

W.S. 828

ORIGINAL

BUREAU OF MILITARY HISTORY 1913-21

BURO STAIRÉ MILEATA 1913-21

No. W.S. 828

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BUREAU OF MILITARY HISTORY, 1913-21.

STATEMENT BY WITNESS

DOCUMENT NO. **W.S.** 828

Witness

James Byrne,
105 Jamestown Road,
Finglas,
Co. Dublin.

Identity.

Member of I.R.B., Wishaw, Scotland, 1905 - ;
Quartermaster 2nd Scottish Brigade, 1919 - .

Subject.

Procurement of arms and ammunition,
Scotland, and their trans-shipment
to Ireland, 1919 - .

Conditions, if any, Stipulated by Witness.

Nil

File No. **S.2137**

Form B.S.M. 2

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STATEMENT BY JAMES BYRNE

105 Jamestown Road, Finglas, Co. Dublin.

I went to Scotland in the year 1904 and took up employment with Colville's Steel Works at Motherwell.

In the winter of 1905 I joined the Irish Republican Brotherhood in Wishaw about a mile and a half from Motherwell. The membership at the time was about nine. The Centre was James Canavan, who was a native of Coalisland, Co. Tyrone. We met once a month. The business transacted was not of a military nature; it merely consisted of ways and means to increase membership.

From that small membership the Irish Republican Brotherhood organisation expanded during the following years. A second Circle was formed at Wishaw and two at Motherwell; one at Hamilton, Blantyre, Mossend and Coatbridge. All these towns were within a radius of three miles from Wishaw. The organisational name for the district was Mid-Lanark. The Irish Republican Brotherhood membership for the entire area in the year 1919 would, I think, have been in the neighbourhood of 600.

On the Saturday before Easter Week 1916, I was called to an Executive meeting at London Hall, Glasgow. I was Centre for my Circle at the time. We were told at that meeting that John Mulholland, who was our representative on the Supreme Council of the Irish Republican Brotherhood, had a letter containing information regarding the date of the Rising in Dublin. John Mulholland did not turn up at the meeting and the District Centre, Mr. Canavan, announced that as Mulholland had not delivered this letter, it was now too late to send any men over from Scotland to take part in the Rising.

John Mulholland did not deliver this letter until late on Saturday. Canavan said: "If any of you people want to go

to Dublin on your own, you are free to do so, but in any case it would not be possible to get there in time". The Rising was discussed at the meeting and all present were led to believe that it was due to take place on Easter Sunday morning.

I cannot say why John Mulholland did not divulge the information he had regarding the Rising sooner. We can only assume that he did not want us to take part in it. I heard afterwards that he was totally against any military action when he attended a meeting of the Supreme Council in Dublin. Following the Rising, the Irish Republican Brotherhood meetings were held regularly and the membership continued to grow.

In January 1919, Joe Vize came over from Dublin to organise the Volunteers in the Mid-Lanark area. The Units were formed from the Irish Republican Brotherhood. A Volunteer company was formed in each town where an I.R.B. Circle existed. In all there were about nine companies formed and these nine companies made up what was known as the 2nd Battalion, Scottish Brigade.

A man by the name of Bernard Quinn, a native of Armagh, was in charge of this battalion and I became his first quartermaster. A man by the name of Doherty was appointed adjutant.

The Motherwell and Wishaw companies amalgamated for drill purposes, weekly drills were carried out in a local hall. The total strength of the battalion would have been approximately 300. The membership were, of course, residents of Ireland and, in addition, a small number were of Irish descent born in Scotland.

Joe Vize and Joe Furlong spent quite a lot of their time with us; they went back to Dublin for short periods and returned again. When the battalion was organised Joe Vize called its officers together and told them that the main function of the unit was to procure arms and ammunition and get them safely over to Ireland. I should have mentioned that the occupations of the Volunteers were mostly miners and steel workers.

When things got very active in Ireland the battalion offered to cross over to assist. Joe Vize told us, however, that he had instructions from Collins that we could do better work by remaining in Scotland and get going on supplies; that ammunition was very short in Ireland and that it was a matter of urgency to get across all we could of it.

Volunteers who were engaged in mining work were issued with a fairly liberal supply of explosives for boring purposes. The battalion headquarters staff was very well aware of this and it issued instructions to its members to secret out in small quantities all the explosives they possibly could. Quite a considerable amount of explosive material was got out in this way and it was trans-shipped from Glasgow by members of the crews of certain ships calling at that port. We had it made up in attaché cases and sent from our area to Glasgow, a distance of about twelve miles. This method of procuring explosives was never detected, although trans-shipment through the port of Glasgow did come under suspicion and supplies from our area had to be diverted to Liverpool.

As the procurement of material progressed we organised a proper chain of transportation to Liverpool - nine men from 'A' company were detailed specially for this purpose. They travelled by passenger train in turn from Motherwell to Liverpool. This train left Motherwell at 11.30 each night and did not get into Liverpool until 6 in the morning. As it was very crowded the couriers had to remain in the corridor of the train all night with their cases of material.

In addition to the explosive material we succeeded in procuring a number of rifles and revolvers and ammunition locally from ex-servicemen. These men brought home quite a number of rifles and revolvers as souvenirs on termination of the 1914-18 war and disposed of them to us at a cost of about

£3 to £3.10.0. each. Money was sent to us from Dublin for this purpose and Joe Vize appointed a committee of seven to be known as a Purchasing Committee. I was a member of this committee. I was in charge of the funds.

Negotiations for the purchase of arms were carried out by individual members of the battalion and when I was satisfied that the purchase was in order I would pay the required sum to the individual or individuals concerned. I think we must have purchased about 100 rifles by this method and a couple of hundred revolvers in addition to small quantities of rifles and revolver ammunition.

The rifles and revolvers were taken to Liverpool by members of the company in sacks. Just before the Truce, we purchased a lorry to carry our supplies to Liverpool.

In August 1919, Joe Vize organised a raid on the headquarters of the 6th Scottish Rifles Military Barracks at Hamilton. For this raid six men were selected from each of seven companies. One of our main contact men with the barracks was a shoemaker who repaired quite a lot of boots and saddlery for the military. He gave full particulars to us of where the rifles were stored and he succeeded in procuring a key that would give us access to the stores concerned.

On the night of the raid six Volunteers succeeded in getting over the wall of the military barracks and entering the stores, with the key in their possession. This was an easy matter and in about twenty minutes about 75 rifles and bayonets were handed out over the wall to the remainder of the raiding party who were ready there to take the rifles away. A lorry was standing by and the rifles were loaded on to it. The lorry travelled direct to Liverpool, a distance of about 175 miles and it was actually back in Hamilton before the military

authorities discovered their loss.

The military sent out a general search party and the whole area around the barracks was thoroughly examined, particularly large banks of clay around the mining area. Eventually they gave up the search and nothing more was heard about it. In any case suspicion was not cast on us.

Following that, information reached us that a man in Bothwell was in possession of a considerable quantity of sporting ammunition, so it was decided to raid him. About twenty men were selected for this raid. On the night in question we went in a party to this man's house. Two Volunteers were sent ahead to ensure that everything was in order before we would all enter the premises. As they drew near the house they were held up by one policeman, one of the men fired and wounded the policeman. The officer in charge of our party now decided that, in view of the shot being fired, the military, who had a post quite adjacent, might come on the scene and it might be better for us to return and not to go ahead with the raid as was planned.

The police, of course, were immediately alerted. On the way home one of our party lost his way and was arrested by the police patrol. They questioned him closely and the only excuse he gave was that he had been to a dance accompanied by another man whose name he gave. The police did not accept this explanation with the result that both he and his friend were charged for being concerned with the shooting of the policeman and were sentenced to five years' imprisonment.

Consignments of ammunition came from time to time from Hamburg to the ports of Leith and Glasgow. On one occasion I was sent down to Glasgow with a fellow Volunteer. We contacted a man in Glasgow who was a native of Sligo and he handed over to us four Gladstone bags heavily weighted with ammunition. We took these bags and their contents to

Liverpool and delivered them to Neil Kerr.

In the 2nd Battalion area in Scotland we had a number of dumps where gelignite, detonators and small arms were accumulated and stored ready for dispatch to Dublin when a favourable opportunity should arise.

We were not always able to get away ammunition and arms as we procured them. Consequently, we organised safe stores for them. I think we had seven or eight of such stores in all. Coming on to the Truce we had quite a considerable quantity of detonators, gelignite and small arms. We notified Dublin for instructions concerning them. A man by the name of D.P. Walsh was sent across to Wishaw. I met him. He told me that he wanted to see the stores where our material was located. He visited them. He decided to have a special box made and have the gelignite, detonators and small arms packed into this large box.

I introduced him to a man by the name of McGroarty, who was a carpenter. He made the box to suit Mr. Walsh's requirements and all the material in the 2nd Battalion area was collected and put into this box; it was then labelled and addressed to Wallace & Co., Carriers, North Wall, Dublin. Three Volunteers took this box to the local stationmaster and told him that it was to be dispatched to Dublin, that it was from the local foundry. There was some mix-up about the invoice. The stationmaster said that it would follow. It transpired, however, that the stationmaster was, in fact, suspicious of the box and its contents and he notified the police. They came along and opened the box, took out all its contents and filled it with bricks and sent it on to Dublin with the original label intact. I was not present when the box was packed, but I was told after my work that evening about the police raid.

The following evening word reached me from Dublin that they were aware there what had happened with regard to the ammunition box. Some time later I was told that the local

Volunteers in Dublin, who were to take over the box, were instructed to have nothing to do with it. It seems that the box lay for a considerable time at the North Wall. One of Wallace's carriers saw it lying there and, as nobody seemed to bother about it, he took it upon himself to have the box collected for delivery to the place to which it was addressed. Immediately he did so the police or military apprehended him. The only action that resulted was a thorough search of the premises of Messrs. Wallace & Co.

The 3rd Battalion of the Scottish Brigade covered the port of Leith. Most of the munitions coming from Hamburg came through this port.

The local Volunteer Company was in charge of a man by the name of Paddy Thompson, now deceased. Whenever he had stuff for shipment to Dublin through Liverpool, he would send word to my headquarters and I was usually sent to Leith to take over the stuff. The procedure was: the stuff would be located in a secondhand clothes shop owned by Paddy Gilhooley, originally a native of Roscommon. He knew me very well and I would take in my suitcase to have the stuff - which mainly consisted of revolvers, Peter the Painter type and ammunition - packed into it. If a customer was in the shop at the time he would take the case from me and put it in the window with a bill of sale attached to it. When the customer had left he would remove the case from the window and pack away guns and ammunition in it.

The place was quite safe for about twelve months, but eventually it came under suspicion and a police raid was carried out and, although about fifteen revolvers were concealed there, they were never discovered. They were got away safely afterwards.

I cannot say definitely the precise number of revolvers - automatic type - that passed through my hands, but I would

estimate them to be about twenty per week over a period of nine months.

During the Truce period we continued to send over arms and ammunition, but as far as I know none were sent during the Civil War period.

Signed: James Byrne
(James Byrne)
Date: April 13, 1953

April 13, 1953.

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

P.S.

Reference page 6, paragraph 3.

One of the three Volunteers that left the box there told the Stationmaster that the Invoice would follow. After the Volunteers left the Stationmaster got suspicious as it was not the usual way this firm sent their goods and notified the Police.

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