An account from the Bureau of Military History

Ned O'Leary's Account of the War of Independence in North Tipperary

(Bureau of Military History Witness Statement No. 1459)

Introduction

Edward (Ned) O'Leary served as Adjutant of No.1 Tipperary (North) Brigade of the IRA and for a time as leader of that brigade's flying column. What follows is his own account as given in the 1950s to the Bureau of Military History.[1] O'Leary gives very little personal information in his statement,[2] concentrating on a range of topics relevant to the IRA campaign in North Tipperary. This is all the more valuable because the activities of the 3rd Brigade tend to grab the headlines. Topics discussed by O'Leary include the Volunteers in Nenagh district just before and after 1916; his arrest and imprisonment in Belfast in 1918; the organization of battalions in general and that of the 1st Brigade in particular; his appointment as brigade adjutant; trips to Dublin in 1919 for arms and meetings with Collins; lack of Volunteer activity;[3] the formation, organization and training of the Flying Column; the killing of Captain Hambleton near Nenagh in November 1920; the Kilcommon Ambush in December 1920[4] (the central episode in O'Leary's military career); the death of Captain James Devenney (so named in the statement, also 'Devanney' or 'Devaney') in January 1921;[5] training camps for members of the Flying Column; return to brigade duties; complaints about the lack of support for active service units and finally some observations on Dáil courts.[6]

Not the least valuable aspect of O'Leary's statement is that it helps to remove any notion that serving in the Volunteers had any glamour and he indicates that moments of excitement were paid for by hours, days and weeks of tedium. O'Leary had some harsh things to say about organising and sustaining the Flying Column. Intelligence was poor. The planning and execution of successful attacks was difficult. O'Leary takes no responsibility for this. He was also critical of the lack of support from some battalions, the officers of which wanted a quiet life and were fearful of reprisals in their areas. O'Leary, not unnaturally absolves himself of blame for the shortcomings of the Flying Column but according to Sean Gaynor, O'Leary was moved back to his old post of brigade adjutant because the flying column had 'not been sufficiently active'.[7]

Edward O'Leary died in Dublin on 6 August 1969 at the age of seventy eight and was buried in Esker Cemetery in Lucan. He was unmarried and before retirement had worked in the Irish Land Commission. Three years after his death, in May 1972, a monument to his memory was unveiled in Lucan Cemetery.[8] (DGM)

Ned O'Leary's Statement

I was born in Beechwood, Nenagh, Co. Tipperary, in January 1891. My father was a comfortable farmer. I was educated at Nenagh Christian Brothers' School, which I left when I had passed the Senior Grade. Some time after leaving school, I was appointed as clerk to the County Surveyor for the North Tipperary County Council in Nenagh.

My mother's people had been prominently connected with the struggle for Irish freedom. My great-grandfather, Mortimer Darcy, was flogged through the town of Nenagh by the yeomanry in 1798 because of his connection with the United Irishmen, while my grandfather, Dan Darcy, was so unpopular with the strong Ascendancy element around Nenagh due to his activities as a Fenian, that his funeral had to be protected from attacks by a strong bodyguard of his own comrades.

My first contact with the Irish National movement began when I joined the Irish Volunteers on their formation in the town of Nenagh early in 1914. About 250 men in that town and in the adjoining rural areas joined up at that time. The driving force behind the organisation in Nenagh was Frank McGrath, an IRB man, though some of the local Catholic clergy also took a leading part at the commencement. The first parade of the Nenagh Volunteers was held in the Courthouse Square, and subsequently the unit met on Sundays for parade and drill. As instructors we had a number of ex-British soldiers, who were paid for their services by a weekly levy of a few pence on each Volunteer. To the best of my recollection, the unit was controlled by a committee whose meetings were informal in character and the whole system of control was loose and inefficient. The only guns which I can remember being used for drill purposes were timber rifles made by local carpenters.

When the Remondite 'split' occurred in August 1914, only about forty of the Nenagh Volunteers sided with the section of the Irish Volunteer Executive which was led by Eoin MacNéill. Frank McGrath was the outstanding personality in that splinter group and he was appointed as captain. Liam Hoolan was next in charge. Both of these officers trained and drilled the group, which from then onwards became known as the Nenagh Company of the Irish Volunteers. Liam Forde, one of the leaders of the Limerick City Volunteers, also helped with the drilling, which mostly took place in the old courthouse in Pound St

The Nenagh Company continued to meet for drill regularly throughout 1915 and up to the Rising on Easter Sunday 1916. I do not think the company had acquired any rifles during that time, but some revolvers – probably not more than half a dozen – were got from people around the town. Of course, if the necessity arose, it could have been possible to arm between twenty or thirty men with shotguns held by the Volunteers themselves or their friends and relations.

The Irish Volunteers in Nenagh did not mobilise immediately prior to, or during the fighting in Dublin in Easter Week. I had heard some time prior to this from Paddy Gleeson that the Rising was being planned. He was a native of the Nenagh district but was working in Dublin, where he was prominently associated with the Volunteer movement. He was on a visit home when he gave me the information, as a great secret of course.

Subsequent to the Rising, the Nenagh Company went out of existence for more than a year. Due again to the initiative of Frank McGrath, the company was revived at a meeting held in Pound St. The old officers were re-appointed, McGrath as Captain, Liam Hoolan as 1st Lieut. I forget the name of the 2nd Lieutenant, but it may have been myself. We started

off with about forty men, a good sprinkling of whom had also been enrolled in the IRB by McGrath, who was then Centre of the Nenagh Circle. It was he who enrolled myself, though I do not remember ever having attended any meeting of the Circle until after the Truce in 1921.

After the Pound St. meeting the company met for drill and instruction in the old courthouse at least once a week. The strength of the company increased gradually in the next three or four months to about 100 men. Under the guidance and influence of McGrath, who was also a big figure in GAA circles in Co. Tipperary, the Irish Volunteers spread throughout the rural areas, so that by the end of 1917, a company existed in every parish within a radius of ten miles of Nenagh.

The threatened enforcement of conscription in Ireland acted as a powerful stimulant to the Republican movement and caused men of military age all over the country to join the Volunteer movement, which was then the spearhead of the resistance to the British Government's proposal. Some companies in North Tipperary more than doubled their strength in consequence. Orders from G.H.Q. required every Volunteer to equip himself with a gun or a pike. Only a very limited number could procure shotguns, and the manufacture of pikes by local blacksmiths and farmers became a matter of urgency. Each company had to make its own arrangements and varied indeed were the methods used to procure suitable steel and timber for the pikeheads and shafts. Funds were low with the vast majority of the Volunteers and as well, it was difficult, if not impossible, to obtain steel from hardware merchants, as they normally did not stock the right type of material. The result was that all sorts of scrap steel were utilised. Springs of disused cars and traps, I think, were about the most commonly used materials. Despite all the trouble and excitement which the making of these pikes entailed, they were never used. They may however have played their part in impressing upon the authorities through reports received from the RIC that an attempt to enforce conscription would meet with bloody and violent resistance.

The British Government of course, were going ahead with their own plans and decided that one of the first steps preparatory to the introduction of conscription should be to place all the leaders of the Volunteers under lock and key. In Nenagh, Frank McGrath was arrested during the spring of 1918. Liam Hoolan, who replaced him as acting company captain, was next detained. I followed Hoolan. On the day of his arrest I mobilised the Volunteers outside the RIC barracks in Barrack St. now Kenyon St. and kept drilling them there for more than an hour. In the course of a few weeks I was arrested along with another Nenagh man, Ned Kennedy. We were taken to Limerick Jail, handcuffed together. After a week or so we were brought to Templemore, also in handcuffs, and tried before an RM on charges of illegal drilling. We both refused to recognise the court and in a speech from the dock, I protested against the manner in which we were brought through the country handcuffed like criminals and not treated as political prisoners which we claimed to be. We were each sentenced to three months imprisonment. There was a scene in court after our trial as we resisted being handcuffed, but a large force of RIC overpowered us on the orders of District Inspector Wilson, later shot dead in Templemore. By way of answer to my protest, I was handcuffed to a tinker who was sentenced for theft. In that manner I was taken away by train to Limerick Jail. After three weeks, Kennedy and myself were transferred to Belfast Jail, where there were about two hundred other Volunteers from all parts of the country confined.

Shortly after my arrival in Belfast, the prison authorities decided to reduce the rations. In protest against this, the prisoners decided to refuse to accept parcels of food sent to them by their relations and friends. The meagreness of the rations soon reflected itself in the physical condition of the prisoners. Some of them were barely able to walk around the compound. In my own case, I dropped over two stone weight in the course of a few weeks. Eventually our gaunt appearance must have frightened the authorities. A number of men were weighed and after that the rations were increased to the normal allowance. From then up to my release, at the end of August, I had no fault to find with the prison treatment.

On coming out of jail, instead of going home directly, I went to stay with a brother in Wexford town, where he was manager of the Wexford Meat Factory, a co-operative undertaking. During my stay of about a fortnight, I made contact with an ex-British officer in a club frequented by my brother and purchased from him a long Webley revolver which I took back with me to Nenagh. This gun was subsequently used by Jim Murphy, 'The Jennet' by nickname, in the shooting of D.I. Hunt in Thurles. On my arrival in Nenagh, I got a big reception from hundreds of Volunteers and Sinn Féin supporters who met me at the station.

Soon after coming back to Nenagh, I got word from Frank McGrath, who was also out of jail, to proceed along the railway line between Nenagh and my own home, a distance of about two miles, to watch out for some guns which were to be dropped off the 5 p.m. train to Dublin by a Nenagh Volunteer named Bill Gill. The latter was to get the guns from two British soldiers, natives of Nenagh, who were returning from furlough. I collected a Lee Enfield service rifle and a long Webley revolver and hid them in my own home.

In September 1918, Nenagh became battalion headquarters of the Irish Volunteers in North Tipperary. The battalion covered roughly the area which three or four months later became known as the No. 1 (North Tipperary Brigade). The battalion officers were Frank McGrath, commandant; Liam Hoolan, vice commandant; Sean Gaynor, adjutant; and Frank Flannery, quartermaster. From this time onwards the Volunteers went in a good deal for manoeuvres, a form of exercise which I personally relished. I was a fairly useful and keen athlete and manoeuvres provided plenty of opportunities for cross-country running, jumping across streams and vaulting over fences. Ernie O'Malley, a G.H.Q. officer, was in the area and he supervised these exercises.

One night while we were engaged in inter-company manoeuvres at Ballinaclough, five miles outside Nenagh, I was called out of the ranks by O'Malley and put in charge of one of the companies. A week or so later I was informed that I had been selected as adjutant to the newly created No. 1 (North) Tipperary Brigade. This happened about December 1918 or January 1919. The other brigade officers were: Commandant – Frank McGrath; Vice Commandant – Liam Hoolan; Quartermaster – Frank Flannery.

One of the first actions of the brigade council was to found a brigade fund, the subscriptions to which came mainly from the farming community in North Tipperary. Most of these subscriptions were made in kind, farm produce and livestock, which were subsequently sold for cash. The total collection reached over £1,000, a sum much greater than we expected.

With so much money at our disposal, the brigade staff decided to use as much as we could of it to purchase firearms and ammunition, and for that purpose I was sent to Dublin with orders to contact Michael Collins, then Adjutant General, I think. I met him in an office

in Bachelor's Walk. He told me to leave the case which I had with me behind and to go out at once and discard the tie I was wearing and have it substituted by a bow. The tie had the Sinn Féin colours over a black background and any person wearing such a tie, especially a young man, was inclined to attract the attention of the very numerous plain clothes policemen and detectives who then were very active about the city.

After an absence of about three hours, I came back to see Collins in Bachelor's Walk with my attire altered in the manner requested by him. He was not there to meet me but a member of his staff handed me my case. It contained four hundred rounds of .303 ammunition. I was staying with an aunt of mine, Mrs. Corcoran, 33 Mary St. and leaving the case with her, I went off around the city. On my return, I found myself locked out but managed with the aid of a policeman, to get accommodation in the Globe Hotel. Next day I collected my suitcase and travelled home to Nenagh without mishap. I would say this trip occurred in April 1919.

Three months later I made another journey to Dublin and this time got fifteen hundred rounds of .303 ammunition. In order to get this stuff to the railway station, I had to hire a taxi as it was very heavy and filled a couple of suitcases. I was accompanied in the taxi by an unsuspecting cousin, who was an officer in the Royal Flying Corps. He was wearing uniform and when we got to Kingsbridge Station, a number of RIC men on duty on the platform made a great fuss about the two of us, saluting most profusely and falling over themselves trying to take the suitcases into the carriage. Normally I would have enjoyed the joke, but I was fearful lest the weight of the cases might make the police suspicious, so I had to decline, as courteously as I could, the offer of assistance from these policemen and carry the cases myself. I made the return journey by train in safety and was met at the station in Nenagh by Frank McGrath, who helped me with my "luggage".

Subsequently, I made one other trip to Dublin, about October or November 1919. I got another consignment of .303 ammunition, through the connivance of Collins, which totalled between fifteen hundred and two thousand rounds. This time I got off the train at Cloughjordan station, where I was met by my cousin, Jack Darcy and Dan Gleeson, who had a pony and trap with them. As we were driving through the village of Cloughjordan, one of the suitcases full of ammunition, fell off the trap under the eyes of an RIC man who was standing right outside the door of the police barracks. Whether he suspected anything and did not pretend to do so, I'm not sure, but the case was replaced in the trap and we drove to Darcy's home in Grange, where the ammunition was hidden.

The duties attached to my rank as brigade adjutant included periodic visits to each battalion to inspect parades and to attend meetings of the battalion council, supervision of night manoeuvres and company training and inspection of arms and arms dumps. Most of my spare time was devoted to this work during the year 1919 and for a good part of 1920. The papers and records which it was necessary for me to keep were hidden in an old store room in the courthouse in Nenagh. The meetings of the brigade council which were held during 1919 took place in the Nenagh Literary Institute.

I was not involved in any armed activity against the British forces until the formation of the No. 1 Tipperary Brigade Flying Column or Active Service Unit in October 1920. This column was set up as a result of a brigade council decision which also appointed me as the

column commander. Each battalion in the brigade was asked to supply two men and the following is a list of the men who comprised the column at the outset:

No. 1 Battalion (Nenagh)	Edward John Ryan, Pat Starr
No. 2 Battalion (Toomeyvara-Moneygall)	Timothy Gleeson, Jeremiah Larkin, Hugh Kelly, Joe Mangan, Jack Harty
No.3 Battalion (Ballywilliam)	Michael Kennedy (The Rajah) Michael Vaughan (Wedger)
No. 4 Battalion (Lorrha)	Sean Glennon, Michael Joyce
No. 5 Battalion (Kilcommon)	Failed to supply quota of two men. Places filled by extra men from No. 2 Battalion
No. 6 Battalion (Newport)	Paddy Ryan (Lacken), Tom McGrath
No. 7 Battalion	Tommy Brophy, Paddy McMahon

The column assembled in Seymour's field in Ardcroney. Nine of the men had rifles and the rest carried shotguns. That night it moved to Windybarn, one and a half miles from Moneygall and there commenced a period of three weeks arduous training under Sean Glennon, who was an ex-Irish Guards man. The course included target practice, for which a rifle fitted with a Morris tube was used. Food was provided by the Moneygall members of the Cumann na mBan and to meet urgent expenses the brigade council gave the sum of £50 which I entrusted for safe custody to Jeremiah Larkin who acted as a kind of unofficial quartermaster.

While the column was in training at Windybarn, Paddy Starr and Jeremiah Larkin and myself, went into Moneygall one evening and we were having tea at Collison's when the place was surrounded by military who had come in lorries from Birr. They were accompanied by a few policemen. One soldier was left on guard at Collison's while a search of the village proceeded. One of my friends found he had three rounds of ammunition in his possession which he did not want to be found by the enemy, so he threw the bullets into the fire, causing minor explosions. The soldier on guard heard the reports but never mentioned them when the officer in charge came along later. Of course, we all gave fictitious names when questioned – the name given by myself was Ryan. An RIC Sergeant named Nolan, who knew us all well, never pretended whether we had given correct names or not, and though he was well aware of our connection with the IRA, he did not disclose this to the military. Nevertheless, they decided to bring Paddy Collison (The Major) and myself with them as prisoners.

At Dunkerrin the lorries halted and the officer in charge, Captain Doughan, North Hampshire Regiment, called for Ryan, the prisoner. On his orders, I was caught by the head and feet and thrown from the lorry in which I travelled. Fortunately for myself, I landed on my feet on the road and at once bounded off in a zig-zag run along the road, getting across a fence about a hundred yards and then escaping in the failing light. Several shots were fired after me but they all missed the target. When I rejoined the Flying Column later that night I was nothing the worse for my experience.

Following the shooting of an RIC man named McCarthy in Nenagh on 2 November

1920, the brigade commandant expected that the creamery in that town would be burned that night as a reprisal and he decided to intercept any enemy forces who might attempt to attack the creamery. The Flying Column, backed up by about forty men of the 1st (Nenagh) Battalion, occupied positions around the creamery between 7 and 8 p.m. and waited there until midnight, but not a solitary policeman or soldier came within sight. The column then withdrew and slept that night in a haybarn at Casey's Cross, two miles from Nenagh.

On the morning after I paraded the column in a field beside the hayshed. The men were all short of cigarettes and I sent Paddy Starr with a bike into Nenagh to get a supply and also gave him instructions to make inquiries about the movements of enemy troops in and around that town. While on his way, Starr met Captain Hambleton, O/C of the Nenagh military post, going on a motor-bike to Templemore, then battalion headquarters for the British troops in North Tipperary. Hambleton had been stationed in Nenagh for some time and bore the reputation of being an extremely bad pill. Starr, once the officer had gone out of sight, came back and reported what he had observed.

I selected Jeremiah Larkin, Hugh Kelly, Mick Gaynor and Starr to come with me to a position one hundred yards on the Nenagh side of Casey's Cross and got behind a wall at about 2 p.m. to await the return of Captain Hambleton. Larkin, Kelly and myself had rifles; Gaynor had a shotgun and Starr, who was required for recognition purposes only, had no gun.

At about 4 p.m. Hambleton approached, travelling at a fairly fast pace. When he was fifty yards or so from our position, I gave the order to fire. Only Larkin and myself did so. At fifteen yards distance from us, he fell off the motor-bike and made for the fence on the far side of the road. He was then almost opposite me and I fired again, hitting him through the left shoulder. He fell forward across the fence into the field on the other side, shouting as he did so, 'You . . . you've got me'. In all, three shots were fired, each of which hit him. The accidental discharge of a shot by Mick Gaynor coinciding with the noise of an oncoming motor vehicle, which, I thought, might contain enemy troops, caused me to order the withdrawal of the party sooner than I normally would have done. Hambleton's body was left in the field into which it had fallen, while we rejoined the remainder of the Flying Column and spent the night in the vicinity.

Next day, 4th November 1920, we received news that a lorry of police were expected to travel from Thurles to Nenagh and we moved off to attack this lorry. The position selected was at Latteragh, eight miles from Nenagh and on the right-hand side of the road travelling from Thurles, where there was a piece of high ground covered with trees or bushes, one hundred and fifty yards from the road that gave excellent cover and good command of the road. We waited four or five hours until nightfall and were about to withdraw when a lorry of soldiers came from Thurles side. Though taken somewhat by surprise, we opened fire. The lorry halted for a brief period, due to the driver having been wounded, but then started off again and drove through to Nenagh. There was no return fire from the military; three of them were wounded. It was just lucky for them that darkness had set in and that they had not come along even fifteen or twenty minutes earlier.

After the brush with the military at Latteragh, I moved the column that night into Moneygall, five miles away. Fearing that reprisals might take place that night, I sent Jack

Harty with a section of six men to fire on the enemy should an attempt be made to burn or loot the shop and public house owned by a man called Ryan (Shaneen) which was situated near the scene of the encounter. No reprisals were tried and Harty rejoined us in Moneygall in the early hours of the 5th November 1920.

A few nights later I took the column into the village of Cloughjordan in the hope that we might be able to engage a police patrol which came out now and again. Nothing happened however, as the police did not leave the barracks. The column returned to billets in Windybarn.

In a few days we set off to try our luck in Portroe which lies between Ballina and Nenagh and where there was an RIC post. We remained on the outskirts of Portroe village in very inclement weather for the whole day but again met with no success as the police remained indoors. Leaving Portroe that evening and going along by the railway line through Kilmastullagh, we crossed over Ballinahinch towards Newport and put up for the night in friendly houses around the Turnpike road. The two succeeding nights were spent in a shooting lodge in Glenculloo and the next night we were in Murphy's of Curreeney. Until we reached Curreeney after leaving Portroe, none of the local Volunteers in the country through which we journeyed gave us any information regarding the movement of enemy convoys or patrols and enquiries which we made, all brought the same answer - no opportunity to attack.

In Curreeney we met two members of the local IRA company who told of an RIC patrol which travelled each day on foot from Kilcommon Cross to Kilcommon village for the purpose of collecting the mails. The RIC post was in Kilcommon Cross and the post office was in the village, the two places being about one mile apart. We were informed by these men, Paddy Hughes and Danny Ryan (The Barracks), that the patrol usually consisted of eight or ten men and that it generally set out from the police barracks about ten o'clock in the morning. Hughes said that the police sometimes varied the route and went across the fields over the side of a hill running parallel to the road from Kilcommon Cross to Kilcommon. Pat O'Brien, Silvermines, had become a member of the Flying Column at that stage and he had a good knowledge of the topography of the Kilcommon country. On his suggestion, I divided the column into two sections, one to occupy a position on the road-side and the other to be placed on the hillside. In pursuance of a decision to attack the patrol the following morning, I moved the whole column from Curreeney to a haybarn in Reiska that night so that we would have to travel only a mile or so to the site of the ambush the next morning and that our movements would not be observed by anybody. In addition to the Flying Column, we had with us six local Volunteers.

We left the haybarn well before daybreak on the next morning, 16th December 1920. The weather was very bad, the ground being covered with snow. Fortunately, one of the local men had got hold of a couple of bottles of poteen, and a good swig of this helped to keep the cold out as we made our way in the darkness through rough hilly country with which most of us were unfamiliar. Nearly all the members of the column came from good flat country and were unused to the bogs and mountains in which they now found themselves. The local Volunteers, acting as guides, got us to our destination in good time without being seen, and we at once got into the pre-arranged positions.

The section who occupied the position at the roadside comprised the following:

Pat O'Brien, Silvermines	(rifle)	in charge
Jim Devenney, Toomevara	(shotgun)	
Jack Harty, Toomevara	(rifle)	
Tim Gleeson, Moneygall	(rifle)	
Joe Mangan, Moneygall	(rifle)	
Sean Glennon, Lorrha	(rifle)	
Tom McGrath, Newport	(rifle)	
Tom Watters, Nenagh	(shotgun)	
Ned Quinlan, Roscrea	(rifle)	
Joubert Powell, Roscrea	(rifle)	

The two last named had joined us only on the previous day. Quinlan was commandant of the 7th (Roscrea) Battalion.

I had charge of the whole operation and as well was in control of the other section on the hillside. With me there were:

Paddy Ryan (Lacken), Newport	(rifle)
Jeremiah Larkin, Moneygall	(rifle)
Jack Collison, Moneygall	(rifle)
Joe Liffey, Moneygall	(shotgun)
Sean O Leary, Nenagh	(shotgun)
Paddy Starr, Nenagh	(shotgun)
Edward John Ryan, Nenagh	(shotgun)
Ned Meagher, Roscrea	(revolver)
Mick Kennedy (Rajah), Ballywilliam	(rifle)
Mick Vaughan (Wedger), Portroe,	(shotgun)
Paddy Hughes, Curreeney (shotgun)	(scout)
Danny Ryan (The Barracks) (shotgun)	"
Dinny Dwyer (shotgun)	"

We also had three Volunteers, Mick Madden and the two Clifford brothers, who acted as a kind of commissariat.

The scouts were posted on the brow of the hill overlooking Kilcommon Cross, of which they had an excellent view and were able to see without difficulty whether the patrol would go along the road or take to the fields. The section on the roadside under Pat O'Brien was all placed on the left-hand side facing Kilcommon Cross, just inside the fence at a bend which gave command of the road for a couple of hundred yards. On the same side of the road and roughly a hundred yards nearer to Kilcommon Cross stood the house of Pat Ryan, The Grove, about fifty yards in from the road, to which it was connected by a laneway. There was a plantation of trees between Ryan's house and the road bend, and on the other side of this house was a kind of shrubbery or patch of scrub, I forget which.

On the hillside I had the men placed at the corner of a field three hundred yards from

the road and separated from it by two fields.

At around 10 a.m. the scouts came running towards me. They had come from their positions at the far end of the next field about two hundred yards nearer to the barracks. The scouts brought word that the patrol of eight men, travelling in pairs, about twenty yards apart, had gone along the road. I led the section back towards Ryan's which as the crow flies, was well over four hundred yards away in a northerly direction, and down near the bottom of the hill. We could not see the patrol, who had an excellent chance of seeing us moving on the bare high ground above them. As we closed on Ryan's, we had to come down towards the road along two stretches of a fence that ran towards the road at right angles. Each of these stretches was forty or fifty yards in length, and while traversing these we had no cover whatever if the police happened to be directly underneath us. Apparently we managed to carry out the movement without being seen by the enemy.

I was leading the section and had reached within a hundred and fifty yards of Ryan's when I heard a solitary shot and then a volley, followed by some desultory shooting. I next heard Pat O'Brien shouting that one of the police had escaped into the shrubbery. I got on top of a sod fence that bounded the shrubbery and fired three shots into places where I thought the policeman might have concealed himself. In the meantime, other men of my section went on by the back of Ryan's, past the northern side of the house, and into the laneway to the road. They included Jack Collison, Paddy Ryan (Lacken) and Eddie John Ryan. They took the rifles from two policemen who were lying on the road.

Seeing no trace of the policeman who was supposed to have escaped into the shrubbery, I concluded he might have got into Ryan's house and gone into the rear of it. At a gateway, I took up a position waiting for the policeman to appear at one of the back windows where I thought he might come to seek a way to escape, but though I waited there for five minutes there was no sign of him. Some of my own men wanted to raid and search Ryan's house, but I objected on the grounds that inside was a large family of very young children who were probably already scared by the shooting and I did not wish to frighten or upset them further. Incidentally, one of the children is now a Monsignor attached to the Papal Secretariat in Rome, an appointment he received when only thirty years of age.

The fight was finished by the time I had reached Ryan's. Earlier on, Paddy Ryan (Lacken), who was somewhere in the rear of my section as we were closing in on the shrubbery, saw the last two members of the patrol running back towards the barracks. He opened fire at over 400 yards range and shot one of the policemen dead. The second man was also killed around the same spot. The equipment carried by these two policemen could not be collected by us, as where they fell was well under the range of fire from the barracks, the police in which had by that time become very much alerted and were sending up Verey lights as fast as they could. There were four police killed in the encounter and three wounded. Only two actually fell into our hands as prisoners – the two men who were wounded outside Ryan's laneway. We captured three or four rifles and over a hundred rounds of .303 ammunition. There were no IRA casualties.

Contact was quickly made between the two sections and the attacking force moved off to Glastrigan, four miles distant. In Meehan's in that townland there was an arms inspection and we then had a meal. I learned from Pat O'Brien after meeting him that the orders which I had given to the men of his section at the road bend had been disregarded.

They were expressly told that fire was not to open until O'Brien gave orders to do so, and my instructions to him were to allow the leading policeman to come within fifteen yards of his position before he gave orders to shoot. Instead, fire was opened when the first of the police were at Ryan's Lane, 100 yards away. This was caused by the action of an experienced ex-British soldier who had fought in the First World War and who, in defiance of orders, fired the solitary shot which preceded the volley which I had heard on my way towards Ryan's.

The firing of that premature shot badly upset our plans, and had it not occurred my section could easily have reached positions which should have enabled us to cut off the police from their station and secure whatever arms and ammunition they carried. As things turned out, four of the police, though all wounded except one, managed to get cover from which they eventually got away.

I learned later that the policeman for whom I was looking in the shrubbery was the sergeant in charge of the patrol. He got into Ryan's and hid himself upstairs.

After resting for a time in Glastrigan, we dismissed the local Volunteers and the column marched back to its old headquarters in Windybarn, remaining there until a few days before Christmas when another night visit was paid to Cloughjordan in the hope of catching the local police out on patrol. The police stayed indoors and we had another journey for nothing. At Christmas the column was disbanded for a week, the rifles and shotguns being placed in a dump in Jack Cooney's, Laughton; the job of cleaning and oiling them was assigned to Joe Mangan, helped by Dick and Jack Cooney.

During the Christmas holidays, Andy Cooney, a member of headquarters staff, came home for a few days. He heard of an opportunity of attacking a lorry in the Lorrha area and collected a number of men from the Moneygall and Toomevara Companies, whom he equipped with the guns which the column had left in the dump and set out for Lorrha in a procession of side-cars. Nothing came out of this effort.

Shortly after the re-assembly of the Flying Column in January 1921, I heard that a lorry taking supplies from Nenagh to the RIC stationed in Dromineer on the shores of Lough Derg usually travelled every Wednesday under an escort of eight or ten policemen. I regarded this information as coming from a very reliable source and made up my mind to be as secretive as possible about any decision that I might make to attack the lorry. As a preliminary move I went alone to the Dromineer district and made a survey of the route taken by the lorry. I found the ideal position at Ballyartella Cross, one and a half miles from Dromineer and before returning I had settled on the exact place where each man in the Flying Column would be put in the attack.

In my absence in Dromineer, the members of the Flying Column were moving round in groups of three and four between Moneygall and Kilruane. During the period – on 27th January 1921 to be exact – three of them went into Dan O'Meara's (Lucky Bags) public house in Kilruane around noon, leaving three bikes which they had outside the door. A lorry of military going from Cloughjordan to Nenagh was approaching the pub when its noise was heard by the men in the bar. Two of them – Pat O'Brien and James Devenney – ran out the back door and were seen by the occupants of the lorry, who promptly opened fire. The two men separated and Devenney was wounded in the hip. The military made no attempt to

pursue them but continued on to Nenagh, where they gathered reinforcements and returned to the scene of the shooting and began a search of the fields. They found Devenney's dead body one hundred and fifty yards from the pub. The poor chap had a main artery severed and bled to death. He had been trying to stanch the blood using his handkerchief and a bit of a stick to make a tourniquet, but it would appear that he was too exhausted to complete the operation . . .[9]

The third man, Paddy Whelan, hid himself behind the counter. His health was poor and he may not have felt like making a run for his life, but on the other hand, he kept his head, and would I believe, have shot it out rather than allow himself be captured. He was armed with a revolver.

I proceeded with the arrangments I had made to attack the police lorry at Ballyartella Cross, but despite all the precautions I had taken and the fact that the column had got into position before dawn and before anybody could have seen us, the lorry did not travel. I waited in ambush until the afternoon and then pulled out, leading the column into the 4th Battalion (Lorrha) area. At Garryard we met the battalion commandant, Felix Cronin, who took us to a point on the Nenagh-Borrisokane road and about three miles from the last mentioned place, to attack a police tender, which, he said, should be on the road that day. After a wait of several hours I withdrew the men and took the column to Bantiss, where we found billets and remained for over a week.

Captain McCormack, a GHQ officer, arrived in the North Tipperary area about this time. He was a fine organiser and a very good training officer and while he was known as 'Captain', certainly the powers which he used from the moment he came to us were considerably greater than that of a captain. Ultimately this man became a Divisional Commandant – 3rd Southern Division- a short period before the Truce. In that capacity he was in charge of five brigades, two in Laois, two in Offaly and No. 1 (North) Tipperary. From the beginning he acted as if he held that rank.

One of Captain McCormack's first actions in North Tipperary was to establish training camps, starting off with one which was held in Power-Lawlor's shooting lodge in Glenculloo. Those who attended comprised the entire Flying Column, the brigade staff and the staff of the 1st Battalion. McCormack himself took charge of the parades and classes. Instructions given by him dealt with the use, care and mechanism of the rifle and revolver, squad and company drill, semaphore and skirmishing exercises. The camp lasted a week, during which meals were prepared by our own men from food sent out from Nenagh, which was paid for out of brigade funds. Another camp followed at Ballywilliam, about five miles from Nenagh. This was on the same lines as the previous one, except that officers of the 3rd Battalion attended instead of the 1st Battalion and we obtained meals around the farmers' houses in the locality.

The people here were better off and the houses more numerous than in the mountainous area in Glenculloo. While the Ballywilliam camp was in progress, the area was raided by a mixed force of military and police. News of their approach came in time to enable McCormack to have all the men in the camp, between thirty-five and forty, ready to engage the raiders, who however, withdrew when they reached about three hundred yards from our positions and returned in their lorries to Nenagh. I do not suggest that this enemy withdrew because they had learned that we were waiting for them.

A third training camp was set up at Ballymacegan near Lorrha. This camp lasted about a fortnight and was on a bigger scale than the two others. Officers were present from the 2nd, 4th and 7th Battalions. When this camp was concluded, McCormack ordered every man in the Flying Column who held a rank in the IRA before joining the column to return to his old unit with his former rank. This resulted in the disbandment of the column for the time being, and in my own case I resumed the post of brigade adjutant in which rank I remained until the Truce.

I was glad to be relieved of my post as commander of the Brigade Flying Column. From the beginning I received very little co-operation from the brigade staff, and as time progressed it was getting more and more difficult to get such things as cigarettes for the men who were with me although I was given an assurance that a supply of cigarettes and tobacco would be sent to us each week by the brigade quartermaster.

The intelligence branch throughout the brigade was poorly organised and in this connection much of the blame was due to lack of initiative at the top. Nenagh was the principal enemy H.Q. in the brigade area and, if properly tapped, could provide a lot of useful information regarding impending movements of enemy troops. The fact that we had no inside contacts to get such information militated very much against the operations of the Flying Column and was responsible for so many of the operations which had been planned ending abortively because of the failure of the enemy troops to put in an appearance.

The relationship between the Flying Column and the battalion staffs of the 3rd, 4th and 7th Battalions also left much room for improvement. The senior officers of these units did not want any trouble in their area and saw to it that no news regarding the enemy troops in their areas reached me as column commander. In some instances the battalion commandants resented the column entering their battalion areas and objected when they learned that an attack was contemplated. After the Kilcommon ambush, the Battalion O/C Paddy Doherty, abused me strongly in Meehan's yard in Glastrigan, over having attacked the police patrol in his area. In this case I only learned about the patrol from some of the men in Doherty's battalion because they wanted to see this patrol attacked and were aware that the battalion commander would not approve such an operation.

As brigade adjutant, my principal duties consisted of periodic inspections of companies, organising and superintending manoeuvres, presiding over monthly meetings of battalion adjutants, attending meetings of the brigade council and checking weekly returns submitted by battalion adjutants and which gave figures of the strength of each company and the numbers attending company parades and also dealt with matters affecting discipline. The brigade commandant never allowed me to handle correspondence with the Adjutant General or any other headquarters department. He always dealt with such correspondence himself.

After my return to the post of brigade adjutant I never had any connection with armed attacks on British forces, though I did assist in some other operations of a minor nature. At the request of Jack Naughton, vice-commandant of the No. 1 (Nenagh) Battalion, I helped him in the burning of a couple of wagons of coal at Nenagh railway station. This coal was consigned to the military in that town and the job was carried out under Naughton's control by about forty men of the local company. This action took place on 1st July 1921.

I also went to Silvermines sub post office with Naughton – in June 1921 I believe, to dismantle the telephone apparatus. We had six or seven men from the Nenagh Company

with us. There was some suspicion on the sub-postmaster that he was not a safe person to have a phone at his disposal as he might use it to give information to the police, so the apparatus was removed from his premises.

On the formation of the Thomas McDonagh Sinn Féin Club in Nenagh in July 1917, I was appointed Secretary but I only accepted the position on the understanding that I would shortly be replaced. Practically all the members of the club at the outset were Irish Volunteers. The Chairman and Vice Chairman were Fr. Charles Culligan and Fr. Michael Houlihan respectively.

On the establishment of the Dáil Arbitration Court for North Tipperary constituency, I became Registrar. This happened about the latter half of 1919. The chairman of that body was Paul Dempsey, B. Agr. Sc and associated with him as arbitrators were Fr. John Fogarty CC, Puckane and John Scanlon, Ballina. These courts were held in various places in the area but most of the sittings took place in the Nenagh Workhouse in the offices of the clerk of the Union.

While the nature of the litigation transacted varied a good deal, the majority of the cases tried by the court were concerned with land disputes. All classes in the community availed of the court's services. One man in particular who helped us a good deal with legal advice was a Nenagh solicitor John H. Dudley, who was the attorney for the Ascendancy in the district. A tribute to the soundness of the decisions given at these courts came later on when appeals against them were heard before the judges of the higher courts established under Saorstát Éireann. In nearly every case the findings of the Arbitration Court were upheld. As one of the Arbitration Courts was in session in the Nenagh Workhouse, the proceedings were disturbed by a party of military under Captain Hambleton who seized all the court papers. He was the British officer who was shot dead at Casey's Cross on 3rd November 1920.

References:

1. For a listing of the witness statements relevant to County Tipperary, copies of which are in Tipperary Studies, see Finding Tipperary. For statements arranged on the basis of the three brigade areas in the county, see www.tipperarylibraries.ie under *Finding Tipperary: Resources for Leaving Certificate History Teachers.* For the Bureau of Military History and the background to these witness statements, see G. O'Brien, *Irish Governments and the Guardianship of Historical Records, 1922-1972* (Dublin, 2004), pp.130-53.
   The copy of O'Leary's statement as found in Tipperary Studies is unsigned and dateless.
2. His father was a J.P.
3. See J. Augusteijn, *From Public Defiance to Guerilla Warfare* (Dublin, 1996), pp. 110-11.
4. This took place near the home of a Ryan family and O'Leary mentions how one of that family, then a child, was a priest in the Vatican at the time the statement was given in the 1950s. This was Thomas Ryan, Bishop of Clonfert (1963-82), the bishop at the centre of the famous *Late Late Show* controversy in 1965.
5. See P. Haicéad, I*n Bloody Protest North Tipperary's Roll of Honour 1916-1926* (Author, 1996), pp. 53-7.
6. For further first hand accounts see the statements of Edward John Ryan (W.S. 1392) who also deals with the forming of the flying column and the killing of Hambleton; Con Spain (W.S. 1464) on the early history of the Volunteers around Nenagh; Frank McGrath (W.S. 1558) on the Sinn Féin courts; Liam Hoolan (W.S. 1553) on the training and reorganisation of the flying column
7. E. Gaynor, *Memoirs of a Tipperary Family the Gaynors of Tyone 1887-2000* (Dublin, [2004]), p.244
8. *Nenagh Guardian,* 16 August 1969; 27 May 1972. Acknowledgement to William O'Brien, Toomevara for his help.
9. At this point in the narrative, the typescript is blank for about seven or eight lines. It appears as if someone decided the missing material might cause offence.