

ROINN COSANTA

BUREAU OF MILITARY HISTORY

STATEMENT BY WITNESS

DOCUMENT NO. W.S 1,101

Witness

Martin Cassidy,
Callan Road,
Kilkenny

Identity

O/C. "A" Company 1st. Btn. Kilkenny Brigade
1917 - 1921

Subject

Irish Volunteers, Kilkenny
1914 - 21

File No. S 2403

Statement by Mr. Martin Cassidy,
Callan Road, Kilkenny WS 1101

I joined the Irish National Volunteers When they were formed in Kilkenny city in March, 1914. At that time I was twenty-three years of age, having been born in the year of 1891. I was then employed in the firm of Messrs. Smithwick & Co., Brewers and Maltsters, Parliament Street, Kilkenny. When the split took place in the Volunteer movement, I was one of a small party of about thirty Volunteers who followed Peter de Loughrey, Patrick Corcoran, Ned Comerford and Thomas Treacy. This small party formed the first Irish Volunteer company in Kilkenny. It became known as A Company, and Thomas Treacy was the first company commander. The split in the Volunteer movement in Kilkenny and the formation of A. Company took place, as far as I can now recollect, about September, 1914. It was certainly shortly after the outbreak of the European war.

Training was carried out on weekdays after tea in the evening, and on Sunday mornings after Mass. On the Sunday mornings the training generally took the form of a march to a field at Lower Dunmore where rifle practice was carried out, with a point 22 B.S.A. rifle. On Easter Sunday, 1916, I paraded under arms with the company at the Volunteer hall at twelve o'clock noon. We remained on parade until 2 p.m. when we were dismissed by the Company O/C, with instructions to parade again at 8 p.m. that night. As instructed, I paraded again that night. Sometime about 11 p.m., after Captain J.J. O'Connell (Ginger) had arrived at the hall, we were again dismissed.

On Easter Monday evening at about 7 p.m., a party of Volunteers from the company, of whom I was one, met a motor car on the Thomastown Road near Archer Street, Kilkenny. The car, which was driven by Peter de Loughrey, was returning from Borris, Co. Carlow, where it had gone earlier that day to collect arms. Accompanying Peter de Loughrey in the car were James Lalor and Patrick Corcoran. The Volunteer party was in charge of Thomas Treacy. We pushed the motor car into Stallard's garden where the arms, which were American breech-loading shotguns, were distributed amongst the Volunteers. There were, as far as I can now recollect, about fifty rounds of ammunition for each gun. I was given custody of a large number of the guns and a quantity of ammunition which I brought to my residence in Patrick Street. I hid the guns and ammunition under the flooring boards and in such a way that they were readily accessible, should they be required by the company.

At the end of the week and after we heard of the surrender in Dublin, I discussed with Pat Corcoran the question of the safety of the guns which were hidden in my residence. Pat Corcoran, who also resided in Patrick Street, was a carpenter by trade. He made a large wooden box, into which we put the shotguns and the ammunition. This box and its contents was then buried in a large hole inside the enclosure in the grounds of St. Joseph's Convent, Patrick Street. I cannot say when, or in what circumstances, the shotguns and ammunition were removed from St. Joseph's Convent. They certainly were never captured by the British forces in the many raids which they carried out after the Rising.

The company was reorganised early in 1917, with Tom Treacy again as Company Captain. Later in the same year, the 1st Battalion was formed. Treacy became O/C of the Battalion, and I succeeded him as captain of A. Company. The other company officers elected at this time were William (Billie) Oakes, 1st Lieutenant and John Donnelly, 2nd Lieutenant. In August, 1917, Mr. W.T. Cosgrave was elected as Sinn Féin M.P. for the Kilkenny city constituency when he defeated the Irish Party candidate, Alderman John McGuinness of Kilkenny. During the election campaign, my company assisted the Sinn Féin candidate by

every means in our power. We made house to house canvasses for votes for him; we acted as guards at the Sinn Féin election rooms and at the Sinn Féin meetings; and, generally speaking, we gave him every assistance we could. During this election work, we generally carried hurleys as arms. Shortly afterwards, a proclamation was issued by the British authorities proclaiming the carrying of hurley sticks.

In March, 1920, I was one of a party of about twelve Volunteers from Kilkenny who went to Waterford city to assist the Volunteers there in maintaining law and order during the famous election campaign there. In addition to the party from Kilkenny, Volunteer units from Cork, Tipperary and Clare were drafted into Waterford for service during this election campaign. All and more perhaps, were necessary, for we had some violent clashes with the Redmondite or Irish Party supporters who made strenuous efforts to smash up the Sinn Féin election organisation. Time and again, they attacked Sinn Féin meetings, speakers and election rooms with bottles and stones, and were it not for the protection given by the Volunteers, it would have been impossible for the Sinn Féin party to carry on the election. Captain Ted Kelly, who was well known in Kilkenny, was in charge of all Volunteer units in Waterford for the election. To our bitter disappointment, Dr. Vincent White, the Sinn Féin candidate, was defeated in this contest.

During the late spring and early summer of 1918 when the conscription menace was at its height, we had many recruits into the Volunteers, and I would say that the strength of the company about doubled itself at the time. Training and instruction were intensified and members of the company did police duty at anti-conscription meetings in and around Kilkenny city. The company did not have any arms at this time, as all arms which came into our possession were handed over to and retained by the Battalion Quartermaster. About this time a man named Joseph McMahan, popularly known as Joe McMahan, arrived in Kilkenny. He was from Co. Clare and was a Volunteer on the run. He obtained employment as a coach builder, which was his trade, with the late Mr. Edward Furniss, Patrick Street, Kilkenny. He remained in Kilkenny for about two years during which time he was a member of my company and we became great friends. Some time after he left Kilkenny again on the run he was killed in Co. Cavan when demonstrating hand bombs, or grenades, to a party of Volunteers there. Joe was a real live wire. He must have had an excellent training in Volunteer work for, shortly after his joining the company, he commenced training signalling classes. He was also quite competent to instruct musketry and bombing classes. His enthusiasm for the movement knew no bounds, and to say that he hated the R.I.C. would be a gross understatement. He invariably carried arms one or sometimes two revolvers. Sometime towards the end of 1916 or early 1919, the British authorities in Kilkenny issued an instruction that owners of motor cars, plying for hire, must have a special military permit. Some owners applied for the permits and got them; others did not apply. Those who applied for the permits and got them, more or less incurred the displeasure of the Volunteers whose attitude at the time was that no recognition, good, bad or indifferent, should be shown to the British authorities or to the British forces. On one occasion as far as I can now recollect, it was early in 1919 three or four motor car owners, who had applied for and got the permits, were engaged by British army officers from Kilkenny military barracks to drive them and their wives or lady friends to a ball which was to take place at the residence of a family named St. George, near Urlingford. Joe McMahan was of the opinion in fact, he was very keen on it and I agreed with him that we should hold up the party on its way to the ball, and put the cars out of commission. On the night on which the ball took place, Joe McMahan, Tom Murphy, Billie Oakes, Michael Scully and myself, with one or two

others whose names I cannot now recall, went out the Freshford Road, which is also the road from Kilkenny to Urlingford, to a point at Troy's Wood where we awaited the party on its way to the ball. We were armed with revolvers and we expected that the British officers with the party would be similarly armed. When the party arrived, we held them up, by placing a two wheeled carriage which came along earlier, across the road. They offered no opposition. Only one of the British army officers was armed. He flung his revolver over the ditch into a field from where we recovered and retained it. Tom Murphy, who was then employed as a motor mechanic in Messrs. Stratham's garage, Kilkenny, was given the job of putting the cars out of commission. This he did by breaking or bursting holes in the petrol tanks with a hammer. Thus we left the British officers and their party stranded on the road and, at the same time, we taught a severe lesson to at least some of those who applied to the British military authorities for permits to use their cars.

Early in 1920, about the month of February, I believe, I assisted Joe McMahon, James Lalor, Tom Murphy, Billie Oakes and Michael (known as Mickle) Phelan in the making of small bombs or hand-grenades. The bombs were made at night in Peter de Loughrey's foundry in parliament Street, Kilkenny. They were made under the guidance of, and to a formula or design supplied by Joe McMahon. While I knew at the time that the bombs were required for an attack on an R.I.C. barracks, I am, however, not now quite certain who gave me this information first. I know, however, that the Brigade staff were considering attacking Tullaroan or Urlingford R.I.C. Barracks. Finally, however, it was decided to attack Hugginstown barracks. This attack took place on the night of March 9th, 1920.

After finishing work in the Brewery that evening, I went to my residence in Patrick Street to have my tea before cycling to Hugginstown which is about fourteen miles from Kilkenny city. While at my tea, I received a message that, before going to Hugginstown, I was to call to the premises of Mr. Tom Butler, merchant, Parliament Street. When I called to Mr. Butler, he gave me two very large bottles, one containing petrol, and the other containing paraffin oil which I brought with me to the assembly point, about two miles from Hugginstown.

Briefly, the plan for taking the barracks was for two parties of Volunteers, armed with shotguns and rifles, to attack the barracks, front and rear, and a small party of bombers, operating from Clery's yard which was next door to the barracks, to attack the roof with the bombs or hand grenades, which I have already referred to as having been made in de Loughrey's foundry.

Tom Treacy, the Brigade O/C, was in charge. The bombing party consisted of Joe McMahon, Tom Murphy, Billie Oakes, Michael Phelan and myself. Joe McMahon was in charge of this small section, and all five of us having assisted in the making of the bombs, were familiar with the handling of them. James Lalor, who also assisted in making the bombs, was the Brigade Vice O/C and was in charge of the party at the front of the barracks. The bombing party was armed with revolvers and, in addition, carried slating hammers for the purpose of breaking the slates on the roof, if necessary. We also had a fairly good-sized home-made bomb or mine, made from the box of a cartwheel packed with gelignite. The intention was that, if the police in the barracks did not surrender to the gun fire, we (the bombing party) would breach the roof and, through the breach, pour in the grenades and inflammable material and, for good measure, the bomb or mine, set the place on fire and thus force their surrender.

When final instructions were given, we moved into our positions as quietly as we could. We (the bombing section) had no difficulty in entering Clery's yard, the gateway of which was open. A long ladder, which was left there earlier in the evening by arrangement with the

local Volunteer Company, was lying in the yard. Joe McMahon and I hoisted the ladder against the gable end of the wall. This gave us access to a lean-to roof from which access to the main roof was easy. McMahon and I then climbed the ladder. After an exchange of signals between the Brigade O/C and McMahon that everything was in order, McMahon flung some of the bombs on to the ground at both the front and rear of the barracks. The Brigade O/C then called on the police to surrender and gave them some minutes (five, I think) to evacuate any women or children who might be in the barracks. The reply he received was a volley of fire from the barracks. He (the Brigade O/C) then gave the signal for the general attack to begin.

Our parties at the front and rear of the barracks then opened fire which they concentrated on the windows and doors of the barracks. This fire was vigorously replied to by the policemen inside. From time to time, Joe McMahon, from his position on the top of the ladder, fired some more of the bombs which exploded with deafening noise right beside the barrack walls. The R.I.C. men also used grenades which they flung out through the top windows of the barracks. I should perhaps mention that the bottom windows of the barracks were shuttered with steel shutters. Once, when coming down the ladder to get more bombs for McMahon, I was fired at, at point blank range, through a loophole in the gable end of the barrack wall facing Clery's yard. The bullet just whizzed by my head. I shouted to McMahon that the police were firing through this loophole which, up to this, we had more or less ignored. McMahon's answer to me was, "You just let them have the contents of your yoke" (meaning, of course, my revolver) "through the loophole". I then fired the six rounds of my Webley revolver straight in through the loophole, and we had no further trouble from that quarter.

The attack continued for about half an hour, after which time McMahon and I, who were both on the ladder, could hear cries of pain and moans coming from inside the barracks. At the same time, we heard the R.I.C. men shouting, "We surrender". The firing then ceased and McMahon, in a loud voice, shouted to the police to bring out their arms and to lay them down on the road at a point opposite the barracks. After a few minutes, the barrack door was opened and one policeman came out carrying six rifles which he laid down on the road. The Brigade O/C sent him back into the barracks for some small arms which he (the Brigade O/C, Tom Treacy) said should be there. The policeman then brought out three or four revolvers which he put down on the road beside the rifles. Meanwhile, some of our men entered the barracks and carried out three large wooden boxes of .303 rifle ammunition.

The policeman who carried out the arms said that one of his comrades, Constable Ryan, was seriously wounded and he (the policeman) thought that he was in a dying condition. He said that they had no first-aid or medical supplies in the barracks. Joe McMahon then handed a first-aid outfit to the policeman, remarking that it might be of assistance. Shortly afterwards, the policeman asked to be permitted to go for the priest and doctor for his comrade who was dying. This permission was given and, under an escort of two of three of our men, the policeman got the priest and doctor, both of whom lived in the village. However, the wounded constable died some hours later. We had no casualties in this attack.

Shortly after the R.I.C. men surrendered, some of our party knocked up a resident of the village from whom a pony and cart were borrowed. The captured arms and ammunition, together with the unused bombs and mine, were driven away in the pony and cart to a temporary hiding place near Stoneyford.

The attack commenced sometime shortly after 11.30 p.m. It was near 1 a.m. when we were dismissed by the O/C. I then cycled back along the fourteen miles to Kilkenny and arrived there without incident. I turned in to work in the Brewery at 6 a.m. just usual.

On Easter Saturday night of 1920, a small party of volunteers from my company, I entered the Customs and Excise offices at The Parade, Kilkenny. Our instructions were to collect all books and documents relating to income tax, pile them up in a heap in the yard at the back of the offices and to burn them there. After entering the premises, I discovered that the caretaker and elderly old lady who had apartments in the building was; very ill there. In fact, she was on the point of death. In view of this, I decided to seek further instructions before burning the records, and was told by some of the battalion officers, whom I am not now: exactly sure, to call the job off for the present at any rate.

After the attack on Hugginstown Barracks, except for more or less routine Volunteer work, there was lull in activities so far as Kilkenny city was concerned. This, in my opinion was due to the fact that both Tom Treacy, the Brigade O/C, and James Lalor, the Brigade Vice O/C, were taken into custody by the British forces, and also to the fact that Joe McMahon, who for some time previously was in hiding in and around Kilkenny city, had, on account of the persistent efforts of the R.I.C. and British forces to arrest him, to leave the district. After hunger-strikes in Belfast and Wormwood prisons, Treacy and Lalor were released by the British and returned home in the autumn of 1920. Both were, however, re-arrested in the following November. Meanwhile, the British forces had been considerably reinforced by the arrival in Kilkenny city and county of large forces of Auxiliaries and Black and Tans. The Auxiliaries took over Woodstock House, Inistiogue and established a Divisional Headquarters there.

A day or two after the re-arrest of Treacy and Lalor, an officer from G.H.Q., Ernest Ó Maille (generally known as Ernie) arrived, in Kilkenny. He stayed for about ten days or a fortnight at Stallard's of Danville, and his coming was in connection with a proposed attack on the Auxiliaries at Woodstock which the Brigade Officers were contemplating at the time. During his stay in Stallard's, he held meetings or consultations with a number of the Brigade and Battalion officers. I was not present at any of these meetings, and my only actual contact with him at that time was on the night of December 7th, 1920. I acted as his escort for part of the journey when he left Stallard's to go to the residence of James O'Hanrahan near Inistiogue. He travelled by pony and trap and was accompanied by a Volunteer named Edward Holland, who had been selected to act as his guide. James O'Hanrahan, to whose home Ó Maille was going, was then Commandant of the 5th Battalion, and the Divisional Headquarters of the Auxiliaries at Woodstock House was in the 5th Battalion area.

On the following morning, i.e., December 8th, 1920, Ó Maille and Holland were captured by Auxiliaries from Woodstock, at O'Hanrahan's house. O'Hanrahan and his workman were also arrested at the same time; Amongst documents captured by the Auxiliaries was a list of the Battalion officers whom Ó Maille had met while he was staying in Stallard's and which, presumably, he had prepared for future reference. The British Forces immediately started a round-up, and amongst others arrested were Peter de Loughrey who was acting as Brigade O/C in Tom Treacy's absence (then under arrest), Leo Dardis, the Brigade Adjutant, Ned Comerford, the Brigade Quartermaster, James Rowan, Commandant of the 7th Battalion, and Joe Rice of Outrath. These arrests left the Brigade organisation in a pretty bad way. A few weeks after, the incidents referred to in the preceding paragraph, George O'Dwyer, Commandant of the 3rd Battalion, was appointed Brigade O/C at a Brigade Council meeting which was held in Kilkenny. It was also agreed at this meeting that I should assist O'Dwyer in

his work as Brigade O/C. This arrangement never worked satisfactorily, so far as I was concerned at any rate. O'Dwyer spent most of his time in the rural districts, principally, I believe, with a flying column which, operated in the 3rd, 4th and 5th Battalion areas, while I lived and continued to work in Kilkenny city, with the result that, until the time of the Truce, I rarely, if ever, met him.

Sometime early in 1921, a flying column, which operated around the Kilkenny-Tipperary border, billeted for a few days in the townland of Ballycallan, about four miles from Kilkenny city. This column was comprised mainly of members of the 7th Battalion, Kilkenny Brigade, and was under the command of Eamon Aylward who was then Commandant of that battalion. During their stay in Ballycallan, Billie Oakes and myself visited the column with the object of discussing with Eamon Aylward the position in Kilkenny city and to see what could be done about carrying out an operation there. We met Aylward, Paddy Ryan and some other members of the column at the house of Tom Minogue in Ballyhendrican, Ballycallan. It was generally agreed that it was about time that something was done in Kilkenny city and, after some discussion, it was decided that Aylward, with some members of the column would come into the city the following evening, which was the evening of a fair day, and make an attempt to shoot County Inspector White of the R.I.C. County Inspector White was a daredevil type of officer. He was most aggressive towards the Volunteers and was known to have approved of the manhandling of prisoners. He lived in a walled-in house on the Callan Road, almost opposite to where I live now. His house was guarded night and day by a large party of Black and Tans, or Black and Tans and Auxiliaries. Accompanied by an escort of four to six constables, he walked each day, about 9.30 a.m., to his office in Parliament Street R.I.C. barracks, and generally left the barracks to walk home with the same escort, about five or 5.30 p.m. each evening. He varied his route from day to day, but then he had only two alternative routes to choose from; one via High Street, Patrick Street, Lower, and the college Road; the other via Abbey Street and the Circular Road.

I gave all these particulars to Aylward and explained to him that a scout placed at the corner of Abbey Street and Parliament Street would not only be able to see White leaving the barracks, but would be able to indicate the route which White was taking. No matter which route White took, he would have to pass either alongside the wall of St. Kiernan's College or quite close to it, and, as Aylward was for some years a student in St. Kiernan's College, he was quite familiar with the locality. He was also familiar with the position of the jail which was situated about four hundred yards from White's house and where, at that time, a large contingent of the Devonshire regiment were stationed. It was agreed that Oakes and I would be in touch with the members of the column from the time they came into the city, and that we would make the scouting arrangements. In deference to Aylward's wishes, it was also agreed that neither myself, Oakes or any of the scouts would carry any arms.

About 5.30 p.m. on the following evening, the scouts reported that White and his escort had left the barracks. They also reported that White, with part of his escort were coming via Abbey Street and the circular Road and that the remainder of the escort had gone via High Street and the College Road. This information was passed on by Oakes and myself to Aylward who, with six or seven members of his column, were waiting on the Circular Road. Aylward then told us (Oakes and myself) to move down the College Road in the direction of St. Patrick's Church. We did so, and were surprised, in a few minutes' time, when we saw the members of the column also moving slowly down the College Road by the college wall. By this movement, they were actually moving away from the direction in which White and his party were coming and were moving towards that part of the escort which was coming

via High Street and Lower Patrick Street. To the amazement of Oakes and myself who were standing on the opposite side of the road, this part of White's escort and the members of the column passed each other on the narrow footpath beside the college wall without even an exchange of greetings, let alone an exchange of fire. To say the least of it, Oakes and I were bitterly disappointed. It was just after dark and the road was clear at the time, and everything seemed in our favour.

When I spoke to Aylward a few minutes later, he offered no explanation, but said that they would come in again early in the morning and attack White and his escort by rifle fire as they came out the gate of White's house. The members of the column did not put in an appearance next morning and, from this time onwards, it was noticed that White never walked from his home to or from the barrack. He used a motor car or a Crossley tender and was always accompanied by a much larger escort in motor cars or lorries.

Towards the end of May, or early in June in 1921, I attended a meeting in Teehan's house at Shipton, near Callan. This was a meeting of Divisional officers of the 2nd Southern Division which had recently been formed. It was presided over by Ernie O'Malley whom I have previously referred to and who had escaped from prison some months before. At the time of this meeting, he was O/C of the newly formed 2nd Southern Division. At this meeting I was appointed Intelligence Officer of the Kilkenny Brigade. I was not exactly happy about accepting the appointment, as I was in full-time employment in Smithwick's Brewery and was finding it rather difficult to take time off during working hours to attend meetings, etc. When I pointed this out to the meeting, Ó Maille's comment was, "Just let them sack you, and we will deal with them". I continued to act as Brigade Intelligence officer until about March of 1922. During my time as Brigade Intelligence officer, a man named Michael Doyle was Divisional Intelligence officer, and it was to him I furnished all my reports.

Signed : Martin Cassidy

Date: 18th Feb. 1955