

ORIGINAL

BUREAU OF MILITARY HISTORY 1913-21

BURO STAIRÉ MILEATA 1913-21

No. W.S. 225

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BUREAU OF MILITARY HISTORY, 1913-21

STATEMENT BY WITNESS

DOCUMENT NO. W.S. 225

Witness

Colonel Michael McDonnell,
310 Johnson Avenue,
Los Gatos,
California, U.S.A.

Identity

Member of I.R.B.;
2nd Lieut. I.V's.F. Coy. 2nd Batt'n.
Dublin 1916.

O.C. Active Service Unit 1920-1922.

Subject

Organised raid for arms North Wall 1915;
Easter Week Rising - Jacob' Factory;
Ashtown Ambush (Lord French and party)
19th December 1919.

Conditions, if any, stipulated by Witness

Nil

File No. ..S. 575.

Form BSM 2

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Statement by Colonel Michael McDonnell,
310 Johnson Avenue, Los Gatos,
California, U.S.A.

In view of the short time at my disposal it would be impossible for me to set out clearly all the incidents connected with my long association with the National Movement, but the following would appear to be of importance.

I joined the Volunteers at the first meeting of "F" Company, 2nd Battalion, after the Howth Gun-running, July 1914. Soon after that I joined the I.R.B., the Gaelic Circle, which met at 41 Parnell Square.

Early in 1915 information was received that four cases of rifles, one hundred in all, addressed to John E. Redmond M.P. had arrived at the North Wall for the use of the Irish National Volunteers. I assisted in organising and carrying out a raid in which these arms were seized and conveyed by my party to Frank Lawless's farm, North County Dublin, where they were subsequently stored and then distributed for use amongst the Irish Volunteers.

I took part in the rising under Commandant John MacBride in Jacobs 1916. I was promoted 2nd Lieutenant during the course of the fighting.

During the course of Easter Week I became closely acquainted with Major John MacBride and had many conversations with him, the last of which remains vividly in my memory. As we were preparing to leave Jacobs to surrender in Bride Street I said to him: "Commandant, you had better get out of here". He replied by saying: "Mac, every G. man in Dublin knows me". And I said: "I had been upstairs looking out

the window and there was not a G. man in sight and there is no chance of your escaping if you remain here, and my advice is to get out". He slightly bowed his head as if in deep emotion and replied: "Oh Mac!, I wouldn't leave the boys". And he didn't. That is the last I saw of him. Following the surrender I was deported to Knutsford and Frongoch.

Following my release the work of re-organisation began. I was appointed Captain Quartermaster in the 2nd Battalion to take the place of Michael O'Hanrahan who was executed in 1916. I remained with the 2nd Battalion until I took over the Squad early in 1919.

From an early stage I advocated the execution of those who were responsible for the identity of the men executed in 1916 and who were at the same time watching us. This was at first turned down by Dick McKee who felt that the people would not stand for this action at this time, but subsequently this was done. Dick McKee with the sanction of Michael Collins approached me although I was not O/C. of the 2nd Battalion and asked me to select four men to carry out a special job which was the shooting of eight Detectives who were prominent in Easter Week and still watching us. The first of these men to be executed was Detective Sergeant Smith of the G. Division. The most difficult of these shootings was that of Detective Sergeant Hoey who for various reasons had escaped for a considerable time and was eventually located by me and shot outside the police station door in Townsend Street. Other executions followed in quick succession. These included that of Molloy whom I considered to be one of the most dangerous spies sent from England.

Some time in the autumn of 1919 I was approached by Dick McKee and asked to make myself available to go to London for special duty with the object of looking the situation over in London and coming back and reporting as to the possibility of wiping out the British Cabinet, and several other prominent

people including editors of newspapers, etc., who were antagonistic to this country. I went with Liam Tobin in charge and George Fitzgerald, who remained with me for two weeks, at the end of which time I returned to Dublin leaving them to find out what they could while I was reporting back here. I first reported to General Mulcahy at Harcourt Street and made an appointment to go to 41 Parnell Square that night and meet Michael Collins, Cathal Brugha, General Mulcahy and a few others of whose identity I cannot just recollect. I could not report favourably owing to lack of assistance on the part of the London Volunteers and to the impossibility of making a simultaneous swoop on the entire Cabinet and the other people who were earmarked for execution. Michael Collins who had lived in London and knew the situation existing there, agreed with this report, but Cathal Brugha insisted that it could and should be done. I then told him it would take at least thirty of the best men we could find and they did not hope to return alive, but he still agreed it would be worth while to lose thirty good men. This ended the matter as far as I was concerned and I did not go back to London. The others remained there for about six weeks longer and then they too were ordered home.

Towards the end of November, 1919, a special victory parade was arranged by the British Government at which Lord French took the salute in College Green and at which Sir Hamar Greenwood was also in attendance. Dick McKee told me the day before the parade that certain arrangements had been made to shoot Lord French on the reviewing stand and at the same time Squads were to attack the parade at different points along the route. He said everything was in readiness except he wanted a good man to go to an office across from the Bank of Ireland where the review was taking place and snipe Lord French through a window of an office building as he was standing on the platform. He then asked me could I recommend a man for this job and after some thought I said I could not, the job was too big. He said he believed the man selected for this job would not come back.

After talking some more about it he put it straight to me by asking: "Will you do it?", and after a few minutes' hesitation thinking that this would be my last day on earth, but if I went down I would go down in glory, I decided to accept. After going home, and without sleep, thinking of what might happen next day, I reported to North Great George's Street to McKee in readiness, and to great surprise he told me the job was called off by H.H.Q. the night before as Cathal Brugha said the people would not stand for it.

Very soon after that G.H.Q. wanted Lord French executed at any cost but found it very hard to get any reliable information as to his whereabouts. After watching and waiting and looking for information I was informed by Tom Ennis that a boy in his, "E" Company, 2nd Battalion, who was the son of a railway guard who conducted specials, was going at 11 p.m. with Lord French and party to Frenchpark, County Roscommon. We organised a squad, went to Ashtown Cross, waiting there all night, and French did not turn up. When dawn started to break in the morning we went home tired, sleepy and hungry, disgusted and disappointed. I enquired that evening what had happened. We afterwards found out that Lord French went on a party, took a little too much that night, and the train waited in readiness at Broadstone Station all night but left early in the morning. I then believed the information must have been reliable as it was no fault of my informant that he did not show up.

I urged him to watch for it coming back and see if he could help us to find out the time of his return. He did; he told us his father would arrive at Ashtown Railway Station about 1 p.m. on December 19, 1919. We were not sure the train would leave until next morning, so Ennis 'phoned me about 11 o'clock and just said: "That left this morning alright", meaning the train had left Broadstone for Roscommon. I hurriedly organised the squad and got to Kelly's public house at Ashtown Cross shortly before 1 p.m. I was in charge of that ambush. As

everyone was working I found it very hard to make up a sufficient number. Seán Treacy, Dan Breen, Seumas Robinson and J.J. Hogan were up here from County Tipperary "on the run" and Treacy had informed me before this that if they could be of any help to me at any time to call on them. This I did at this time with these four, Paddy Daly, Martin Savage, my half-brother Tom Keogh, Jim Slattery, Vincent Byrne, Joe Leonard, Ben Barrett and myself. We had no mode of transportation other than bicycles as the taxi drivers were on strike protesting against getting permits from the British Government to use petrol. We got into Kelly's public house and some of the boys ordered minerals. I went out the back to look at Ashtown Station to see what I could see. While out in the yard I saw a large farm-cart standing on its heels. I told Breen to get it in readiness to push it through the gate, body first, on to the road with the object of running round the corner to block French's convoy of four cars which at this time had gone down to the station. I told him above all to turn it while in the yard so as we could push it towards the first car approaching round the corner from the Navan road. What obstructed us most of all was the arrival of a policeman who came along to do point duty in the middle of the road. We thought of taking him in but thought again it would hamper our position or maybe give the alarm, then decided to leave him alone.

French's party took less time than we had expected to get into the cars and come from the station. I gave the signal for the cart to be brought out and I put Paddy Daly and four others inside the hedge with hand-grenades. After telling them to concentrate on the second car and some other details, I turned to the cart again and found they were bringing it through the gate with the shafts first instead of the way I had told them. I started swearing and shouted: "Why didn't you push it out the way I told you?". That delayed them trying to turn it outside the gate. We lost much time in doing so. The result was the first car of French's party which was preceded by a Detective on a motor-bicycle, flew by before we got the cart to the corner.

Grenades were thrown from our party inside the hedge which stopped the second car as we had told them to do, but unfortunately French had already passed in the first car. A sniper opened fire from French's car on those of us who were on the road, killing Martin Savage instantly. The other two cars came from behind the second one and also escaped, but we captured the driver of the second one, and to our amazement discovered there was nothing in it but luggage. Dan Breen was also wounded on the road but his own men succeeded in getting him back to Dublin. As we had no motor conveyance for reasons which I have already stated, all we could do with Martin Savage's body was to bring him back to Kelly's public house. I called on some of the boys to pick his body up and as soon as he got to Kelly's door they closed it, leaving us no alternative but to leave the body in the yard. I ascertained afterwards that the military were out there soon and brought it to Ryan's public house in Parkgate Street where an inquest was held with Mr. Ryan, the Proprietor, as foreman. Notwithstanding efforts made by representatives of the British Attorney General to obtain a suitable verdict condemning the perpetrators of this shooting, the jury brought in a verdict very strongly commending the action of Martin Savage and stating that he died in defence of his country. No further inquests were held by the British following this verdict.

Martin Savage's body was handed over to his two brothers who wished it to be placed in a Dublin Church for the night before taking it for burial to his native Ballysodare, County Sligo, next morning. Representations were made at the Pro-Cathedral and at his parish church, St. Laurence O'Toole's, Seville Place, to have his body taken into the church for the night, but these were refused and it was found necessary to take him to the Broadstone Railway Station where he was left overnight in a box car.

Following this Ashtown ambush all my party very quickly

dispersed and made their way back safely to the city on bicycles.

Although the Active Service Unit known to us as the "Squad" was formed on May day 1919, it did not become a full-time Unit until early 1920.

After the formation of the full-time "Squad" took place early 1920 we executed many important British agents, including Allen Bell, a northern R.M. who was brought to Dublin Castle to investigate financial transactions in the Banks believed to be associated with the Dáil Loan, etc. His work was considered to be a menace to our cause and H.Q. considered it essential that he be executed. The "Squad" tracked him down and one morning, boarding an incoming Dalkey tram in small numbers, confronted him, took him off the tram at Sandymount Avenue and shot him at the corner of Simmonscourt Road. No further attempt was made to continue his investigations by anybody else.

As the time at my disposal has now run out I must conclude rather abruptly at this stage. There are many further matters I should like to record, and hope to be in a position to do so in the not too distant future when I return to this country again.

Signed: *Michael McDonnell*
Michael McDonnell,
Colonel.

Date: *March 31st 1949*

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