recall prior to 1920. Officially the Company was designated "G" Company, 7th Battalion, Kilkenny Brigade. This title would be rarely used except for dispatches. Volunteers in the rural areas which went to make up the Battalion area, usually referred to our Company as the Callan lads or the town lads. As organisation developed, new members were recruited into the ranks and I am sure there were at least forty or fifty names on the Company's roll. The late Patrick Funchion of Callan was O/C of the Company until his arrest in October, 1920, when I succeeded him for a period.

On the night of 8th March, 1920, Hugginstown R.I.C, barracks was attacked and captured. The task allotted to our Company on that occasion was to block the Kilkenny/Callan road at Tullamaine. My own particular assignment was to guard the men felling the trees and making the road blocks, and for that duty I was armed with a shotgun and a few rounds of ammunition. We were detailed for and carried out similar duties at the same place on the night of 4th June, 1920, when Drangan R.I.C. barracks was attacked and captured.

About the early autumn of 1920, whilst on a visit to my home in Kilsheelan, I obtained a small supply of .303 ammunition. On my return to Callan I handed it over to the Company Captain, Patrick Funchion, and together we hid it in a secret hiding place underneath the stairs in his home. Shortly afterwards his house was raided and searched by the R.I.C. but nothing incriminating was found. Funchion himself was, however, arrested and interned in Spike Island.

At the next parade of the Company - then known as "G" Company, 7th Battalion, Kilkenny Brigade - I was elected to succeed him. I remember collecting the ammunition from its hiding place and handing it over to the Battalion Quartermaster.

The first attempt, that I can recall to ambush enemy forces and with which I was connected, was made early in October 1920.

About twenty-five selected men drawn from the Callan, Ahenure, Mullinahone and Ballycloven Companies occupied a position on the Lismolin-Mullinahone road about 14 miles from Mullinahone at 8 o'clock one morning. We were armed principally with shotguns and Martini rifles. On that particular day we were working in union with the neighbouring 7th Battalion of the 3rd Tipperary Brigade. The Tipperary men had planned a ruse which they expected would draw out a party of British military from either Mullinahone or from Killenaule and the idea was that if they came from Mullinahone, we would ambush them, and if they came from Killenaule, the Tipperary men would attack them at Horan's Cross on the Prospect road. About 2 p.m. it was learned that a cycle party of fourteen British soldiers did leave Killenaule but, most unexpectedly, had returned again via Wilford road about three miles from our position. We moved to Wilford but by the time we got there, the only trace of the soldiers was the tracks of their bicycles on the road. The order was then given to disperse- and return home.

At about 1.30 p.m. on a Sunday afternoon about two or three weeks later I was arrested by a party of R.I.C. men as I stepped out from my residence in Callan. Apparently they had been waiting outside for me. At the time I was about to go to a parade of the Company which had been arranged for a remote spot and I had on me a printed copy of the I.R.A. oath, and an R.I.C. whistle. The whistle was one which had been given to me by the late Tommy Donovan then Commandant of the 7th Battalion, 3rd Tipperary Brigade, and it was formerly the property of a Sergeant Tobin of the R.I.C. who had been shot in an ambush in County Tipperary.

On my way to the barracks after arrest I managed to destroy the copy of the oath and, while being searched in the barracks, I held the whistle in my hand and it escaped detection. That evening a member of the local Cumann na mBan brought me some tea. There was an R.I.C. man present during our conversation but, when she was leaving, I passed the whistle to her as we shook hands.

I was kept in the R.I.C. barracks in Callan for three days and was then moved to Kilkenny military barracks. There were many other prisoners there including the Brigade O/C., Thomas Treacy. A few days later the Rev. Father Delahunty, C.C., Callan, was arrested and he, too, was with us in Kilkenny Detention barracks for some time.

During the next few weeks, prisoners came and went. Some were sent to Spike Island and Ballykinlar Internment Camps. Father Delahunty and I were handcuffed together and taken under escort by road to Waterford Prison.

In January, 1921, I was tried by courtmartial on a charge of being in possession of seditious literature which, the police witnesses stated, was found in my room after my arrest. I was sentenced to fifty-six days imprisonment which I served in Waterford Prison.

I was released in March, 1921 and returned to Callan. Volunteer work then became a full-time occupation. There was continuous activity such as providing guards and guides for the Battalion Active Service Unit which had been formed whilst I was in prison, road- blocking and trenching, and raiding mails. We usually censored the letters in the coach-house of an ex-British Army Officer, Colonel Butler, D.S.O., whose coachman was a Volunteer.

I think it was in April, 1921 that, at a Battalion Council meeting in Mullinahone, I was appointed Battalion Adjutant and about the same time I became a member of the Active Service Unit. Three farmhouses, Bowers of the Wood, Neary's of Ballylarkin and Maher's of Ballylarkin, principally the latter, were used as Battalion Headquarters and dispatches were delivered to and dispatched from there.

On several occasions I was with the A.S.U. in an ambush position behind the Convent walls at the end of Bridge Street, Callan, awaiting an enemy patrol which generally left the barracks to parade the town about 10 p.m. On each occasion the patrol left the barracks at the usual time but on

the nights that we were in the ambush position, the patrol never crossed the bridge and continued to the Convent wall which was their usual point for turning to return to the barracks.

We often discussed this and agreed that the police were being tipped off by somebody or by some means, but we failed to discover the informer. On the other hand if the enemy were aware of our presence in the ambush position, it was peculiar that they never made an effort to surprise and attack us there. The whole thing was a bit of a mystery.

During a visit to the Piltown area in South County Kilkenny, the Active Service Unit, with about twenty Volunteers from the local (8th) Battalion, occupied a farmhouse on the Piltown-Fiddown road. I remember it was on a Saturday morning and full preparations were made to ambush a patrol which, it was reported, passed daily between Fiddown and Piltown. The day wore on but no sign of the patrol. Our position was within 300 or 400 yards of the R.I.C. barracks at Fiddown and during the day we captured and held prisoner an Auxiliary R.I.C. man named Garagan who passed along the road alone.

About 3 or 4 p.m. that evening we evacuated the position and moved off through Bessborough Demesne. Meanwhile British Military had come out in force from Waterford, Clonmel and Carrick-on-Suir and had begun an encircling movement of the area. The first intimation we had of their presence was when we saw some soldiers lying in extended formation on a height within the demesne itself.

They opened fire on us with Lewis guns and rifle-grenades to which we replied and there was a short engagement. There was an abundance of good cover which we used to reach the demesne wall. Fortunately for us the British Forces had not completed the encircling movement and we were able to cross the road and get up into the hills near Templeorum.

I attribute our escape on that occasion to the coolness and experience of an ex-British soldier named James Kelly who was a member of the Active Service Unit. His advice and directions regarding cover and our line of retreat were invaluable and were, I would say, a main contribution to the fact that we escaped without a casualty.

About a week later we met Seán Hogan's Column of the 3rd Tipperary Brigade. They had come into County Kilkenny and we met them near Dunamaggin, Hogan and Eamon Alyward, who was then in charge of our unit, decided to join forces for the time being with a view to carrying out a major operation at Kllmanagh. The strength of the combined forces was something over forty men, made up of our unit of fourteen and Hogan's column of approximately thirty men.

After a few days around the Kells and Dunamaggin districts, the march to Kilmanagh started. During the journey I was ordered to go to Callan and get some .303 ammunition and to have it conveyed to the Active Service Unit. That took me some time longer than I had estimated as the officer who had the ammunition was absent, probably 'on the irun'. The result was that I missed the engagement which the unit had with enemy forces at Tubrid and in which my comrade in Waterford Prison, Pat Walsh of Dunamaggin, and Sean Quinn, another member of the Active Service Unit, were killed. That was on 14th May, 1921.

On numerous occasions during the remaining weeks before the Truce we lay in ambush on the main Kilkenny-Callan road but never got the opportunity for a scrap as the expected lorries of military or patrols of police did not come along. Visits into the town of Callan to attack the military or police also proved fruitless. It was very difficult at that period to get them outside their barracks except when they moved in powerful convoys. The last position we occupied as a unit was at Kilbride near Callan. That was a few days before the Truce and on that day, too, we drew a blank.

After the signing of the Truce I was in attendance at the Battalion Headquarters. Whilst there I was instructed by the Battalion O/C to proceed to the Divisional Headquarters training camp at Galtee Castle for an Officers' training course. There were representatives there from each Battalion in the East Limerick, Tipperary Nos. 1 and 2 and Kilkenny Brigades, and we did a stiff course of training for six weeks, under the vigilant eye of the late Ernie O'Malley, then the Divisional O/C.

Whilst at Galtee Castle I was elected Quartermaster of the Kilkenny Brigade and during the Civil War I was appointed Brigade Adjutant of the Republican Forces.

Signed: Thomas Meagher