

ORIGINAL

BUREAU OF MILITARY HISTORY 1913-21

BURO STAIRÉ MILÉATA 1913-21

No. W.S. 428

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BUREAU OF MILITARY HISTORY, 1913-21.

STATEMENT BY WITNESS

DOCUMENT NO. W.S. 428

Witness

Thomas Devine,
101 Larkfield Grove,
Kimmage,
Dublin

Identity

Member of 'E' Company, 3rd Battalion
Dublin Brigade I.V's. 1915-16.

Subject

- (a) G.P.O. Easter Week, 1916;
- (b) Death of The O'Rahilly.

Conditions, if any, stipulated by Witness

Nil

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Form B.S.M. 2.

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STATEMENT BY THOMAS DEVINE,

101 Larkfield Grove, Kimmage, Dublin.

I cannot remember in what month or year I joined "E" Company, 3rd Battalion, Dublin Brigade, but it was probably in early 1915.

Although "E" Company had increased in numbers since the time when Liam Tannam grappled with the problem of forming fours with three men, yet when I joined, its full strength was only ten. We met once or twice a week in Magee's Cottage, Beaver Row, Donnybrook. De Valera came too and taught us Irish and military engineering, using chalk and blackboard; and Liam Tannam was our Lieutenant, drill and musketry instructor, and many other things besides. Under his supervision we learnt shooting - with .22 miniatures at Eglinton Road, and once in Dundrum with mausers using live ammunition, I remember.

By the winter of '15 (I think) we had moved to roomier quarters at Cullenswood House, Ranelagh. "E" Company was now seventy or eighty strong. Our seditious activities at our new address included parades, route marches, etc., and one glorious "field" day in the Dublin Mountains. Leaving the hall one night in spring 1916, in company with Liam Tannam and Paddy Doyle - later killed in Clanwilliam House - I was let into the thrilling secret that plans for a Rising were all but complete, and that night I'm sure cleaned and oiled my .22 with special care and tenderness!

On Easter Sunday, 1916, in response to the general mobilisation order, "E" Company mustered in strength at Ranelagh, only to learn there had been a change of plan and the big 'outing' was off. We were dismissed and returned to our homes, disappointed and upset by the turn events had taken.

On Easter Monday morning Volunteer Alf Harnett and myself turned in to work - Alf to overhaul boilers, myself, a gas plant at the Laundry where we were employed. These tasks we had neglected the previous Saturday, thanks to our faith in an Easter rising. The work engaged us till noon when on our way home to dinner we learned the exciting news that the Rising was 'on'. After a hasty conference Alf cycled off to the city; I followed on foot towards Rathmines where later he would meet and tell me the whereabouts of "E" Company. As it happened our next meeting was as fellow prisoners on the grass patch facing Rotunda Hospital.

Reaching Portobello Bridge about 1 p.m. I saw a wounded British officer and learned there had been 'exchanges' between a few Volunteers in Davy's (pub) Fort and the garrison of Portobello Barracks. Soldiers in full war kit were all over the place. That way into town was barred but Richmond Hill was open, and I went that way, reaching O'Connell Street without challenge and en route passing the Citizen Army entrenched in Stephen's Green.

Near G.P.O. a small force of British cavalry had encountered the garrison and I vaguely recall a dead

horse near the Nelson Pillar. Little groups of people stood about and stared curiously or incredulously at the ground windows of G.P.O., all of which were manned and barricaded. The Tricolour flew over the building and from inside a tremendous hammering and crashing sounded as the garrison prepared it for defence. Going nearer, I scanned the faces in the windows but though I recognised Jim Kenny and Charlie Donnelly of Pearse's own Company, I saw nobody from "E", and with the object of enquiring their whereabouts (actually they were in Bolands with De Valera) I approached the main entrance, when to my pleased surprise Liam Tannam hove up in the doorway.

At the time I was unarmed and wearing my working clothes, but thanks to Tannam I was given a shotgun, some cartridges and a bandolier, carrying which soldierly equipment I reinforced the watchers at the windows.

Incidentally the bandolier - taken shortly before from the shoulders of a dead Lancer - was new, stiff and multi-strapped, and it resisted all my civilian efforts to get it on. Desperate, I asked a stout man in Citizen Army uniform to help me. He was busy too, very much so, with problems of his own, but he didn't hesitate. "Certainly, my son", he said cheerily, and in a thrice had me inside the straps. Later I learned his name - James Connolly - which information caused me some embarrassment.

In the afternoon I was among a platoon sent to man two outposts in Fairview - a pub and a wine shop -

and I remember that though the shelves of the latter were full, the cupboard was very very bare and our fourteen hour fast was broken only by a jam jar full of tea at which nine of us sipped in turn. On Tuesday though, we had mutton - an unlucky sheep being commandeered, killed, cooked and devoured in less than two hours under the gay supervision of Harry Boland.

We were recalled to Headquarters on Tuesday afternoon and the same evening I fired my first shot for Ireland. It happened outside the G.P.O. under the windows of which we knelt on arrival, whilst the men inside fired two volleys in the air to disperse daring looters up the street. Filled with ardour I joined in the second volley - the effort earning me a scared reproachful look from someone in front and rebuke from an officer behind. After a meal a number of us were detailed for barricading in Henry Place, and this, as well as tunnelling from house to house in Henry Street, occupied us till well after midnight when we were able to snatch a few hours' sleep.

I remember little of Wednesday morning save that I had bacon and egg for breakfast! During forenoon and afternoon I suppose I just stuck around the G.P.O. In the evening we erected more barricades - probably the best dressed barricades of the Rising - bales of Irish tweed and worsted being the materials we used. A similar mental blackout covers the happenings of Thursday morning, but things, I dimly recall, were now warning up. Incessant gun fire sounded from all parts of the city, and the last venturesome civilian had disappeared from the streets. Dublin - in one sector at

least - wore a deserted dead look, though in fact it was very much alive.

On Thursday afternoon two small parties left the G.P.O. under Lieutenant Patrick Shortice and a Sergeant respectively, with orders to occupy the Henry Street Warehouse (now Roche's Stores?) and a licensed premises (presently O'Neill's) on Liffey Street corner opposite. Lieutenant P. Shortice was the officer in command of the party which occupied the licensed premises; a sergeant (name unknown) was in charge of those in occupation of the Henry Street Warehouse; myself being one of the party, numbering, I think, in all six men.

Later the same evening, for some reason or other, we in the Warehouse joined forces with Shortice's men in the licensed premises and were posted at various windows. Mine looked westward down Liffey Street and I was staring in the direction of Britain (Parnell) Street when a slowly moving armoured car appeared in the street and stopped dead in my line of vision. The range was a couple of hundred yards, and I had time for two shots with a Mauser before the car moved on out of sight. By the way, the sole effort made amends for my impulsiveness outside the G.P.O. for according to Shortice this time the volleys should have joined in with me.

Nobody, I recall, had been posted on our roof, which had consequences later on. Less than an hour after the brief appearance of the armoured car, heavy fire was opened on us from the warehouse opposite and we were taken completely by surprise. There was, I think, a weak

return fire from our top windows, but this quickly flickered out, for the parapet of the warehouse, which blunderingly we'd vacated earlier, dominated all our windows on that side of the street, and deciding that continued occupation was inadvisable, Shortice gave the order to come down. Getting downstairs was itself a tricky job for showers of bullets pierced the thin inner walls lining the staircase, but eventually we reached the ground floor with only one casualty - a superficial throat wound.

As Shortice expected, a direct attack from the street, preparations were made to put our house in order, beer barrels, I think, playing a big part in the process. In fact I remember little of the contents of that room save beer barrels and a strong whiff of porter which leaked from punctured casks. Darkness had now fallen and firing from the warehouse had ceased, but though we watched and waited into the small hours, the attack didn't materialise.

Towards dawn we got a message from Pearse recalling us to the G.P.O. At the time we didn't know but afterwards learned that a strong cordon was tightening in around the Post Office, and ours was only one of various outposts attacked and vacated during Thursday night-Friday morning. Incidentally, it was Diarmuid Lynch who conveyed Pearse's order to us and other outposts - a risky bit of work in an area 'sniving' with enemy snipers.

Soon after daybreak acting on Shortice's orders, we left the outpost one by one at intervals of a minute

or two, and ran as fast as our legs would carry us down Liffey Street, along mid-Abbey Street, and through an opening near present Independent House, entering the G.P.O. via Prince's Street. It's pleasant to record that every man reached home safely, even the belated last comer who arrived by the 'hard way' of O'Connell Street'.

After 'breakfast' (I am quoting Desmond Fitzgerald) I moved about the G.P.O. and was struck by the 'new look' it had acquired since we'd left it fourteen hours before.

Since then bombardment had worked havoc in the building, especially in the roof and upper storeys which had got the brunt of the shelling. Daylight was visible in many places, twisted girders hung at queer angles, walls, floors and staircases were in a chaotic state. On such parts as still smouldered or burned the hoses were continuously played, especially those nearest the large store of home-made hand grenades. The garrison too showed traces of the ordeal. Down on the ground floor many wounded lay, sat or stood by, whilst those active went about their tasks. I state the simple truth when I say that on that eventful Friday, discipline and the morale of the defenders was without exception splendid.

Towards afternoon the order was issued for all present to assemble in the large room just inside the entrance to the building, and I remember Pearse standing up on a table and seeing his fine head in relief against a sunlit window. It was my last sight of him and the picture is still very clear in my memory.

In his address he paid tribute to the spirit and exertions of his followers. I don't remember all he said on that historic occasion, but I do remember the (prophetic) words : "Win it we will although we may win it in death", and the cheer that went up from the garrison.

He then outlined his immediate plans. Evacuation had been decided on. The wounded would first be removed to the Coliseum Theatre in Henry Street. Next an advance party with bayonets would leave with The O'Rahilly, attack the enemy barricade in Moore Street, and if successful in breaking through, take possession of Williams and Woods Jam Factory nearby. The main body would then follow to fortify and defend the new headquarters.

The removal of the wounded out of doors began at once, conspicuous amongst them a stretcher case covered in white linen which I was told was James Connolly. I remember thinking he was dead. This operation of removal was supervised by a captured officer of the R. A. M. C.

Volunteers for the advance party were now called for and out of a large number who put up their hands, about thirty - though I can't be sure of the number - were chosen, myself among them.

As we got ready to leave the G. P. O. a comrade advised me to discard my British bandolier - "in case", he said, "you're wounded or taken prisoner later on". It seemed good advice and I carried it out, transferring

about thirty rounds of 'Howth' ammunition to the pockets of my shower-proof coat.

We lined up in Henry Street just outside G.P.O. windows, when The O'Rahilly briefly inspected our ranks, noting I daresay, that more than one rifle lacked a bayonet. The inspection finished, we formed fours, The O'Rahilly drew his sword and took his place in front. Then at the words of command "Quick March - at the double", we moved off along Henry Street and at a brisk trot rounded Moore Street corner.

We were met with bursts of machine gun fire from the barricade and I heard groans and thuds as several of my comrades fell. One of them was my friend Patrick Shortice, R.I.P. I forget the exact number of casualties we suffered but they were comparatively heavy. The wonder is our small force wasn't wiped out there and then. Moore Street is about 250 yards long; we had to travel over 200 yards before coming to grips with the barricade.

After the first burst, myself and six others swerved from the middle to the left-hand side of the street and hugging the shopfronts dashed on at breakneck speed for a distance of about 170 or 180 yards; the fleet-footed O'Rahilly - he could run like a deer - kept nearer the right-hand pavement and led the nearest of us by six or seven yards. The charge carried us and him within 25 or 30 yards of the barricade, when perceiving, or sensing, that the bulk of his party had failed to keep up with him, The O'Rahilly swerved into a doorway (the private door of Leahy's licensed premises).

In the narrow framework he got sufficient cover by standing stiffly erect. Simultaneously we seven swerved into Riddle's Row, an alley on the opposite side of Moore Street, and here we stood and stared across at him awaiting a signal.

At this time I don't suppose a cat could have crossed Moore Street unscathed, for besides raking machine gun fire from the British barricade the remainder of our party now more than half way down Moore Street, and, availing itself of such cover as doorways and doorsteps afforded, poured volley after volley into the enemy. The din was deafening, smashing glass and splintering woodwork adding their quota to the effect. For about half a minute O'Rahilly stood tensely in the doorway, then taking advantage of a momentary lull in the firing, he noed swiftly in our direction and blew two blasts on his whistle. A few seconds he waited, then dashed out into mid street in the direction of Henry Street, evidently with the intention of rejoining his men further up. He had covered only a few yards when he was hit from the barricade and he fell face forward, his sword clattering in front of him. He lay motionless for a few seconds and we thought him dead. Then with a great effort he raised himself a little on his left arm and with his right made the sign of the Cross. Again he lay down and again such was the greyness of his face we thought him dead; then minutes, seconds - I cannot tell, - later he stirred and by supreme efforts, slowly and painfully dragged himself inch by inch into Sackville Lane a few yards away where he lay down for the last time. The present memorial plaque overlooks the spot where he died. R. I. P.

During this painful scene - it all happened in less time than it takes to write the words - intermittent, but heavy fire had been kept up from both ends of Moore Street. Our comrades mid way up Moore Street - we heard later - were now in occupation of several houses and from covered positions concentrated on the barricade. But I'm unable to give further details of their movements for we in Riddle's Row never managed to link up with them. Our position was an awkward one. To try to rejoin the Moore Street party was out of the question, and the Cole's Lane-Moore Street sector in our rear was evidently in enemy hands too, for as we still stood in Riddle's Row discussing ways and means of rejoining our comrades in the G.P.O., we were fired on from Cole's Lane direction and we took cover in the nearest hallway. Here, a council was held, and on the suggestion of the two senior members of our group, we decided to remain where we were for the present. The idea, I think, was that a second G.P.O. party would attack the barricade in which case we'd be able to rejoin them, or failing that, that after nightfall we stood a good chance of getting back to the G.P.O. Of course, the second expected attack never materialised.

I cannot tell why, but no attempt was made to leave Riddle's Row until after dawn on Saturday morning. As in the case of Liffey Street, we left it in pairs with intervals of a couple of minutes between. When the first pair left - the seniors I think - going in the direction Cole's Lane-Anglesea Market - the way seemed clear and I don't recall hearing a challenge or shots; but when the second pair set out and had reached one of the various

criss-crossing alleys in the area we heard repeated challenges in English accents and knew that way was closed. Moore Street was quiet now - all firing had ceased. Gavin and I decided to surrender at the barricade, which we did at an early hour on Saturday morning.

In Parnell Street we were placed under armed guard and later questioned by an officer who, although harsh and even violent at first, gradually softened in admiration of my comrade Gavin's defiant attitude. From about 7 o'clock on Saturday morning we stood by a wall in Parnell Street. Later in the evening with hundreds more we were taken to the grass patch facing the Rotunda Hospital.

Near the Parnell Monument on Sunday morning some hundreds of prisoners were assembled and the march to Richmond Barracks began. Just before we set out I had seen our President, Tom Clarke, for the first time. The old Fenian stood bareheaded in the custody of two officers near the Rotunda Hospital, and I for one was greatly impressed by his grey hairs, his erect carriage and fearless bearing.

I recall the steady tramp of our feet as under strong escort we marched down silent O'Connell Street past the old G.P.O. now like our dream, in ruin. After the week's incessant gunfire which everywhere had worked up to a high crescendo by Friday, the silence seemed strange to our ears, and in my own case eerie. I say silence, but it is only a comparative term. From one direction or another as we marched to distance

vile we heard the occasional bark of some still-defiant 'rebel' sniper's rifle, and sporadic fire out Ringsend way told us that De Valera's men were still carrying on. An unpleasant memory of that morning is the hostile attitude towards us of certain Dubliners - mostly soldiers' dependents from the Coombe and adjacent districts.

During my short detention in Richmond Barracks Seán McDermott was a fellow-prisoner and I and many others will always esteem it a privilege to have shared his company for a little while, a week or so before his trial and execution.

In that room the nightly event looked forward to was our sing-song which concluded our days (in)activities and which Seán was a contributor to usually with a recitation. When 'lights out' sounded, our signature tune was sung, 'Oft' in the Stilly Night', which tune to this day calls up for me a picture of Seán sitting by the window and his kindly smile as he watches the antics of his youthfull fellow-prisoners.

I remember one day, the Thursday after the Surrender I think, when the courtmartial were in daily session and the departure of sentenced prisoners to known and unknown destinations a daily occurrence, a noted patriot who had just received a sentence of twenty years entered our room and broke down as he embraced and said goodbye to Seán McDermott. It was a very moving scene: everyone knew it was a last goodbye.

14.

To conclude this record of my experiences -
I was released on Saturday, the 6th May, 1916, some
two score others being released also on account of
their youth.

SIGNED Thomas Devine

DATE September 22nd 1950

WITNESS Seán Brennan. Comdt.

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