

Life with the South Tipperary Volunteers 1914-1921 by Paul Merrigan, from the Bureau of Military History 1913-21.

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Introduction¹

The Bureau of Military History 1913-1921, from which the following statement by Paul Merrigan comes, was set up on the initiative of the then-Taoiseach, Eamonn de Valera, by the then-Minister for Defence Oscar Traynor TD, in January 1947. Its aim was to assemble and co-ordinate material which would form the basis of a history of the movement for independence from 1913 to July 1921, the date of the Truce.

The origins of the Bureau go back to 1944 when the then editor of *An Cosantóir*, Major Florence O'Donoghue, published a series of articles (in *An Cosantóir*, 1945-46) and submitted a plan for such a bureau to de Valera. Over the following ten years, over three hundred groups of documents (of which the statement below is an example) were assembled by the Bureau. The Bureau was put under the charge of the Department of Defence, and the staff (partly military personnel, partly civilian) was given intensive training in interview skills.

An advisory committee to the Bureau was chaired by Dr. Richard Hayes, director of the National Library of Ireland and included Professors R. Dudley Edwards and Theodore W. Moody, history academics from UCD and TCD respectively.

Paul Merrigan's statement is a typical Bureau statement. Supplied on September 3rd 1957, it gives a personal account of his career in the Volunteers and, subsequently, the IRA. The main interest in the statement lies in its brief account of the capture, imprisonment and subsequent execution by the South Tipperary Brigade of District Inspector Gilbert Potter. Although Potter's execution was a sensation in its day, references to it are few and far between in the literature of the War of Independence. Eighty-plus years after the event, the morality or justification for Potter's shooting must be challenged. It is clear from Merrigan's statement that sanction for the execution was obtained from brigade headquarters, but the equally clear implication is that sanction was either not sought or obtained from Volunteer Headquarters in Dublin.

The most recent account of what has become known as the 'D.I. Potter Affair' may be found in *Tipperary County: People and Places*, edited by Michael Hallinan.² Hallinan, then a child of only three, actually witnessed the imprisonment of Potter (for at least one night) in his parents' home near Newcastle.

Bureau of Military History 1913-21 No. 1.667

Paul Merrigan –Statement to the Bureau of Military History 1913-21

I was born in the year 1898 at Ballinleen, near Mount Bruis, Co. Tipperary, where my parents were farming folk. I was educated at the local national school in Mount Bruis and later, for a few years, at the Christian Brothers' School in Tipperary Town. My school days ended when I was sixteen years of age, and I then remained at home on the land, with my people.

Shortly after I left school, I joined the Volunteer movement in Tipperary Town, and was a member for perhaps a year or two. There were the usual parades and drills, which I attended for some time, but otherwise there was nothing of special interest with which I was associated and which I can recall, prior to Easter Week, 1916.

On the Wednesday of Easter Week 1916, I was at my cousin's, Michael Merrigan's, house at Moanour, Kilross. His nearest neighbour was Peter Hennessy, also of Moanour. About noon, I heard a shot, followed closely by a second shot from the direction of Hennessy's house. Almost immediately Hennessy's workboy came running to where I was, saying that here was a madman in Hennessy's who had shot two policemen, and that Peter Hennessy needed help. I ran to Hennessy's, and saw Sergeant O' Rourke of the R.I.C. propped up in the kitchen: he was not dead, but was moaning with pain, and it was evident that he was dying. Outside in the yard, near a hayshed, I saw another policeman, Constable Hurley, lying dead.

Peter Hennessy then told me how it all happened. His cousin, Michael O' Callaghan, whom I knew to be a Volunteer officer and whom the police had attempted to arrest in Tipperary on the previous night, had arrived at Hennessy's that morning. He was sitting at the fire when Sergeant O' Rourke and Constable Hurley arrived. The sergeant spoke to Peter Hennessy first, and then went to place his hand on Callaghan's shoulder, whom he knew well, saying, "Who is this you have here Peter?". O'Callaghan swung around in his chair and, saying, 'Here is my card, Sergeant!', fired point blank at him. The constable ran out the door, followed by O'Callaghan who fired after him, with the result I had seen. Michael O'Callaghan had left Hennessy's, and taken to the mountainside when I got there.

We decided to send the workboy, who was not aware of O'Callaghan's identity, to Aherlow R.I.C. barracks to report the shooting. It was not long until the police and military arrived from Tipperary. The place was surrounded, and a prolonged search commenced. Peter Hennessy, his wife and I were questioned, and our statements taken down. For weeks and months afterwards, the police were unrelenting in their search for O'Callaghan until finally he got out of the country and reached the U.S.A.

He had some remarkable escapes from capture. For instance, I remember being told one night by a man whom I considered could not be trusted, that Michael O'Callaghan was staying at John Crowe's of Ardavillane. I called that night to Crowe's, and told John Crowe that this individual knew that Michael O' Callaghan was in the house. O'Callaghan then moved to Rathkea. Next morning, both Crowe's and Kiely's were raided, and Michael made his escape through a back window, while the police were approaching Kiely's house.

In the springtime of 1917, an Irish Volunteer unit which I joined was formed in Mount Bruis. Its first parade was held on either 1st or 2nd April, 1917. Prior to that we had a Sinn Féin club there, and I might say the Sinn Féin club was the foundation-stone of the Volunteer company. In other words, all the young men in the Sinn Féin club were Volunteer-minded, and on that account there was very little difficulty in securing the initial members for the company.

Approximately eighteen men were enrolled on the first night, but within twelve months this number had increased to over eighty. An old list in my possession gives the names of eighty two members of the company when the 4th Battalion was formed in April 1918 and when we became F. Company of that battalion.

Seán Treacy and Dan Breen gave us great help in organising the company. The first officers elected were Patrick Power, Company Captain, Matt Barlow, 1st Lieutenant, Michael Kiely, 2nd Lieutenant, and Con Power, Quartetmaster. My first rank was that of Section Commander, but later on in 1918 I was appointed 2nd Lieutenant and, some months later, 1st Lieutenant.

Parades were held at various places on Friday nights, and a subscription of threepence per man was collected into a company fund. Good progress was made with training, and signalling and musketry classes were started. Target practice, with a miniature rifle and using moving targets, was held in Tobin's quarry at Shrough.

The summer months of 1918 were an exceptionally busy period for the Volunteers, due to the threat of the British Government to extend the Conscription Act to Ireland and the preparations made to deal with the threat. To arm the Company, we collected shotguns and ammunition from farmers. Some parted with them voluntarily, others against their will. A raid on Captain Moore's places at Mooresfort and at Bansha Castle, carried out on the same night by the Mount Bruis company, yielded a good number of shotguns which the Captain kept in reserve for his visitors. Another successful raid at that time was on the offices of the Urban District Council in Tipperary where a number of single-shot Martini rifles were stored, from the days of the National Volunteers. That raid was carried out jointly by the Mount Bruis and Tipperary Town companies, and we got either ten or twelve of the rifles for the Mount Bruis company.

During that time too the Battalion Headquarters set up a munition factory in our company area – at Barlow's of Shrough. I would say that not more than ten persons, including the battalion and company officers, were aware of its existence, and the Volunteers who did duty, day and night, around Barlow's, must often have wondered what they were guarding. The work done in the factory consisted principally of running molten lead through moulds to make buckshot, re-filling cartridge cases, and making grenades and mines. Matt and Arthur Barlow were the chief figures in this factory activity, and were assisted at the work by the battalion and company officers.

Another item of interest around that period was the introduction of a novel method of raising funds. It was decided by either the battalion or the brigade headquarters to place a levy on each farmer of five shillings per cow for every cow he owned. The farmers were notified beforehand of the amount of their levy. When we called to collect, some paid up at once, saying we were great boys and deserving of support. With others it was not quite so easy and, in some cases it was necessary to seize and sell cattle to collect the amount due. In the latter cases, only the amount of the levy was retained and the balance of the money was returned to the former owners of the cattle. I cannot now recall what the amount raised in in the Mount Bruis area by this levy was, but it was a pretty big sum. A portion of it was handed over to the local branch of the White Cross organisation, and the balance of it was forwarded to the brigade headquarters.

Early in 1919, Con Moloney came and, at a parade of the company, all members took the oath of allegiance. While I am not sure of the date, I think it was also éarly in 1919 that a big raid was carried out on Limerick Junction railway station, and something like one thousand gallons of petrol, the property of the British army, was captured. This was a battalion operation in which some hundreds of volunteers were engaged, and had to be done at night. The petrol was in two-gallon tins, and we brought it to Kilross creamery where prior arrangements had been made to store it in an underground cellar.

At Easter of 1920, the company was engaged in the destruction of two evacuated R.I.C. barracks, one at Glenbane and the other at Lisvernane. Glenbane barracks was burned on Easter Saturday night, and, on the following night, Easter Sunday night, we carried eight tins of petrol over Slievenamuck mountain and did a similar job on Lisvernane barracks. Two weeks later, we put the British army rifle range at Ballyglass out of action. This was done by burning the lever shed and destroying the lever mechanism with a charge of six sticks of gelignite. The range was never subsequently used by the British military.

Activities then became more general and varied. Day-to-day activities including providing guides for Ernie O' Malley, Sean McLoughlin and George Plunkett, who were frequently in the Mount Bruis area, cleaning and oiling the arms, sniping (sic) the British military hutments at Scallaheen and Ballynamounty, supplying despatch riders, and the blocking of roads. On the nights of the attacks on Ballyanders and Kilmallock barracks, our company blocked the Tipperary-Kilmallock road and the Lattin-Emly road. Three members of the company, Patrick Power, Con Power and Matt Barlow, travelled to Kilmallock and took part in the attack on the barracks.

In September 1920, the flying column was formed, and began its activities. Its first billets were in my company area, and, about one week later, with eight to twelve men from our company, it occupied its first ambush position at a place called Toor, on the Tipperary-Galbally road. Two lorries of military usually passed that way about 10a.m., but on that day no military arrived up to 3p.m., and the column then moved off over Slievenamuck Mountain, and we returned to our homes. The initial strength of the column, including Dinny Lacey, the O/C, was sixteen, and it included two members of our company, Pake Dalton and Matt Barlow.

The first serious operation in which I was engaged against enemy forces was at Lisnagaul on November 13th, 1920. I was not then a member of the column, but, on the previous night, eight of us from the Mount Bruis company billeted with the column near Lisnagaul. We had been selected beforehand to assist in the ambush. It was also the second or third attempt by the column to ambush this particular party of R.I.C. and Black and Tans on their way to Bansha.

The position was at a bend in the road about three miles from Bansha and about the same distance from the village of Church-road. We occupied it about 9a.m. My position was with the main party, and I was armed with a service rifle. About 3 p.m., a scout signalled the approach of the police party. As the tender on which they were travelling came into position, there were several shouts of 'halt', but as I saw it the driver appeared to put on speed. Lacey blew a single blast on his whistle, which was the signal to open fire. The driver was killed in the first volley, and the tender hit the ditch, but it had also cleared, or partly cleared, the bend of the road. Those of the police who were not killed in the first volley got cover under the tender, and replied to our fire. The firing continued, I would say, for about eight or ten minutes, until the police shouted that they were surrendering. The firing ceased, and four policemen who surrendered were all wounded. When we got out on the road the firing ceased, and four policemen who surrendered were all wounded. When we got out on the road, we found three others dead. One policeman had escaped, and succeeded in getting away. The arms, which we collected as a result of this ambush, were ten rifles (police carbine type), seven revolvers, all stamped, 'R.I.C', some slings of ammunition, a box of ammunition and some grenades which were on the tender. Finally, the tender itself was set on fire after the dead bodies of the police had been removed from it.

As a reprisal, the British wrecked and burned a number of business houses in Tipperary Town, including P.J. Moloney's, Hayes's in Main Street, and The Irish House. They also burned down the house of a man named John Bourke who lived near the ambush site. They imposed a curfew from sunset to sunrise in Tipperary Town and district, and banned all fairs and markets. My own house was amongst those raided, and I then went on the run.

Towards the end of January 1921, the column paid another visit to Mount Bruis. Lacey was seeking some additional men, and it was then that I became a regular member of the column. On my first night with it, we marched over eight miles to Solohead, Moanmore and Seskin – not bad when you consider that our route was through the bye-roads, laneways and across fields.

There was then a long period with the column of marching and occupying positions in

various areas, without having any worthwhile engagement with enemy forces. This was, of course, because enemy forces did not turn up when we expected them. There were sniping attacks on the police barracks at Limerick Junction, Dundrum, New Inn, Golden and Glenbower, just to harass the garrison within, and to do what damage we could. Then there was one night the column was brought into Tipperary Town, the object being to attack military and police parties who patrolled the streets after curfew. We entered the town from the Dundrum side, and assembled inside the convent walls. Whilst there, we heard the patrols passing outside on the street. All preparations for the operation were completed and men were detailed to rush to certain streets and laneways, but, at the last minute, the whole thing was called off. Why, I am not certain, but I believe that information was received that the enemy forces had been warned, and that the alarm had been sounded in the barracks.

About the middle of March 1921 there was an engagement between the column and a military party on the Coach Road. My recollection of that is that we were at Greene's of Killea when the information was received that a military party of about thirty had gone to Ballynacourty camp from Tipperary, escorting a ration-wagon drawn by mules. It was decided to ambush them on their way back. The column were scattered over a number of houses, and time slipped by, while they and some local scouts were being got together. As a matter of fact, only about twelve members of the column, including Dinny Lacey, Jerry Kiely, Pake Dalton, Andy Kennedy, Tom Bellews and myself, who were in houses nearest to the road, had reached it when the party were passing back, and there was no time to get into a proper position. The soldiers were marching in a rather unusual formation. First, there was a party of four, followed at some distance by a party of eight, and then the mules and wagon, with the remainder of the soldiers marching behind. Lacey said, 'Let the first party pass!' As the eight came towards us, he gave the signal to fire, which we did. Like the trained men they were, the soldiers scattered and got cover. The mules started to run towards our position, and were shot dead. For about five minutes, there was an exchange of fire with the soldiers, and Lacey then sounded the retreat, and we withdrew through a ravine back to Killea. The soldiers made no attempt to follow us, nor had we any casualties, but I believe the some of the soldiers were killed, as the military commandeered a cart from a man named Butler to convey their casualties back to Tipperary military barracks.

The next incident of any consequence was the capture of District Inspector Potter of the R.I.C. at Garrymore Cross, near Ballylooby, on April 23rd, 1921. The two brigade columns, i.e., Seán Hogan's and ours, had met, and occupied a position at Garrymore Cross, and it was hoped to ambush a big convoy of British troops passing between Cahir and Clogheen. After waiting for some hours and no sign of the convoy coming, it was decided to evacuate the position, and Hogan's column pulled out. Our column was in the act of doing likewise – the columns were to withdraw in opposite directions – when a small party of British soldiers, with a horse-driven ration-car, came along and were fired on by some of our men. This party of soldiers surrendered after a few minutes, and when their equipment had been collected, the column proceeded with the withdrawal movement, moving off in two's along a bye-road which led in the direction of the village of Newcastle. James Kilmartin, vice o/c of the column, and I were the last two to move off, and it was at this stage that a small two-seater car, driven by a man wearing a tweed overcoat and a soft hat, arrived. He was alone.

As cars were rare things on the road at the time, and as it was necessary to have a permit from the British authorities to use one, our suspicions were aroused, and when we held him up, he said he was a doctor. We found a revolver in the car, and Seán Downey, a member of the column, identified him as District Inspector Potter. It all happened so long ago that it is not easy to

describe the details, but I remember that Lacey was on the scene and that, while we were engaged with Potter, firing broke out between the leading members of the column and military who apparently had come from Clogheen and were endeavouring to intercept the column. Lacey instructed Kilmartin and me to guard the prisoner and not to let him go, at any cost. We took him into what is known locally as a cul-de-sac, actually a sunken laneway leading into farmers' fields. He was reluctant to come with us and, for a time, lay down in the laneway.

Meanwhile, the engagement with the military who were in extended formation and were firing from behind a stone wall, developed, and I would say that a good twenty minutes elapsed before the engagement was broken off, and the column withdrew under the cover of the banks of the cul-de-sac. There were no casualties amongst the column and, taking Potter with us, we headed for the Knockmealdown Mountains, and reached Newcastle about midnight. From there, Thomas Kennedy was sent to Rosegreen to report Potter's capture to brigade headquarters.

We were all weary. Billets were found in some of the small farmhouses on the mountainside, but it was my night on duty to inspect the scouts. Before 5 a.m., military lorries were heard approaching Newcastle, and it was evident that a big round-up was under way. The men were roused again, and that morning we crossed the Knockmealdowns, and continued on until we reached Mount Melleray Abbey about 1p.m. The monks gave us a hearty welcome, and our first bit to eat since early the day before. It was Potter's first meal too since his capture. Much older than any of us, he was a remarkably fit man, and had held his own during the strenuous march. After a few hours rest at the Abbey, we moved off again towards the Comeragh mountains. We were then, of course, in County Waterford.

Potter was a prisoner of ours for at least a week, and moved about with the column. He was guarded day and night by two members of the column whilst we awaited the result of an offer made by the brigade headquarters to release him, provided the British authorities reprieved a volunteer named Thomas Traynor, who was then under sentence of death in Mountjoy prison. When Traynor was executed, Potter's execution followed. It took place on a Sunday night, on the banks of the Nire, near Kilclooney, Co. Waterford.

In May, we were back again in County Waterford, this time with instructions from the brigade headquarters to dig dug-outs near Crotty's Lake in the Comeragh mountains. I understand that the dug-outs were required to store arms which it was expected would be landed from a ship near Dungarvan, and that the column was to proceed to Upper Clonea, about two and a half miles from Dungarvan, when the ship with the arms arrived. However, there were no developments as regards that part of it, as far as I am aware.

We spent about three weeks at that job, billeting all the time in farmers houses in the Nire valley. About thirty dug-outs were made, and as they were completed, the entrances or openings were covered over with light poles and sods. Lacey was dissatisfied with this part of the job, as he feared they would be a danger to cattle and sheep grazing in the vicinity, so he sent eight of us one night to Kirwan's hardware store in Kilmacthomas to commandeer galvanised iron sheeting.

Whilst we were loading the sheeting on a horse and cart in Kirwan's yard, two lorries of Black and Tans arrived in the village. Rightly or wrongly, we assumed that they had got word of the raid and that they would surround the yard, so we left immediately and got back to the Nire valley without any incident and without the galvanised sheeting.

We left the Nire valley towards the end of May, and went to Rathgormack, near Portlaw. This was a beautiful and quiet locality for a rest, and we remained there for three or four days. Most

of us were then suffering from a skin ailment which, for a better name, we called the 'Republican itch'. Dr. Murphy came out from Carrick-on-Suir and attended us.

Our next move was to the banks of the Suir, and fishermen rowed us across the river to Kilsheelan in County Tipperary. Following this, and before going to Rosegreen, I remember we made a daylight sniping-attack on Glenbower R.I.C. barracks. Some of the R.I.C. were outside the barracks when the attack commenced, and it was reported that one R.I.C. man was killed and another wounded.

When we reached Rosegreen, we learned that big forces of British military were encamped under canvas at Garnalea and at Rathsallagh, and, instead of billeting in farmhouses in the ordinary way, we were accommodated in the brigade and battalion dug-outs. The encamped soldiers were part of forces from Clonmel, Cahir, and Fethard, engaged in a general round-up. As a matter of fact, military actually walked over the dug-out which I and some other members of the column occupied.

From Rosegreen, we went to Cloneen, and it was there that Denis Sadlier, Commandant of the 5th Battalion, was accidentally shot dead by one of his best friends. I remember that incident well. We were on our way to the assembly point, after having dinner in Britton's of Cloneen, when Sadlier and his friend started 'caffling', or playing pranks with their rifles. The friend aimed his loaded rifle at Sadlier and, believing it to be unloaded, pressed the trigger and shot him. He died almost immediately. An improvised coffin was made from boxes, and we carried the remains to a cemetery near Nine-Mile-House where he was buried at 2a.m. next morning.

Shortly before the columns were disbanded, the two columns met again and occupied an ambush position at Woodruffe, on the Fethard-Clonmel road. The roads were blocked, and we were there from 9a.m. until 4p.m., but nothing happened, as no enemy forces came along.

As far as I can recollect, it was from Woodruffe we went to Ballypatrick where Lacey read out the brigade order, disbanding the columns and instructing all members to return to their battalion areas. I remember that we parted company that evening, and with me, travelling back to the 4th battalion area, were Pake Dalton (the tank), Michael Ryan (Bouleen), Andy Kennedy, Sean Kennedy, Pat Cahill, Bill Allen, James Kilmartin, Patrick McDonagh, B.A., James Doherty, Tom Lynch, Jerry Kiely, Ned O'Dwyer (Corkscrew) and Jerry Fitzpatrick. Five other 4th battalion men who served with the column were Seán and Michael Fitzpatrick, Brian Shanahan, Tadhg Crowe and Tom Bellews.

During the lifetime of the column, Seán Fitzpatrick had been appointed brigade adjutant, and his brother, Michael, when recovered from his wounds received at Thomastown, was appointed to the divisional staff. Brian Shanahan and Tadhg Crowe had been appointed respectively Commandant and Quartermaster of the 4th Battalion; and on the disbandment of the column, Tom Bellews was appointed to the staff of the 7th battalion.

We remained together after returning to the battalion area, and set a trap for the Oola police. We had a message sent to them, saying that a goods train had been held up at Boherdota bridge. Actually, a train had been held up there a short time previously, and the police went out from Oola to investigate. On receipt of our message, four R.I.C. men or Black and Tans left Oola barracks, and came walking in extended formation along the railway line.

They walked straight into the ambush position. We gave them every chance to surrender and put up their hands, but they ran back and attempted to get cover in the high grass along the railway embankment, with the result that we opened fire on them from the heights or top of the embankment. Two of the police were killed, one was wounded, and one, who kept on running, escaped back to Oola. That ambush at Boherdota bridge took place on July 8th, 1921. We

collected the guns and ammunition belonging to the dead and wounded policemen, and then beat a hasty retreat to Solohead north.

On the following evening, we were near Thomastown – we had been avoiding the round-up which followed Boherdota and were on our way to Slievenamuch mountain – when at about 4p.m. we saw a convoy of approximately sixteen lorries and tenders of enemy forces moving along the Cashel-Tipperary road. At the time, we were about two hundred yards from the road, and had plenty of good cover. We let the first and second lorries pass, and sniped the third one.

The convoy stopped, and the troops opened a barrage of fire with machine-guns. We, of course, had no intention of having a prolonged engagement with such a powerful force, and, under cover of a stone wall, pulled out at once. The military were apparently taken by surprise, or else they overrated our strength, for they remained on the road and did not move to pursue us. Half an hour later when we reached Grantstown Castle, the military were still firing on the road.

Next day, which was the day before the Truce, we decided to separate. There were twelve of us – all ex-members of the column – together since the ambush at Boherdota. Pake Dalton and I returned to Mount Bruis that evening.

To conclude, I might mention that on the following morning – the morning of the Truce – Dalton and I held up a postman and examined his mails. We found one letter which aroused our suspicion. It was to an ex-British soldier, bore no sender's address, and read, "Writer can be seen at his home." It was not signed, just initialled. We sent it to the battalion headquarters, but there were no developments of which I am aware.

My rank on July 11th, 1921, was that of battalion transport officer, an appointment which I received after returning from the column.

Notes

- 1 *An Introduction to the Bureau of Military History*, (Dublin, 2002).
- 2 Michael Hallinan, ed., *Tipperary County: People and Places, an Anthology of the Evolution of County Tipperary, some Historical Events and the History of the Principal Towns in the County*, (Dublin 1993), chapter 26.