

W. S. 1,065

ORIGINAL

BUREAU OF MILITARY HISTORY 1913-21
BURO STAIRE MILEATA 1913-21
No. W.S. 1,065

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BUREAU OF MILITARY HISTORY, 1913-21.

STATEMENT BY WITNESS.

DOCUMENT NO. W.S. 1,065

Witness

James Coss,
10 St. Brigid's Terrace,
Fermoy,
Co. Cork.

Identity.

Intelligence Officer Fermoy Coy. I.R.A.
Batt'n. I.O. Fermoy Batt'n. later.

Subject.

Irish Volunteers, Fermoy, Co. Cork,
1917-1921.

Conditions, if any, Stipulated by Witness.

Nil

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ORIGINAL

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BUREAU OF MILITARY HISTORY 1913-21
BURO STAIRÉ MILEATA 1913-21
No. W.S. 1065

STATEMENT BY JAMES COSS,

10, St. Brigid's Terrace, Fermoy.

I was born in Dublin on July 12th 1888. My parents left Dublin while I was still an infant and I was reared at Belleville, Cappoquin, Co. Waterford.

I have no recollection that my parents were at any time connected with any of the political parties or the Irish Ireland movement during my boyhood days.

I left Cappoquin in 1911 and went to Liverpool in search of work. I remained there less than a fortnight, at the end of which period I returned to Dublin where I found work with Messrs. Callanan & Co., Haulage Contractors, Burgh Quay. I worked with this firm until the general strike in 1913. When the strike ended I was not re-employed by the firm on the grounds that they had lost a considerable amount of business due to the strike and were only taking back the employees with the longer service.

Late in 1913 I returned to Cappoquin where I found employment with the late Harry Keane (a brother of Sir John Keane, Bart.). When Harry Keane joined the British Royal Navy shortly after the outbreak of the 1914-1918 war, he moved his household to England and I was taken along to look after his car. I spent the latter portion of 1914 and up to November 1915 in London in the employment of the Keane family, but by the summer of 1915 I was being called up by the military authorities to join the British Army. I remained in my job until November, when I left and returned to Cappoquin. From my experience of Harry Keane at the time

I would like to put it on record that I'm sure he only joined the British Navy to avoid the jibes and sneers of the members of the "upper ten" circle in which he moved rather than from any love he had for the Empire. He was a good employer at that time and remained so to the end.

On my return to Cappoquin before Christmas 1915 I found employment in O'Keeffe's garage there. I remained in this job until March 1917, when I came to Fermoy and found work at Magner's Garage and Hackney car business. In the course of my work I made many contacts amongst the Volunteers in the town but did not join up for some months.

I joined the Irish Volunteers in the Sinn Féin Hall, Chapel Square, Fermoy, in October 1917. I was then employed as motor-driver by Magner's, Barrack Hill, Fermoy. There were about 60 to 70 members in the Fermoy Company at the time. The officers were:

O/C	Liam Denn
1st Lt.	Liam Lynch
2nd Lt.	Lar Condon
Adjt.	Geo. Power
Q/M	Mick Fitzgerald.

It was not too easy to get into the Volunteers at this period. Recruits were only accepted on the proposal of existing members and then only when they had been vetted by the officers. I was invited to join the Volunteers by Tom Cavanagh and George Power.

In the early stages new recruits were put through some foot drill in the fields in the vicinity of the town. Sometimes parades and drills were held in the Sinn Féin Hall. All parades and training was carried out under the Company

officers, who usually took the various sections in turn. It should be noted that at this time the full company seldom paraded as a unit. It was divided into four sections, each of which had its own particular parade ground in the district about the town.

Shortly after I joined the company the O/C (Liam Denn) was arrested for "illegal drilling". His arrest was followed a few weeks later by that of Lar Condon (2nd Lieut.) on a similar charge. Both were sentenced to terms of imprisonment in Cork Gaol, where they were detained until released following a hungerstrike sometime before Xmas 1917. The arrests led to a fresh election of officers which resulted as follows:

O/C - Liam Lynch
 1st Lt. Mick Fitzgerald
 2nd Lt. John Fanning.

The usual drilling and parades continued during 1918, in the early part of which Fermoy Battalion was formed. This reorganisation was found necessary as a result of the growing strength of the Volunteer organisation in the district, in which there were now ten companies. These companies were: Fermoy, Rathcormac, Ballynoe, Watergrasshill, Glenville, Bartlemy, Castlelyons, Kilworth, Conna and Araglen. The first officers of the battalion were:

O/C - Martin O'Keefe, Ballynoe
 Vice O/C - Lar Condon, Fermoy
 Adj.- Liam Lynch, Fermoy
 Q/M - Mick Fitzgerald, Fermoy.

This battalion now became a unit of the Cork Brigade, which now was composed of some twenty battalions spread over

the whole county.

The election of Liam Lynch and Mick Fitzgerald to the Battalion Staff led to further changes in the officer personnel in Fermoy Company. The new officers were:

O/C - John Fanning
1st Lt.- "Pa" Gallagher
2nd Lt.- Mick Sweeney.

At this stage (early 1918) the strength of the company had reached close on 120, which figure remained constant to the Truce. There was, however, a big rush of new recruits during the conscription scare in the spring and summer of 1918, but when the threat had passed the company resumed its normal strength of "old reliables". I should have mentioned that during this period all Volunteers were actively engaged in organising the political wing - Sinn Féin - which was mainly composed of the Volunteers and the members of the families.

The usual drilling and parades were carried out during 1918. In addition several raids for arms took place which resulted in the accumulation of a stock of about 30 shotguns, some hundreds of rounds of ammunition for same, as well as about half dozen .22 rifles. I think we also had some service rifles at this time. Nearly all these arms were kept in dumps in the Clondulane area. The raids were carried out under the control of the company officers, and practically all members of the company were engaged thereon at one time or another.

Several members of the company travelled to Waterford City for the general election in December 1918 to protect the Republican Party's supporters from the attacks of the

Redmondite and British ex-soldier elements who were violently opposed to the Volunteers and Sinn Féin. There was no political activity in Fermoy area where the Sinn Féin candidate, David Kent, of Bawnard House fame, was returned unopposed. I did not go to Waterford.

The success of Sinn Féin in the general election showed the Volunteers that the people were behind them and the organisation grew in strength. It was about this time that it was decided to divide the unwieldy Cork Brigade of about 20 battalions into three brigades to be numbered I, II and III.

Fermoy Battalion became a unit of Cork II Brigade which was formed on January 6th 1919. The other battalions in this brigade were: Castletownroche, Mallow, Charleville, Kanturk, Newmarket and Millstreet. The first officers of this brigade were:

O/C - Liam Lynch, Fermoy
 Vice O/C - Dan Hegarty, Mallow
 Adj. - Tom Barry, Glanworth
 Q/M - George Power, Fermoy.

The establishment of Cork II Brigade led to further changes in the staff of Fermoy Battalion. The new staff members were:

O/C - Mick Fitzgerald, Fermoy
 Vice O/C - Lar Condon, do.
 Adj. - Moss Twomey, do.
 Q/M - Con Leddy, Araglen.

Beyond the usual parades there was nothing exceptional to report at this time in the area. The rescue of Seán Hogan at Knocklong on May 13th 1919

led to some activity in dealing with the safe custody and treatment of Jim Scanlon and Ned O'Brien who were wounded in this engagement. On the evening following this engagement I met Liam Lynch who was looking for Tom Cavanagh as he wanted a car to move the wounded men. (Tom Cavanagh had a motor car hiring business at this time). As Tom Cavanagh was not available I drove the car to The Square, Fermoy, but when I reached this point we met Cavanagh who took over. The wounded men were taken on this occasion to Dr. Molan's, Conna, where they remained for about a month. I later drove them to Dan Daly's, Bushypark, Watergrasshill. On one occasion while at Dr. Molan's I drove the wounded men to Wm. Molan's, Glanworth. This was on a Sunday morning, and when we reached Glanworth I dropped Jim Scanlon and Ned O'Brien outside the church and they went into Mass. I was accompanied on this occasion by Dr. Molan and Tom Griffin, Ballynoe.

When Scanlon and O'Brien had gone into Mass I saw an R.I.C. man whom I knew well approaching. His name was Jack Barron. As I did not wish him to make contact with my passengers I drove off as he drew near and did not return to Glanworth until Mass was finished. While waiting to pick up my passengers I was again approached by Barron, who enquired in a jocosely way as to my business. I informed him that I had some passengers who were going to see some greyhounds at Reynold's outside the village. He then moved off after a few minutes and appeared to be satisfied, so I then picked up my party and proceeded to Molan's, Dunmahon, Glanworth, where we met Jim Scanlon's mother and Ned O'Brien's wife. We remained in Dunmahon until darkness had set in

and we then returned to Conna without incident.

On the occasion of the raid on the church party of British troops at the Wesleyan Church, Fermoy, on September 7th, 1919, I acted with Tom Cavanagh as a scout at The Square, with instructions to report to the attacking party if and when any additional enemy forces left the military barracks on Barrack Hill. As there was no additional military activity until the job had been successfully completed, no action was necessary by us and we carried on as ordinary civilians.

About this time I was advised by my Company O/C to avoid parading in public with the Volunteers and I was delegated to act as an Intelligence Officer. The fact that as a motor-driver I was free to move around the country enabled me to keep enemy activities over a wide area under observation. I remember that about this time I went to parade at the funeral of a Volunteer, Jerh. Fitzgerald, but due to the fact that I was an Intelligence Officer I was ordered to leave the parade by George Power, who was then Brigade Adjutant. He informed me before the others on parade that I was not a Volunteer. Later he told me in private that I would be no use as an Intelligence Officer if I was to associate myself openly with the Volunteers.

Having regard to my instructions I had now to confine myself to observing and reporting enemy activities. This I continued to do, and I don't think any activity of mine in the open could have been taken as in support of the I.R.A. until the funeral of Mick Fitzgerald in October 1920 when I acted as a member of the bodyguard in the church in Fermoy.

When arrangements were being made to capture General Lucas in June 1920 I was instructed by Con Leddy to call on Owen Curtin to request him to report to Leddy. He was required to drive one of the cars used to transport the captured officers to the place of detention.

At this time I was in contact with several workmen employed in the military barracks. Amongst them were four men who took out regular supplies of ammunition in their pockets each day up to the Truce. Some of the men were Volunteers while others were sympathisers, amongst whom was the barrack foreman of works. The activities of these men were facilitated by the procedure which prevailed at the guard-room at the barrack gate, where everybody going in was searched while those coming out were not. It was thus only a question of getting in and anybody could take out any reasonable quantity of stores. These men were: Wm. Norrison (barrack foreman of works), Dave Sinnott,

When the funeral of Mick Fitzgerald (late Battalion O/C) reached Fermoy on October 19th it was met by a huge crowd. All battalions of the I.R.A. in Cork 11 Brigade were represented, as were many of the brigades in the South. I was a member of the bodyguard in the church that night when Liam Lynch (Brigade O/C), who was in the area with the Brigade Column, came in. The coffin was opened to enable him to see his old comrade for the last time. When the coffin was opened Lynch placed his hand on Mick Fitzgerald's forehead and then withdrew. The lid was then replaced on the coffin.

On the evening of December 1st 1920 a large party of Auxiliaries arrived in Fermoy. The majority of them

were already drunk or if not were suffering from the effects of drink. They entered the Royal Hotel where they went to the bar and began to look for trouble. They pushed and jostled the customers, amongst whom was an ex-officer of the British Army named Prendergast. He was the owner of a public house in the town but it was generally known that he usually went to the Royal Hotel each night for a drink or two. Prendergast resented being pushed around by the Auxies. He informed them that he had been through the 1914-18 war as a Captain in the British Army. They replied that the Irish in the war were no d - good and that all Irishmen were the same. They then punched him round the bar, knocked him down and kicked him to death. They then took his body to the rear of the hotel and through a gateway across the road to the bank of the Blackwater. They then threw his body into the river.

I knew Prendergast well as he taught me in the Christian Brothers' Schools in Lismore, where I received my secondary education when living in Cappoquin. He was a strong supporter of the Redmondite party at the time and I don't think that he was at any time sympathetic to Sinn Féin or the Volunteer movement.

Following the murder of Prendergast the same party of Auxies set fire to three shops in the town - Dooley's, O'Keeffe's and Flavin's. These houses were adjoining the Royal Hotel. They took Dooley from his house before setting it on fire and they threw him into the river which was in flood. He was carried down the river to a flood-gate where he managed to drag himself out. He then walked along an island in the river, crossed the mill

stream and went to Fermoy hospital where he was treated. Dooley, as far as I know, had no political affiliations.

I continued my work as Intelligence Officer - observing and reporting on enemy activities and getting all possible information of any military value. Tom Cavanagh was Battalion I/O at this time. He had been appointed following the arrest of Paddy Ahern in November 1920. This was the position until late in February 1921 when Tom Cavanagh joined the Battalion Column and I was appointed Battalion I/O. Incidentally, Tom Cavanagh was not aware that he was under suspicion by the enemy until he was held up by two R.I.C. men one night about this time. They were both under the influence of drink. Having searched him thoroughly they disclosed during the course of the search that they had been watching him for some time. Cavanagh decided that night that it was time to move out, so he went off to the column and I took over his duties.

When I assumed duty as Battalion I/O I was informed by Tom Cavanagh of the names of certain contacts in the military barracks. These included Paddy Hackett and Frank Quann - two men who did trojan work in the heart of the enemy stronghold. I immediately set about reorganising the intelligence system throughout the battalion. I arranged that in each company area a number of men would be placed on intelligence work in each district, these men to report to the Company Intelligence Officer each day. The Company I/O had to furnish a weekly report to me, or should the circumstances warrant he had to report at shorter intervals. The company reports were condensed by me and passed to the Brigade Intelligence

Officer. Arrangements were made so that any information requiring urgent attention would be passed immediately to the appropriate section or unit (brigade, division or headquarters as the case may be). Amongst the information received by me from my intelligence officers in the military barracks was a copy of a file which gave particulars of the individual who gave the information to the enemy forces which led to the massacre of a number of I.R.A. men. — They were, I think, Midleton Battalion Column at Clonmult, near Midleton, in February 1921. Within 24 hours of receiving the information the spy in question had been arrested, tried and executed. His name was David Walsh.

I continued to carry on my job at Magner's. As a permit was necessary for each journey, I was in constant touch with the enemy, who, apparently, never suspected my connection with the I.R.A.

About 14 days before the Truce on July 11th, 1921, one of my I.O.s in the barracks (Paddy Hackett) took out to me the original of a report being sent by the O/C British Forces Fermoy to his Divisional H.Q. in Cork. I copied this document and my I.O. returned it to its appropriate file next morning. This report, which gave a rather detailed account of the general position in the area, stated amongst other things that owing to I.R.A. activity the only means of communication from the enemy forces in Fermoy was by air. A copy of this report was transmitted by me to Brigade H.Q. In conclusion I may say that our intelligence staff in this area were not confined solely to Irishmen, as we had members of the enemy forces working for the I.R.A. both in Moorepark Camp and in the Artillery Barracks.

In addition to the contacts in the Military Barracks I also had three intelligence officers working in the Post Office, while there were also two others at the railway station. The men in the Post Office were: Jack Higgins (at the time a Post Office clerk and now Postmaster Fermoy), Dan Sweeney and another postman. The men at the railway station were: Wm. Wagner and John Joe Barry.

I have no recollection of having at any time held the key of any enemy codes. All messages which passed through the Post Office in code were always forwarded immediately to Battalion H.Q. where they were decoded.

My rank at the Truce - I.O. Fermoy Battalion.

The strength of the battalion was about 700.

Signed:

Seamus MacCps
(Seamus MacCps)

Date:

19th January 1955
19th January, 1955.

Witness:

P. O'Donnell.
(P. O'Donnell)
(Investigator)

