

Statement of Michael Hughes Castlebar Battalion I.R.A.

Contributed by Carmel Hughes

There was a house in Tucker Street, Castlebar called Rooney Hall, a kind of literary society. This hall was frequented by the so-called I.R.B., including Comdt. Michael MacHugh. He was Comdt. of the Castlebar Battalion of the Volunteers. The Guerilla War in the south of Ireland as well as Dublin was now getting hot, so one evening I and my pal William McCarthy met James Chambers outside T.A. Wynne's in the Main Street. I said to him that I was going raiding for arms and I would like to have the opinion of Comdt. McHugh and the others of the Rooney Hall on the matter, and I would meet him at the same place the following night for a reply. On the following night we met at the same place, and his answer was that the men of the Rooney Hall would not accept any responsibility, and if I raided for arms I would do so at my own risk.

Raiding for Arms

At this time raiding for arms was an everyday occurrence and the war was getting hot. I immediately set to work and picked out half a dozen men. At this point I must say, to the best of my knowledge, there were no complaints sent to the R.I.C. After searching all around the town for a week or two, we decided to extend our area of operations to the rural areas, but to cover a wide area we needed transport. So we approached Georgie Smith who was working there at the time, and sure enough he came to our rescue. Whenever we required the car Georgie would drive it out the back way and leave it in again in the early hours of the morning after our night's raiding, and sometimes quite an amount of mixed material used to be picked up. At that time I was working in *The Connaught Telegraph* office which was situated right beside the R.I.C. Barracks in Ellison Street, and I used to lift up the floor boards under the linotype machine and hide some of the material, mostly ammunition. One night I received a message to be at a certain place at a certain time. I attended the rendezvous at the back of the Brothers' Monastery down by the river. I and my pal were not long waiting when Michael MacHugh came along and handed me about four stone of blasting powder,

gelignite and detonators. So the gentlemen of the Rooney Hall had washed their hands of physical force.

Kings Own Scottish Borderers

Around this time there was a Battalion of the British Army of the K.O.S.B. stationed in Castlebar, and there happened to be a few Irishmen among them. One of these was a man named Sheedy, a native of County Clare. Sheedy won the D.C.M. in the First World War. He was promoted to the rank of Corporal in lieu of the medal he would receive. Sheedy used to frequent a pub in the Main Street which was owned by a Mrs Brown, and she was assisted in running the business by her sister, Miss Nora Moran.

Nora was a member of the Cumann na mBan at this time and she overheard Sheedy talking about selling guns. She contacted me and my pal and we entered the pub and were introduced to Sheedy. By the same token the pub was also frequented by a number of other soldiers who did not suspect what was going on around them. In order to get a revolver or ammunition, Sheedy would volunteer to take charge of the guard on Guard Duty, and he would then have the key to the Armoury and bring out the gun the following night. There was another soldier named Murray also from Clare. One night as he was walking across the Barracks at about 12.00 o'clock carrying a huge box of ammunition he was stopped by an Officer and arrested. At the same time I and Paddy Horkan and Mark Killilea were waiting in Paddy Carney's of Castle Street to meet Murray. We were unaware of what happened on the Barrack Square until the next day. Murray was kept in the guardroom for some days, awaiting a General Court Martial. However Murray's escape was fixed, so one evening at the changing of the Guard a door was left open and he slipped out. He climbed the wall outside and dropped into Lord Lucan's lawn, and then ran down to the Gate House where Miss Miller lived (a Protestant lady by the way), and when the hue and cry died down he was removed back to Achill, and remained there until after the Truce. He later joined the Free State Army.

Meeting the British

Let me also state here that before the Column was formed I attended a Brigade meeting in a school in the Islandeady area. That meeting was presided over by Tom Derrig and amongst those who attended were Michael Kilroy, Éamonn Moane and Johnny Gibbons. They were on the run at the time and were fully armed. Tom Derrig was arrested shortly afterwards. Paddy Horkan, James Chambers and myself were driven back to the meeting and when we were returning home in the car we got a puncture. The driver was in the act of repairing the puncture

when along comes a military lorry. The lorry stopped as it came near us and an officer got out. He asked what was wrong and we told him we had a puncture. He immediately ordered a soldier to give us a spare wheel and leave the wheel in Brady's Main Street when we would arrive in town. Little did that officer know what we had in our minds at that time. We had a hearty laugh when the lorry departed.

Formation of the Flying Column

Things were moving fast at this time and there was talk of forming a Column. I met James Chambers one evening and he explained that he was calling a parade of the local company at The Rocks and to be there. I attended at the parade in the capacity of an observer. James Chambers addressed the Company of men and explained that if they volunteered to join the Column, they must be prepared to sacrifice their lives if necessary, etc. He asked those who wished to volunteer to step forward. Those who did step forward he handed over to me and dismissed the rest. I knew all my men, most of whom were already active workers and on whom I could rely.

Eventually the Column was formed with Comdt. Paddy Jordan of Islandeady in command and Doctor J. A. Madden second-in-command as fighting doctor (a man with a great shot) and I was next. We were operating around Crimlin and that area for some time. It was decided to make a foray on Castlebar one Saturday night so we marched up as far as Ardvarney about two miles from Castlebar.

Capture of British Officers

We were resting in Ardvarney when lo and behold two British officers walked down pretty close to where we were. Some of the lads had shotgun ammunition out drying in the sun and we thought the officers might have seen it. So four men were dispatched to capture the two officers and bring them up to the village. The two officers were brought back and Doctor Madden took off his wrist watch and put it on my left wrist and said to me 'As soon as it is 9.00 o'clock you know what to do. Pick out whatever men you want.' I did so and placed my men about five yards away facing the two officers. One was a captain and the other a lieutenant. At this time let me say that the captain took his capture in good part, but the lieutenant almost collapsed. He changed colour several times and I sent up to Walsh's house for milk to try and revive him. In the meantime word was sent to Jack Walsh of Ardvarney to prepare a grave for the two men. He and his son dug the grave in his garden a short distance from his home. At five minutes to 9 o'clock I received a dispatch from Paddy Ketterick (Butty) telling me to release the prisoners at once, that they were missed and that the military were on their way searching for them and to leave at once.

I informed the two officers that I had got orders to release them, but I said, 'If you were two Tans I would never let you go no matter what order I got.' The captain thanked me and took out his wallet and offered me a £5 note which I naturally refused. As soon as the officers left, the remainder of the Column arrived on the scene and I explained to them what happened. We were all very displeased with what had occurred, especially Doctor Madden. Word was sent to Walsh to fill in the grave at once. He did so and then went on the run until the Truce.

Ambush Attempts

On one occasion we were operating in a village named Ayle, half way between Castlebar and Westport, and on a Saturday evening W. McCarthy and I made our way to Mrs Hynes, Halfway House, where we enjoyed a good evening with a lot of the local lads who knew what we were on. We returned to the village later that evening and we were told we were to be court-martialled. However, on the following day the men were lined up in two ranks in the village, and I was told to pick twelve men for a raid on Castlebar. I picked out the twelve men and supplied each with small arms. We arrived at Mickey Walsh's pub on the Newport Road and in we went. I ordered thirteen pints of stout although I had no money to pay for them. He understood who we were.

I said to the men that we might never be together again and to enjoy a drink. Most of these lads never put a glass to their lips before, but on this occasion each man drank his pint. Early that evening we arrived at Bayne's Hill on the outskirts of the town, but we weren't there very long when a messenger came to tell us that the raid was called off and to return to the Column. That was the second occasion in which we were frustrated in our efforts to attack the town. The remainder of the Column was employed blockading the roads, etc. We lay in ambush several times with negative results.

Islandeady Ambush

About this time we joined up with the Westport Column and it was decided to lie in ambush on the road between Westport and Castlebar (at the spot where a recent ambush took place on a number of North of Ireland men). In the early hours of the morning we aroused the local people from their beds and got the menfolk to build trenches and barricades on the road. Sure enough the Tans came along but they only came out to arrest Michael Staunton, a local stalwart in the fight. When they didn't find Michael they unfortunately returned to Castlebar and in doing so they suddenly came upon the men digging up the road, and they opened fire on the men, killing Volunteers O'Malley and Lally and wounding others. The men were taken unawares because the Tans turned back instead of

the usual run back to Westport. We, of course, were sadly disappointed. We heard the shooting in the distance but didn't know what was wrong until later on.

Accidental Shooting - Mark Killilea

We were billeted in a village not far from the town and Mark Killilea was repairing some of the shotguns. The ejector of one gun was defective, and while Mark was repairing it, he accidentally put a live cartridge into the gun and the next thing the gun went off and blew the toes off one of his feet. He was dressed by Doctor Madden and sent into the County Infirmary which was situated on the Mall in charge of Doctor Anthony MacBride, a great Irishman and a first-class surgeon. He was a brother off Major John MacBride, executed in 1916. Mark remained in the hospital until after the truce.

Attack on Newport Barracks

Shortly afterwards we met Michael Kilroy and the men of the Newport Column. One evening (18 May 1921) Michael sent Jim Moran of his Column to snipe at Newport Police Barracks. Jim took up a position overlooking the Barracks. He hadn't long to wait. A woman visitor at the Barracks was coming out, accompanied by a constable. As soon as the woman parted from his company, Jim fired and the constable fell dead. Jim was one man with a perfect shot and what a lovely chap he was. As a reprisal, the Tans were expected to burn down Newport, so Michael ordered that an ambush take place at Kilmeena.

We were all lined up in ambush position and later the Tans came along in four or five lorries. There was a Lewis machine-gun in the front lorry and a Vickers machine-gun in the rear lorry. We were sitting ducks for the Tans, hemmed in between the two deadly machine-guns and rifle fire in the centre, while some of our men were only armed with shotguns and a mixture of rifles. We had no earthly chance of success. A few of our men were killed and several were wounded. Tom Nolan from Castlebar was wounded in the knee and was captured. The British medical men amputated his leg, also Paddy O'Malley from Kilmeena was captured and had his leg amputated. That was the policy of the British. James MacEvilly, Castlebar and Tom O'Donnell from Castlebar, a native of Kilmeena, were killed. Paddy Jordan died from wounds a short time afterwards in hospital. James Swift and Michael Hughes were wounded, but escaped.

Skirdagh

Swift and I were put on horseback that evening and brought to the village of Skirdagh. Doctor Madden dressed our wounds and gave us an injection to ease

our pain. In the early hours of Monday morning we were awakened by heavy gunfire. We were staying in O'Donnell's house at the extreme end of the village. All of a sudden the door burst open and in ran Éamonn Moane. He said Michael Kilroy gave him instructions to save the wounded at all costs. At this time the house was under heavy fire. We could hear the bullets whizzing through the roof. So we all knelt down and said our prayers thinking they were the last we would say. We then got down on our stomachs and crawled out the door. Luckily for us, there was a small river close by, but there were pools of water five feet deep. Sometimes all you could see was our heads out of the water and the bullets dropping all round us. We had several narrow shaves. It was during this time that Jim Brown was killed. Dr Madden performed an operation on James Swift's toes that were badly broken (before this). We arrived at the village of Shramore late in the afternoon, and we hadn't much time to spare as the military were on their way to search for us. Swift and I were very weak and we wouldn't be able to keep up with the Column, so it was decided that we would be moved to the North Mayo area because it was comparatively quiet at the time.

Move to North Mayo

Swift and I were dressed up in women's clothes, and accompanied by John Chambers, we headed for North Mayo on a horse and side car which was driven by a young man who had resigned from the R.I.C. It seems he wasn't long in the Force at the time. We came as far as Canon Hegarty's house. We stopped the horse and car and asked for a drink. When we told the Canon who we were he at once gave us a rug to keep us warm, which we badly needed, and wanted us in for tea, etc. We had no time to wait, as the Military were on their way to intercept us. We travelled along for some distance and then we saw the lights of the military lorries coming in our direction. As soon as the driver saw the lights, he jumped from the car and left us in the lurch.

Crossmolina

In the meantime Lynn, a dispatch rider on a bicycle, came on the scene and directed us the way to go. He went on before us and notified the Crossmolina lads of our approach. As we entered Crossmolina in the early hours of the morning, the Captain of the Crossmolina Coy., and Martin McAndrew (now McAndrews Motors Ballina) brought us to Ned O'Boyle's house outside the town. Shortly after we arrived at O'Boyles, Dr McGuinness came and dressed our wounds. It was here we met Éamonn Gannon, a native of Westport, who was Brigade QC for North Mayo. He was a Vocational Teacher, as was also his fellow-townsmen

Tom Derrig. We were then moved from place to place until we were put in charge of Nurse Carey, who did everything possible for us during our stay as did also the members of her family who were so kind and sympathetic to us. After travelling around for some time, we moved up to the Lahardane area. During all this time Swift was unable to walk and was carried most of the time by Martin McAndrew – no better man for the job. Eventually we arrived at the home of Mrs O'Malley, Killeen, Crossmolina, where we remained a few weeks. During our stay we were treated most royally by the O'Malley family. Paddy O'Malley was an active member of the Lahardane Coy. And his sisters Margaret and Lizzy were also members of the Coy. During this time we were attended regularly by Nurse Cecilia Hegarty from Lahardane and her brother Martin who was Comdt. of the Lahardane Battalion.

Holdup of Postman

One night Martin told us he got a despatch from Michael Kilroy to do something in order to ease the pressure on the rest of the Column. So it was decided that I would hold up the Postman and take whatever Old Age Pension money he had, and to use a strange accent. I relieved the Postman of the sum of £30, which I handed over to Martin Hegarty that night. So the next day the countryside was swarming with military. They came out and pitched their tents along the shores of the lake, and each night they would move out and lie in ambush along the roads. So one night, Nurse Hegarty and her brother Martin were after leaving us, and had not gone very far when they were held up by the military and the excuse they put up was that they were at a wake. However, the military were not fully satisfied and they kept them there for an hour under severe questioning. Eventually they were released, but the military confiscated Martin's bicycle and he had to walk home. He sent us a despatch the following day.

Crossing the Mountain

It was getting too hot for us then so we were moved further on. It seems the military were getting information about our movements from a lady spy who lived in the area, She was on the black list for execution, but the Truce was called in the meantime and saved her. One night we reached a house at the foot of a high mountain. After a short rest we decided to cross the mountain, an almost insurmountable task. However, the owner of the house provided us with a sturdy horse. We mounted the horse and the animal was led by the owner. If we could only see where we had to travel, we would not have attempted it as it was a very risky journey. We arrived at Paddy Staunton's house in the early hours of the morning and took a well-earned rest as guests of a great I.R.A. family.



Castlebar IRA Flying Column 1921

Back row (left to right): John Chambers, James Hughes, John Cooney, P. J. Cannon, Willie McCarthy, Mark Killalee and Tom Maloney.

Front row (left to right): Anthony Clarke, Paddy Ainsworth, Paddy Boyle, James Swift and Michael Hughes.

Other members of the Column (not in picture) – Capt. Séamus MacEivilly, Castlebar, killed in Kilmeena Ambush; Paddy Jordan, Islandeady and Tom O'Donnell, Kilmeena, also killed in the Kilmeena Ambush; Tom Nolan and Dr. John Madden. This picture was taken outside the old prison in Castlebar on whose site the County Hospital now stands.

Grove House

We then moved on nearer to Castlebar and we were informed by James Chambers that we were to go to the Grove House. Now the Grove House is situated in off the main road with an avenue leading to the house. Right beside the entrance to the house lived the wives and families of two R.I.C. men. Their husbands were living constantly in the Old Jail with the Black and Tans. The Grove House was owned and occupied by a Mr Faulkner (BL) and his wife and family. A stepson of the owner Georgie Lane was an active member of our Company and used to keep us supplied with information. Georgie's sister was courting a Black and Tan and later got married to him after the Truce. Miss Lane treated us most royally and loyally, and would come to our room each night with her brother Georgie and give us the day's news. The Military Barracks was only a short distance across the road, and the policemen's wives used to pay an odd visit to the house where we were staying. We used to watch the soldiers on parade on the barrack square by peeping out from behind the curtains. The nearer we were to the enemy the safer we were. We used to watch the enemy boarding their lorries and sweeping through the country in search for us. We remained in the Grove House until some time after the Truce.

Castlebar Flying Column

The following are the names of the Castlebar Flying Column:

Michael Hughes (wounded at Kilmeena), James Swift (wounded at Kilmeena), John Chambers, James Hughes, John Cooney, William McCarthy, Mark Killilea, Tom Maloney, Anthony Clark, Paddy Ainsworth, Paddy Boyle, Séamus MacEivilly (died at Kilmeena), Tom Nolan (wounded at Kilmeena), Paddy Jordan (died at Kilmeena), Thomas O'Donnell (died at Kilmeena), Dr John Madden, Paddy Cannon.

Michael Hughes died on 30 September 1976 aged eighty-two. Full military honours were rendered at the grave in Ballinahaglish Cemetery, Ballina by the army firing party. Local bugler Mr Pat O'Neill sounded the Last Post and Reveille. The oration was delivered by Mr Tommy Heavey, Westport, Ballina and Dublin, a former comrade-in-arms. Mr S. Devlin, President of the Old IRA Club, Dublin, presided. Mr Tom Bourke, former M.C.C. and Old IRA North Mayo Brigade recited a decade of the Rosary in Irish. Revd Fr P. Hegarty, C.C. Rathduff officiated at the graveside. 'I líonta Dé go gcastar sinn.'