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COSANTA.

BUREAU OF MILITARY HISTORY, 1913-21.

STATEMENT BY WITNESS

DOCUMENT NO. W.S. 642.....

Witness

Christopher Byrne,
7 Geoffrey Keating Road,
Fairbrothers Fields,
Dublin.

Identity.

O/C. 'C' Company 4th Battalion, Dublin Brigade 1920 - ;
Vice-Commandant do.

Subject.

National activities 1916-1921.

Conditions, if any, Stipulated by Witness.

Nil

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ORIGINAL

BUREAU OF MILITARY HISTORY 1913-21
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No. W.S. <i>642</i>

Statement of Christopher Byrne,
7 Geoffrey Keating Road,
Fairbrothers Fields, Dublin.

In Part I. of my statement I covered the period 1908 to the Easter Rising of 1916. I was released from Frongoch in August, 1916.

4th Battalion re-organised:

Following the general release of prisoners, work was begun on reorganising the 4th Battalion. The first meeting of old members of my old Company, namely "F" Company, was held in the Gaelic League rooms in Chapelizod. Seamus Murphy presided. I was elected O/C. of the Company. Larry Murtagh was elected 1st Lieutenant and Liam Power 2nd Lieutenant.

Seamus Murphy, at that time, was in the process of being elected Commandant of the Battalion which appointment was subsequently confirmed. We got going immediately on the Company reorganisation, held weekly drills and attended short lectures.

Some members, who took part with the Company during the Rising, did not return to it. Their places were taken in any case by younger and completely new men. Its approximate strength when re-formed would be in the neighbourhood of forty.

At the time, we, of course, had no armaments in the Company except a few old revolvers that escaped the search following 1916. We started immediately to collect arms and many raids were made on houses in the Inchicore area. As a result of these raids we considered ourselves fairly well equipped with a few revolvers/^{and} many shot guns. In some cases people sent for us

and told us to come and take the arms. Other householders not so fairly well disposed handed them up through fear. I distinctly remember a Parish Priest, Father O'Carroll, sending word to me to come and collect two guns that he had. It was just as well anyway that these arms were given up freely because the R.I.C. would have seized them.

Apart from military activities the Company also took part in what might be termed political activities, that is, a number of us were sent up to South Armagh in February, 1918, in connection with the candidature of Dr. McCartan there. Dr. Ted O'Kelly was in charge of us. We took the train to Newry and from there were sent on to Newtownhamilton. Our job was to protect the polling booths and to prevent intimidation on the part of members of the A.O.H. Everything went off quietly and we returned to Dublin when the election was over.

Company Dumps:

The arms captured on raids on private houses were stored principally in dumps at Miss Flood's house, Bluebell, and in the Brickworks at Dolphin's Barn. The Manager was a Mr. Cassidy who, although Scotch, was very sympathetic and helpful to us.

Republican Courts:

When the Republican Courts were formed John Joyce and myself were representatives on a South City Court from the 4th Battalion. I only attended two sessions. The Court was held in the Bricklayers' Hall in Cuffe Street, I think. I think it was Pat Cosgrave that presided. Mr. Willie Corrigan, I think, was one of the solicitors. Both cases were of a

ne of them dealt with the repairs to a motor car. A man by the name of Lynch who had a garage carried out repairs to a car, the property of a Jewman. The owner of the car refused to pay for the repairs and consequently the case came before our Court. We had to give judgment against Lynch. The other case was still more trivial. It was a summons by one man against another and it was fixed up before it was actually heard.

Company Activities:

While individual members of the Company took part in many attacks on enemy Forces, Company operations, as such, could not take place without the prior sanction of Battalion and Brigade. One of the first operations of "F" Company took place at Inchicore. It was an attack on a convoy of British troops at, I think, Tyrconnell Road. One soldier was killed.

Some time in 1920 an attempt was made by "D" Company and "F" Company to burn Crumlin Police Barracks which was then evacuated. A number of men from each of the two Companies were selected for this job. As the barracks was a fairly substantial stone building it was necessary to have it mined to complete its destruction. Engineers were brought on the job and they dug holes in the ground and laid the mines in them. When the mines were ready, the place was sprinkled with petrol and some Volunteers, stupidly enough, entered the building with a lighted candle or struck a match - I forget which - with the result that a fire was started straight away. Joe Larkin who, at the time was attending to the fuses that were to set off the mines, got badly burned when the fire started. We had to remove him immediately to the house of Miss Boushell at Ring Street, Inchicore. The following morning we sent for Dr. Kathleen Lynn but she said that she could not attend him there and that we would have to bring him to St. Ultan's. I then got in touch with Dr. Rock, an eye specialist, and he agreed to attend to him at Miss Flood's, Portlester House, Inchicore, where we transferred the patient to Dr. Rock who was an Omagh man and was most attentive and refused to accept any fees for his services. With regard to the Police barracks itself, all that happened to it was that the fire caused an

explosion and it became extinguished almost immediately. Our efforts to destroy it were a failure.

Transferred to Battalion Staff:

Late in 1919 or early 1920 when Joe McGrath resigned from Vice-Commandant of the Battalion I was transferred to the Battalion Staff to fill the vacancy. On the night that I was elected Vice-Commandant John Dowling succeeded Ted Kelly as Battalion Commandant. In my capacity as Vice-Commandant one of my chief responsibilities was to go around the Battalion area and find out how the special services of the Battalion were working such as Intelligence, First Aid, Signals and Police. I knew when and where each Special Service held its meeting. I checked up on the number present. I reported then back to the Commandant and gave him a general idea of the progress each of the Special Service Units in his Battalion was making. Battalion Council meetings were held every Sunday night at the old Iveagh Ground at Dolphin's Barn. A Volunteer by the name of John Ronan, who worked in Guinnesses, had a key to the pavilion and he admitted us on each occasion. At these meetings each Company Commander had to give an account of the activities in his area for ^{the} / week and if the Battalion Commander had any operation in mind he usually briefed the Company Commander there and then.

Escape of Prisoners from Kilmainham:

On one occasion when the Battalion Council meeting was in progress, Oscar Traynor, the Battalion O/C. accompanied by Paddy McGurk, Brigade ^{Quartermaster, L.B.} ~~Commander~~, called there and brought me outside. They told me that it was proposed to try and effect the escape from Kilmainham gaol of Frank Teeling, Ernie O'Malley and Simon Donnelly. He gave me an idea what arrangements had already been made and that I was to take charge of the arrangements for the escape. A bolt cutter had already been sent

in to the prisoners, he stated, that they were trying to cut their way out and this method had failed. An alternate method was now being prepared which was that they were to make their way over the wall by means of a rope ladder. Oscar Traynor said to me that this ladder had been made and that it was now lying at Devlin's public house, Parnell Street, from which place I was to collect it immediately as the escape was planned for that night. John Dowling, Jimmy Donnelly, a few other officers and myself went up to Kilmainham gaol. Donnelly, in the meantime, collected the rope ladder. When we reached the gaol we selected what we thought was a suitable point to throw the rope ladder over the wall. We attached to the ladder a sash cord with a lead weight at the end of it to carry it over the wall. We succeeded in getting the ladder to the top of the wall but failed to get it completely over. I am not aware of the arrangements we made for the prisoners to get out of their cells but I do know that when we threw the ladder up to the wall they were on the inside pulling the sash cord. The ladder seemed to have ^{caught} on top of the wall and with the constant pulling it broke. The result was that we had to abandon any further attempt to rescue the prisoners that night. While all this was happening three soldiers and their lady friends were in the vicinity. We knew that they had seen the whole rescue attempt and that there was nothing for it but to take these soldiers and their girls with us. We kept our seven prisoners in custody for a week, treated them as well as we could and released them when the escape did actually take place. I should mention that following the failure of our attempt I went up to Oscar Traynor and gave him a report on how the rope had got cut in the wall. I asked him what was wrong with the bolt cutter that we sent in

to the prisoners and he said that the handles had to be cut for the friendly soldiers to get them under their coats and that the cutting down of the handles reduced the leverage of the cutters and left it practically useless. I then said to him that that was an easy matter to adjust; that by putting two lengths of steel piping on the cut handles would give them all the leverage that was required. He said, "Christy, of course, I never thought of that".

Bloody Sunday:

On the Friday night before Bloody Sunday I attended a Battalion Council meeting. The Battalion Commander there told me that operations had been planned for the following Sunday to eliminate a number of ^{British} Secret Service men and agents that were residing in ~~the~~ various houses and places throughout the city. My instructions were that I was to pick a number of selected men and proceed to the Eastwood Hotel in Lower Leeson Street at 9 o'clock on Sunday morning and there carry out the shooting of an Intelligence Officer by the name of Lieutenant-Colonel Jennings. On Saturday Jimmy Donnelly and myself went up to the Eastwood Hotel and reconnoitred round the back of it. We saw that it had a back entrance and that it would be necessary for me to put some of my men there. I picked my men on Saturday evening. These were Jimmy Donnelly, Captain of "F" Company, Padraig O'Connor, Jimmy McGuinness, Joe McGuinness, Ned Bennett, George Dwyer and, I think, Jerry Hannon. I got my men together and told them what the job was for the following morning. I instructed them to meet me at some place that I cannot now recall in the vicinity of the hotel at 9 o'clock. On Sunday morning at the appointed time I met all my men as

arranged. I placed two of my party at the back entrance to the hotel. Donnelly and myself took up a position at the main entrance door. I detailed the remainder of the party to go into the hotel and locate the British agent, Jennings, and carry out their instructions. Ned Bennett led the party into the hotel, asked for the Manageress and inquired from her the number of the room that Jennings occupied. She said he was not there, that he had left a couple of days previously. The register was then called for and the number of the room that he had occupied was shown. The Manageress's word was not taken for it and the party went up to the room and searched it. They saw then that he actually had left the place and there was nothing for it but to get out as quickly as possible. I would like to mention that two Cumann na mBan girls accompanied us that morning. They were the Misses Cooney. We had arranged with them that in case that we might not be able to get back with our guns they would take them from us. This they agreed to do and the meeting place was arranged at University Church. However, as it was easy for us to get back with our arms it was not necessary for us to hand over our guns when our work was completed. I would also like to mention that Bob Byrne, who was a Company officer at that time, had also received instructions for another job on Bloody Sunday. This job was, however, called off late on Saturday evening. Knowing that I had been detailed for the Eastwood Hotel he volunteered to come with me, which he did.

A. R. R. E. S. T.:

I was arrested in May, 1921, by British military and taken to Richmond Barracks. No charge was preferred against me and I was subsequently transferred to Arbour Hill and from there to ~~Wellington barracks~~ *Collins Barracks* 6. B; then back to Kilmainham where I was

detained until the General Release towards the end of the year.

During my internment I was appointed Camp Commandant of the prisoners. I had quite a lot of dealings with the Military Commandant at the time who was a Captain Webber. On the whole I found him a very decent fellow and he was out to facilitate us in every possible way he could.

On my release I returned to the Battalion Staff and served on it until I was again arrested during the Civil War in the year 1923.

Signed: Christopher Byrne
(Christopher Byrne)

Date: 5-2-52
5.2.52.

Witness: William Ivory Comdt
(William Ivory) Comd't.

