

W.S. 801

ORIGINAL

BUREAU OF MILITARY HISTORY 1913-21
BUREAU STAIRS MILITARY 1913-21
No. W.S. 801

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BUREAU OF MILITARY HISTORY, 1913-21.

STATEMENT BY WITNESS

DOCUMENT NO. **W.S.** 801

Witness

William Mullins,
55 Moyderwell,
Tralee,
Co. Kerry.

Identity.

O/C. Communications, Kerry Brigade, 1917 - ;
Q.M. Kerry 1 Brigade, 1919 - .

Subject.

National activities, Tralee, Co. Kerry,
1917-1921.

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STATEMENTBYWILLIAM MULLINS, 55, MOYDERWELL, TRALEE,CO. KERRY.QUARTERMASTER, KERRY I BRIGADE.

Having made a previous statement of my recollections and experiences to cover the period from the formation of the Fianna and the Volunteers up to my release from the internment camp at Frongoch, North Wales, in 1916, I now continue my statement to cover the remaining period to the Truce on July 11th, 1921.

I am fully convinced that Frongoch made our whole organisation into what it eventually reached. The comradeship that developed in Frongoch and the knowledge we got of each other from different parts of the country, the military aspect of things and being brought into close contact with men whom we used only hear about previous to that was a binding force for the future. John Bull made an awful blunder when he put us all together there.

When we came back from Frongoch we took up again where we left off and we found things good and sound in our organisation, due, of course, to the spirit of those who were left at home. In February, 1917, as I left a meeting of the Volunteers one night, it was at 1 a.m., when I got to my house (where I am still living, in fact) the street was pretty dark at the time and I was pounced upon by about a dozen R.I.C. men. I was knocked to the ground by them and I was searched thoroughly. They arrested me and took

me to the local police barracks. The following morning I was transferred to Tralee Gaol. The following day there were three more Volunteers arrested - Joe Melinn, Tralee, Michael J. O'Connor, Tralee, Michael Moriarty, Dingle. I was arrested on a Tuesday and the following Friday we were taken from Tralee to Dublin by train with an escort of a full Company of the Black Watch Regiment. That evening at the Station in Tralee there was a big crowd of people who rushed to attempt our rescue, which resulted in terrible baton charges in which many people were hurt.

We arrived in Dublin, having left Tralee by the 7.30 p.m. train, at 4 o'clock in the morning. Arbour Hill refused to take us. It presumably got no official notification of our coming. Our escort was in a quandary and eventually we were lodged in the Bridewell behind the Four Courts until midday on Saturday. We were then taken to Arbour Hill and received this time with open arms.

Our experience during our short stay there gave us a great insight into the punishment meted out to defaulting soldiers.

On the next morning (Sunday) we were brought before a number of military officers and there we met five other men who had been arrested in Limerick. They were Michael Colivet, Seamus McInerney, Liam Manahan, Michael Brennan and Seán Ó Muirthiule. A large map of England lay on the table and one of the Officers pointed out a number of red circles drawn around several towns in different parts of England, telling us to choose one of them as we were to be deported to England

that morning.

The Officers left the room, giving us ten minutes to choose which town we wished to go to, but in their absence we decided not to choose, as to do so we would become a party to their plans. When the time was up the Officers returned and we told them our decision. Needless to say, they got ratty and, I take it, the senior officer just put his finger on one of the rings and said "You'll go there".

'There' turned out to be Weatherby in Yorkshire.

We were immediately put in a Crossley tender and driven to Dun Laoghaire. The mail boat left Dunlaoghaire at 8 o'clock in the morning. Our escort this time consisted of a Company of Royal Irish Rifles under an Officer named Tierney of Tipperary. Incidentally, this Officer told us on the boat that this was the most unpleasant job he ever got orders to carry out.

We arrived in Crewe at 4 p.m. that day and as there were no Sunday trains in England we had to wait there until midnight. We boarded the train again, arriving at Weatherby on Monday morning.

We were taken then to the local police station and all our particulars were noted. They had arrangements already made for our digs in the town. We were put - the five from Limerick in one house and O'Connor and Moriarty together in another house and Melinn and myself in yet another.

We met the following morning in the digs of the five men and discussed our situation and in the course of the talks I

proposed we should get away out of the place as soon as possible. We had been informed in the police station on our arrival that our movements were limited to one mile radius from our digs. It was eventually agreed that we would wait and size up our situation. Ó Muirthuile made several trips to London. There he contacted the National Aid under Art O'Brien and as a result we were each supplied with £2. 10. 0. per week during the remainder of our stay, out of which we had to pay our own digs.

Eventually, a week before the general amnesty of 1917, Ó Murthuile got us all together on the river bank and showed us a wire he had received that morning worded 'Surprised at your action or rather inaction (signed) Brugha'. After a long conference, it was decided that we would get away. A day or two after we started leaving in ones and twos. All were gone with the exception of O'Connor and myself when the police smelt a rat and rounded up O'Connor and myself for attempting to break bounds. We were arrested on a Saturday forenoon and kept in cells until Monday afternoon. We were taken before some military officer who read out a statement from a form which they wanted us to sign, telling us that we were not to enter any railway station or premises occupied by a railway company and giving us a radius of five miles.

This document we refused to sign because we thought it rather strange to be asked to do so, since we had documents served on us often before without putting our names to them. I pointed this out to the Officer in charge. His reply was "Back to your cells".

Two hours afterwards we were again brought before them. I presume they had been to Ripon, which was the H.Q. of the Northern Command. This time they read the same documents for us again and handed them to us, saying that we must abide by those rules. We accepted them, telling them that seemed to be the usual way to do business, seeing we were their prisoners and couldn't become a party to their arrangements. They also seemed more satisfied and became more friendly to us.

We thanked them for extending our radius by four miles for attempting to break the one mile radius originally given us.

The following day we were summoned to the police barracks. On arrival, the Superintendent informed us he had very good news, that we were free men again under the general amnesty; at the same time handing us each a cheque for £36.

After being in Weatherby for a few days the nine of us visited the Superintendent of Police at the barracks. We made a claim on the British Government for our maintenance while in Weatherby. He forwarded it to the proper authorities but all the time that we sojourned in the town we paid weekly visits of enquiry but without result, and on the day of our release these cheques came as a complete surprise to us.

We left Weatherby the following day for Manchester where we stayed a week with some Irish friends. There I parted with O'Connor, taking his cheque and my own to London where I handed them to Art O'Brien in the National Aid offices.

On my return home to Tralee I again took up my duties

as Captain of Communications in Kerry. Actually, there was no Brigade formed, only Battalions under direct control of G.H.Q.. We spent our time perfecting the organisation. My work consisted of superintending the carrying of despatches, the timing of same between Kerry and Cork on one side and Kerry and Limerick on the other, and I found that the men concerned were at all times willing and ready to move off no matter what the hour or distance was, with the result that we had perfect lines of communication at all times.

I was home only about two months when at the end of September I was arrested again, with a large number of local men, all for parading in Volunteer uniform. We were taken to Cork prison and after being there some weeks we were Court-martialled and sentenced to two years. This, I understand, was the extent of the sentence which could be awarded by Courtmartial for charges of such a nature.

The local R.I.C. men were the witnesses against us, swearing they saw us parading in Volunteer uniform on such a date. Each prisoner in turn naturally refused to recognise their Court. Some days after this we decided to go on hunger-strike. The strike started at midday on Monday but that morning a large number of us were transferred to Dundalk Gaol to serve our two years there.

Any food in our possession was dumped out of the train at the hour for which the strike was fixed. We were on hungerstrike on our arrival at Dundalk and within ten days of our arrival we were all released under what was then known as

the Cat and Mouse Act. According to British Law, this Act enabled the authorities to pick us up at any time.

We are home again and at our work after our release, we are back at our Volunteer work. At this time - the beginning of 1918 - the British Government is having recruiting meetings and around the Co. Kerry these recruiting meetings are being broken up in disorder. We are also keeping an eye on military stores arriving in Tralee railway station and taking every opportunity to seize them and succeed in getting away with much valuable equipment, consisting of rifles, ammunition, revolvers, blankets and a whole lot of property very useful to the British but for which we had no use. All this we destroyed, sometimes by fire.

In April, 1918, conscription turned up. We held very large anti-conscription meetings in the County, the biggest of them being held in Tralee, at which one of the local priests was in the habit of speaking and warning the youths to prepare to resist to the last, with the result that a very fine spirit prevailed in the County. This priest by his eloquence and advice to the youth made himself conspicuous in the eyes of the British. We had to guard him day and night until eventually he had to go into hiding. He went into hiding in West Kerry. This was Father Ferris, a curate in the parish of Tralee.

During this time, too, we collected a number of firearms, principally shot-guns and some very costly ones too. These were taken from private owners and from gunsmiths' shops throughout the County. We always gave receipts for weapons

seized.

Tralee and district had a lot of fowlers with whom we got in touch and made them agree that we should get half their ammunition. In this way we built up a pretty large store of shot-gun ammunition.

In May, 1918, the R.I.C. came to my house to arrest me again but I am not at home. I get word from my people. I then get in touch with my Brigade O.C. to find they also are after him. He was Paddy Cahill. We decide we will not be arrested so we leave town and go on the run. We go to Mauchana Knockane, about ten miles North of Tralee. We stay in this district and do our Volunteer work as usual.

In September Paddy Cahill decides to go to Dublin and is arrested there at his sister's house. She was Mrs. Looney and lived off Holles Street. He found himself in prison in England like the others who were taken earlier that year in connection with the so-called German Plot.

Towards the end of the year some more lads who also had to leave Tralee the same time as Cahill and myself started to drift back home and I came into Tralee the final week in December.

It would be as well to refer here to our work in connection with the bye-elections and general election in 1918. We sent contingents to Longford, Clare and Waterford bye-elections and as there were no contests in Kerry for the General Election, all our candidates being returned unopposed, we sent contingents of Volunteers to a number of constituencies. I

myself was in Dublin assisting in the Smithfield area.

We took a lot of petrol from the military at Tralee railway station, also rifles and ammunition off grain boats at Fenit Pier.

We had in Tralee a Fianna organisation which we considered second to none in Ireland. These young lads, under their O/C. Michael O'Leary, were a terrible thorn to the British. They were so young and inconspicuous that they were able to go into hotels, restaurants, cloakrooms at local dances and search the pockets of the overcoats of military officers and later Black-and-Tans and Auxiliaries, getting many small arms and letters that gave us much valuable information both of a military nature and at times disclosing to us the source of information detrimental to our forces which had been supplied to the British by their spies.

In the subsequent years by this means the guilt of a number of these people was established beyond doubt. We found that they were a source of terrible danger to our men, living amongst us as they were, and fraternising, too, with Volunteers' relatives and friends. A number of them had to be tried and shot as spies in the Brigade area.

We had to take into custody some men from Tralee district against whom we had very grave suspicion at first and absolute proof eventually of acting as spies for the British.

Three were arrested and tried, and when proof of their guilt was brought home to them in fair trial they cried for mercy, but they had been and still were such a source of grave

danger to our forces that in each case the Court ordered that they be shot. The sentence was carried out on each of these three men, but through circumstance one of them was not killed outright; he recovered, lost no time in emigrating to England and he died there a few years afterwards.

The fourth man was shot in the licensed premises of Knightlys', Lower Castle Street. The premises were burned the following day by the British as a reprisal.

A few more were suspected and proof was being collected and traps set, but the Truce came and saved them. Suspicion was not sufficient grounds to take a life, so we had no spy shot without absolute proof of guilt. Those few whom the Truce saved still live, some among us, and little do they know how near they were to the same fate of all spies who are caught.

In the year, 1919, we are all home again and we carried on with organisation. In this year the County is divided into three Brigades. I am appointed Brigade Quartermaster of the 1st Brigade and with Paddy Cahill, who is officially appointed O.C., we visit over a period of some months every Company and administer the declaration of allegiance, thus knitting together the Companies into Battalions, such Company and Battalion electing their officers, which are sanctioned by G.H.Q.,

The Brigade Staff consisted of :

O/C.	Paddy Cahill.
V/O.C.	Joe Melinn.
Adjutant.	Daniel O'Sullivan.
Q.M.	Billy Mullins.

I.O.	Tim Kennedy.
Engineer.	James Flavin.
Transport.	(James Mullins. (Denis O'Connor.

In April, 1920, I was arrested again. I was taken to Ballymullen Military Barracks and held there two days, then transferred to Tralee Gaol and, with about ten other men from different parts of the County, taken to Cobh from Fenit by a British gunboat. We were held in Cork prison for some weeks, then again put on board another British gunboat and taken to Crumlin Road Prison, Belfast.

After some weeks a hungerstrike is declared and on the fourth day of the strike half the prisoners, numbering about sixty, are again driven in lorries to Belfast Docks where we are put on board yet another British boat. We are handcuffed in pairs and get rather rough treatment from both our British Army escort and the dock workers. We are transferred to a port in the South of England and then on train to London, eventually arriving at Wormwood Scrubbs.

During our journey there were many pitiable sights amongst us of men getting seasick who were on their fifth day of hungerstrike, some of them getting violent fits of vomiting on empty stomachs, with the result that there was much blood flowing in the holds of the boat. All this time our military and police escort refused to remove the handcuffs off these very sick men, many of whom had to be taken to the train from the boat in carts with their comrades still handcuffed to them. In such a

condition we were viewed in Paddington Station by the London travelling public who happened to be there at the time.

The hungerstrike lasted twenty-eight days and eventually we were all transferred to hospitals to recuperate and straggled home to Ireland as best we could. I arrived home at the end of July to be greeted with a strange sight, a new kind of policeman, half police and half military uniform, afterwards known as the Black and Tans.

We got to work again as usual but I am now free to devote my whole time to the work on hands as I have severed my connection with the firm of Donovans, Ltd. My frequent sojourns in John Bull's gaols and in his country interfered with my work and I decided I could not serve two masters. At the same time my employers did not want me to go; they were very decent in this respect. In fact, every time I came home from gaol they paid me for the full time I was away. Nevertheless, I could see I wouldn't be much use to those people if I was to devote all the time I wished to carry on with the fight.

At that time, Black and Tans, R.I.C., military and later Auxiliaries sought after a number of us, with the result that we had to again leave our homes and take to the country. There were so many of us had to do this that we decided we would form ourselves into a Flying Column. We went to Keel district and a man there vacated his house and put it at our disposal. After using it for some weeks we decided that we would build a hut on the mountain near Fibough, which we subsequently did. Here we lived and planned ambushes, etc. We numbered 25,

Paddy Cahill in charge, second in command was Tadg Brosnan of Castlegregory. We carried out ambushes at Killorglin, Glenbeigh, Ballymacandy (Castlemaine), Lispole, and isolated the Dingle Peninsula, with the result it was very little travelled by the enemy forces.

In the Glenbeigh ambush we augmented our forces with men from Castlegregory and Castlemaine to the number of 60, but we did not use all of them, leaving about 25 at the cabin to the East of Glenbeigh Station. Here we captured 21 rifles, 1 Lewis machine gun, many pans of ammunition ~~from~~ it and over 2,000 rounds of rifle ammunition. This British force was a maintenance party stationed at Glenbeigh and they had a set day for travelling to Tralee by train for supplies. Having studied their movements for some weeks, we knew exactly their time of arrival at Glenbeigh station. They put up no fight, having been taken completely by surprise. There was a Sergeant in charge but the most of the party were young soldiers and gave in quickly after our fire was directed. Actually, there were no casualties on either side but we got what we wanted. We had taken up positions in the waiting rooms, in the signal cabin, behind a small goods shed and in two open waggons which were on the outer tracks just opposite the waiting rooms. Such disposition of our men completely hemmed in the British party when they walked on to the platform.

At Ballymacandy, near Castlemaine, we ambushed a party of R.I.C. and Black and Tans who were in the habit of visiting Tralee from Killorglin for their pay packet. Our forces were just spread along the ditches at both sides of the road which was straight for about 350 yards. They put up a fight

and seven of them were killed, including the District Inspector. We got their rifles, revolvers, ammunition, bicycles and £87 in cash. We had one casualty, Jerry Myles, wounded. A bullet pierced his shoulder, coming out through his back. It injured his lung, but he lived until 1951, though an invalid for the remainder of his life; the wound was really the cause of his death eventually.

The Lispole engagement was an ambush of R.I.C. and Black and Tans in two lorries. Our party took up positions and had to wait two days for the enemy force. It became generally known around the district that we were there and there is no doubt the force from Dingle was informed of our movements. When they did come they seemed to have good knowledge of our whereabouts but we would have brought this engagement to a more successful conclusion but for the bad work of two of our scouts who did not inform us of the line of approach of the enemy, with the result that both sides found themselves in an awkward situation and had any side realised the position of the other they could have done untold harm. The one thing in our favour was the position we chose from the point of view of retreat. - This was perfect, as we broke off the engagement. We suffered one casualty here. Tommy Hawley, not crouching low enough passing a gap covered by enemy machine gun fire, was grazed on the head, a wound from which he died a few weeks later. The enemy had succeeded in capturing some of our lads, about ten, that day but we succeeded in rescuing them while the fight was still in progress. Actually, none of their arms was lost. We got a few of the

enemy rifles in the mixed up battle that it was, but we were never to learn that they suffered any casualties.

Killorglin was an attack on the R.I.C. Barracks. We also attacked the barracks at Fenit and Camp. In both these latter attacks we cut the roads, cut telephone wires, put barbed wire constructions convenient to Ballymullen Barracks in Tralee and felled trees to delay help coming from there. All these attacks were successful, the barracks being damaged to such an extent that they had to be evacuated, thus clearing each of these districts of British outposts. In Fenit the garrison surrendered and their arms were taken. In Camp they held and we had to break off the fight at dawn. At Killorglin we gave the occupants a pretty good reminder of what was to come, without, however, forcing an issue at the time. However, we subsequently subdued them at Ballymacandy.

Fenit and Camp attacks took place in 1920, Killorglin, Glenbeigh, Ballymacandy and Lispole in 1921. I have only detailed engagements of the Brigade Column I belonged to and in which I actually participated. As a Brigade Officer I was aware beforehand of the plans for engagements to be carried out by local Units apart from the Brigade Column and which, of course, had to get the sanction of Brigade.

In connection with the Lewis gun and ammunition captured at Glenbeigh and brought over to our mountain quarters at Keel, the District Inspector of the R.I.C. at Dingle panicked over it as he had visions of our column paying him a visit some time in the near future. He had the wires to Tralee and Dublin Castle all to himself for some days; we had full proof of the

state of his mind and nerves as our Intelligence in the G.P.O., Tralee, kept us well informed of all that went on. We were supplied several times a day with copies of the D.I.'s wires and Dublin Castle's reply, in code of course, which we had no difficulty in deciphering as we were at all times supplied with the code from G.H.Q. immediately it was changed by the Castle. (Plans for the attack on Dingle R.I.C. Barracks were well in hand when the Truce came; we had decided that the O.C. Dingle Battalion could no longer hold us up.) The terrible row this D.I. made with his superiors had by this time reached the House of Commons as many questions were asked there about the activities of the I.R.A. on the Dingle Peninsula. The newspapers of that time carried the news in big headlines and we can well recall the British Premier stating that in order to make any attempt to clean out this peninsula the British Government would be forced to use thousands of troops, many planes and some gunboats, but at the time they were not prepared to send them, for the simple reason that they had not got them handy at the time as practically all the troops they had were being well harassed by the I.R.A. all over the country. So the Dingle D.I. was to have many sleepless nights and uneasy days, his superiors could not come to his aid. We also knew that the British would not dare take on this task as the terrain was most unsuitable to them, the mountain range was high, extensive and dangerous; also it was shrouded in mist for practically five days out of the seven; our Column knew every glen, crevice and cliff, therefore British troops would be altogether at our mercy and we would be in a position to take a heavy toll, had they resorted to such a comb out.

At the time of the Truce, in July, 1921, I could say that the Brigade was in a more solid position than ever it was before. The nine Battalions were very well equipped as to arms and ammunition and experience. The Brigade Column had never any difficulty in finding billets and the question of clothing and food was very satisfactory. The people were very good to us in this way. Even after coming home, when the Truce was declared, we never lost touch with one another and were ready at all times to take up the fight again if necessary.

The comradeship developed during all this period is still the same down through the years and words could not describe the good feeling to-day when we meet, which we often have to do, at the final salute to some of our dear comrades in arms who were with us through all the fight in those years.

Signed: William Mullins, Capt. Q.M.
(Wm. Mullins)

Witnessed: C. Saurin LT.-COLONEL.
(C. Saurin)

Date: 9th Feby 1953.

