

ORIGINAL

BUREAU OF MILITARY HISTORY 1913-21

BURO STAIRÉ MILÉATA 1913-21

No. W.S. 612

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COSANTA.

BUREAU OF MILITARY HISTORY, 1913-21.

STATEMENT BY WITNESS

DOCUMENT NO. W.S. 612

Witness

Patrick Beagan,
Lislea,
Tassagh,
Co. Armagh.

Identity.

Member of I.R.B. Co. Armagh, 1917- ;
2nd Lieut. Ballymacnab Company Irish Vol's.
1917 - ;
1st Lieut. do. 1919 - .

Subject.

- (a) National activities, Co. Armagh, 1917-1924;
- (b) Formation of Irish Volunteers " 1917;
- (c) Belfast Boycott, 1920;
- (d) Shooting of James McGlennon by B. Specials
17.3.1922.

Conditions, if any, Stipulated by Witness.

Nil

File No. S.1892

Form B.S.M. 2

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STATEMENT BY MR. PATRICK BEAGAN,

Lislea, Tassagh, Co. Armagh.

I have carefully read the statement given by John Cosgrove, Letmacollumm, Lisnadill, to the Bureau of Military History. I was in all the activities he has described. I find that I could not add anything to the description he has given of the various activities he took part in, up to the time of his arrest in 1921. I do not propose to go over the ground he has covered, as my doing so would only produce at its best an exact repetition of his story. I will, however, deal with matters which I had personal contact with, and which Mr. Cosgrave did not refer to in his evidence.

Irish Republican Brotherhood:

I joined the I.R.B. (Irish Republican Brotherhood) in 1917. I was proposed, introduced and sworn into the organisation (I.R.B.) by Henry McKenna, Ballymacnab. The Circle I joined contained about seven members. We held meetings regularly. It was sometimes difficult to know how often we met, as our little bunch of I.R.B. members were coming together nightly and discussing and planning matters concerning the organisation. Officially, meetings were held once every two weeks.

Start of the Irish Volunteers:

I don't know much about the I.R.B. outside our own circle. After the Volunteers were organised later in 1917, the I.R.B. took a paternal interest in the new Volunteer organisation and saw that proper officers were elected in charge of companies, etc. When the Volunteers were properly established and in working order, the I.R.B. seemed to become inactive to some extent, as the Volunteers took control of the matters which the I.R.B. were organised to encourage and foster.

I was appointed 2nd Lieutenant of the Ballymacnab Company in 1917 and in or about 1919, when the Battalion was formed, I was promoted to 1st Lieutenant. I acted as Company Captain from May, 1921, when John Cosgrave was captured, up to September, 1921, when Cosgrave was released from prison.

Boycott of Belfast Goods:

When the Belfast trade boycott was launched in late 1920, we got orders to prevent the sale of Belfast bread in our Company area. This boycott was to be enforced in a drastic manner, and all bread carts and other means of distribution were to be destroyed. This form of activity was most appropriate in areas such as ours, where we were surrounded by large districts where the population was predominantly Unionist and where a substantial number of the young Unionists were members of the B. Special constabulary, and were armed with rifles and revolvers. To carry out any major military operations in areas such as ours was an almost impossible project to make a success of. In dealing with the question of the Belfast bread carts, our problem was simplified, as the objectives for our plans came into our areas almost each day and we were both willing and capable of dealing with the situation. Leaving out the question of destroying the bread carts, molestation on a widespread scale had a most useful effect on the military situation, caused demoralisation to the enemy who were forced to provide armed escorts of at least six or seven men for each bread cart and had a most heartening effect on the morale of our men. This work properly carried out had useful effects in both the economic and military spheres by curtailing the trading facilities of Belfast Unionist houses and lining up a considerable number of armed members of the enemy forces on protection duty.

Attacks on Bread Carts selling Belfast Bread:

In connection with the destruction of Belfast bread carts, I was in charge of one operation in which a man named Dunlap was the driver of the bread cart. Dunlap was a Unionist and probably a member of the B. Specials. Myself and another Volunteer waited for him and, when he arrived at our position, we called on him to halt. He immediately slashed his horse into a canter and I ran alongside of the fast moving cart. I shot the horse a number of times, but the bullets fired into the horse seemed to accelerate his speed, and the driver and cart outdistanced me. After travelling for about two miles at a fast pace, the horse collapsed and died. This operation at least showed the British that we were determined to put the Belfast bread carts off the roads, and the British authorities were forced to provide armed escorts for all bread carts travelling in or near our area. Shortly after this incident, I and another Volunteer were again awaiting a Belfast bread cart and were proceeding across fields near a by-road which would seem a good position for carrying out our operation. The police had apparently decided that this location along the by-road would be selected by us, and they lay in ambush there for us. When I and my companion suddenly appeared in their midst, we gave them a scare, as our appearance so close in suggested that we were acting as a decoy, especially as we immediately beat a hasty retreat. The police immediately sent some of their party to Keady for reinforcements, and a big round-up in large area of country resulted.

Dealing with a Lady Spy:

A lady and her reputed son appeared in our district. This lady first called at a stationery shop owned by two Miss McPartlands in Armagh. This lady claimed that she was the mother of Dan Breen and that the young man with her

was Dan Breen's younger brother, and that both were on the run from Tipperary where their lives were in danger. The McPartland girls were both enthusiastic Republicans and had sympathy for the lady and her "son", and they introduced them to some of their Republican friends. Accommodation was provided for the two strangers at the Cooney family's farm at Annaghacurk, Ballymoyer. The Cooney brothers were officers in the I.R.A., Tom Cooney being O/C Newtownhamilton Battalion.

When the lady and her companion were in McPartland's Father Toner, C.C., was introduced to them, and he had a faint remembrance of seeing the lady somewhere and that the person remembered was not of good repute. In trying to recollect where he had previously seen her, he remembered a case of a woman who called on Mr. Lavery, Solicitor, Armagh - father of Cecil Lavery, now High Court Judge - in connection with a case she had against her husband and in which there was a volume of correspondence with Mr. Lavery's office. About this time Jim Toner, a brother of Fr. Toner, had a close association with Mr. Lavery's business and had access to all Mr. Lavery's papers. From the papers he found out that the lady in question was named Mrs. Rafferty and that she was, in early 1921, serving a sentence in prison. A local Sergeant in the R.I.C. - McGettigan - on promotion to the rank of District Inspector, was sent to Dublin. McGettigan got in touch with Mrs. Rafferty and obtained her release from prison, presumably to get her to do intelligence work in Armagh.

Father Toner conveyed this suspicion of Mrs. Rafferty's history to Henry McKenna, and it was decided that Fr. Toner should get a sample of Mrs. Rafferty's handwriting from Mr. Lavery's office through Jim Toner.

The lady under suspicion was got to write a note on some pretext. When the handwritings were compared, there was no doubt but that Mrs. Rafferty and "Dan Breen's mother" were one and the same person, and proved Fr. Toner's suspicions. This lady had expressed a wish on several occasions to meet Frank Aiken. When all the local information and the confirmation of Fr. Toner's suspicions were conveyed to Frank Aiken, he gave orders that the lady and her young man companion should be chased from the area. I was sent to the Cooney homestead to carry out Mr. Aiken's orders and did so. I found the lady a most plausible person and, only I knew all the very definite incriminating evidence against the lady, she might have convinced me that she was the victim of false charges.

Attempt to shoot Sergeant McLean:

There was a Sergeant McLean serving with the R.I.C. in Armagh city. This man was connected with a shooting down in the south of Ireland. We got orders to shoot McLean and, as far as I understood at the time, these orders came from G.H.Q., Dublin. On four Saturday nights in succession I and another I.R.A. man waited for McLean in Armagh. He was in the habit of passing through ^{Ogle} ~~William~~ Street between 8 and 9 p.m. each night on his journey from Russell Street to Irish Street Barracks. Any of the nights we waited for him he failed to put in an appearance.

Truce Period:

From the Truce in 1921 and up to March, 1922, my story is similar to John Cosgrove's, and I will deal only with incidents in this period which Cosgrove did not refer to in his evidence.

Shooting of James McGlennon by B.Specials:

On the 17th March, 1922, James McGlennon, an old

man who had been stone-deaf for years, was shot dead by a B. Special patrol at Dundrum cross-roads. This man was a Catholic in religion, and in politics an Hibernian. The patrol that shot McGlennon was composed of neighbours of his who all knew him well and were well aware of his disability. This man worked in a beetling mill, where a process in the preparation of linen fabric is carried out. All workers employed in a beetling mill are soon rendered stone-deaf by the continual noise of the machinery.

An inquest was held on McGlennon, and the verdict returned was that the man was shot for refusing to halt when challenged!! This explanation to justify the shooting was not credited by those knowing the facts. The local I.R.A. were ordered to carry out reprisals on the patrol who were responsible for the shooting.)

When the members of the patrol realised the feelings of revulsion that their action in shooting McGlennon produced, they all went on the run and ceased all official patrols. In an effort to get some of those who were considered more guilty, a few of their houses were raided and one man was shot dead. This unfortunate man was the victim of a mistaken identity. (These two shootings of innocent men show the tragic consequences that can result from religious bigotry amongst decent country people who would in normal times live in a condition of neighbourliness with each other.)

Setting up I.R.A. Camp at Castleshane:

Immediately after the planned rising in the North in May, 1922, described in John Cosgrove's statement, and after the round-up in which I was lucky to evade capture, I went to Divisional Headquarters in Dundalk

with a number of other I.R.A. men, similarly circumstanced as I was, to find out what men on the run in the Six Counties should do, and what should be done with the arms lying in Northern dumps. We were told to get all our men in danger of capture by Crown forces in the North and any of the arms and war equipment not securely dumped moved to Castleshane, Co. Monaghan, and to occupy Lucas Castle there as a base for men on the run from all North Armagh areas where we could use all the freedom and the facilities the place afforded to set up a training camp. Some time later when I was returning from Dundalk with a few others, we got a lift from the military barracks on a lorry which was loaded with the first consignment of blankets and mattresses being sent to Castleshane Camp as it became subsequently known. We parted with this lorry in the town of Castleblaney and we walked from there across country to Ballymacnab. A few days after we arrived at home, I collected 17 men of my company who were badly on the run and we marched to Castleshane Camp where a large number of men from both Armagh and Lurgan Battalions were encamped.

The question of arms dumped in Ballymacnab area was a matter causing us anxiety. After some discussion on the subject, it was decided that eleven of us should return home to Ballymacnab and that six men would remain in Castleshane Camp with their rifles.

Position in Northern Ireland, July-September, 1922:

When we arrived back in Ballymacnab, we found the position in the area bad. It looked that to preserve our freedom from arrest or, in fact, our lives within this area would be a difficult task. However, we tried to make the best of our limited resources and endeavoured to "stay put".

Some time after this we got orders from our Brigade Headquarters, then located in Castleshane Camp, to make plans for the burning of a number of large Unionist places in our area. We selected one place near Lisnadill. In selecting this place, we hoped that the B. Specials' patrol from Lisnadill would turn out to put out the fire and we would be in ambush waiting for them, and by this means we hoped to even an old "score" we had with them. This general burning of Unionist property, planned for all over the Brigade area, was cancelled and, for some reason, we received no cancellation orders. We carried out our plans by burning Foy's flax mill and, when the fire was got going, we got into an ambush position to await the patrol. The patrol failed to turn out. The mill and its contents were most inflammable and to burn out took only a short space of time, and we moved away from the vicinity when all hope of the patrol coming passed.

I was on the run from when I went home in or about July, 1922, to the Spring of the following year. In September, 1922, a big round-up was carried out, and every place I was suspected of frequenting was raided for me. After the Spring of 1923 I could move about with some feeling of safety, and I was not interfered with afterwards.

Plans for Rescue of Miss Nano Aiken - 1924:

In March, 1924, Miss Nano Aiken was a political prisoner in Armagh Jail which at this time was converted into a female prison. Plans were made by the then Divisional O/C, Tom Rogers, to rescue Miss Aiken.

Miss Aiken was receiving political treatment whilst in prison. She had special privileges which enabled her to move about, under supervision, around the

passages inside the prison.

I got orders to prepare a hide-out in a farmer's house, about five miles from Armagh city. This hide-out was for use only if a raid on the farmhouse took place. I and another made the hide-out. Its entrance was made from a wall cupboard; the bottom of the cupboard was made removable; and a chamber was excavated underneath about six feet square and about six feet deep. In case of a raid, a person could go to the cupboard, remove the bottom, go down a short ladder and there remain in comparative safety until the raiders left the premises. The entrance to this hide-out was so painstakingly constructed that it would be difficult to detect when the bottom was fitted into place.

A chaplain was used as the connection between Miss Aiken in the prison and our officers on the outside. On the morning arranged for the rescue, the carefully made plans were put into execution as follows: A messenger, one of the best of the local Volunteers, took a parcel to the jail door, addressed to Miss Aiken, rang the prison bell and, when the door was opened, he stepped in with the parcel. At this moment Miss Aiken was to step forward to receive the parcel; the messenger was to get her through the door, close the door and rush her to a waiting motor car which would take her to the vicinity of the house containing the hide-out. At a pre-selected spot, Miss Aiken was to leave the car, dressed in a man's raincoat, leggings and hat, and walk up to the house where a Cumann na mBan girl was waiting to receive her; and the car was to proceed as fast as possible to the Armagh-Monaghan border, near Keady, and there be abandoned. This was for the purpose of throwing the Northern authorities off and directing their attention to the

border area. I came to the prison door with the driver of the car, who was one of our most reliable men. My duty was to take care of an armed sentry who stood about fifteen feet from the prison door on the outside of the prison, and behind the railings in front of the prison.

When the messenger got into the prison doorway with the parcel, he saw Miss Aiken in a passage-way. She made no movement to come to the door, and a wardress near the door took the parcel out of the "messenger's" hands, pushed him out and slammed the door shut.

It was apparent that a misunderstanding took place in the carefully laid plans for this operation. It is possible that both Miss Aiken and the "messenger" misunderstood their part in the plan. Perfect understanding was required, and, in fact, a rehearsal of the plan should have been carried out, as far as it was possible to do so, so as to avoid the many little accidents that can make all the difference between success and failure. Neither Miss Aiken nor the messenger could be suspected of any want of courage or initiative to properly carry out their part in the plans.

As matters turned out, it was providential that the rescue plan failed, as Miss Aiken was released in a very short period - a matter of days - afterwards.

SIGNED: Patrick Beagan
(Patrick Beagan)
DATE: 23 November 1951
23 November 1951.

WITNESS: John McCoy
(John McCoy).
23/11/51
23/11/51.

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