

W.S. 1,085

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BUREAU OF MILITARY HISTORY 1913-21
BURO STAIRS MILITAI 1913-21
No. W.S. 1085

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BUREAU OF MILITARY HISTORY, 1913-21

STATEMENT BY WITNESS.

DOCUMENT NO. W.S. 1,085

Witness

Sean Whelan,
St. Senan's,
Enniscorthy,
Co. Wexford.

Identity.

Q.M. North Wexford Brigade;
O.C. No.1 Flying Column North Wexford Brigade.

Subject.

Shooting (execution) of District Inspector
Lee Wilson by I.R.A. June 1920.

Conditions, if any, Stipulated by Witness.

Nil

File No. S:2406.

Form B S M 2

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Statement by Seán Whelan,

St. Senan's, Enniscorthy, Co. Wexford.

Shooting of District Inspector Lee Wilson:

I remember the day well - though I have forgotten the date. It was an evening in June 1920. I was crossing the bridge in Enniscorthy on my usual evening visit to "Antwerp" (Volunteer Headquarters) in Mary St. when I met Eamon Balfe. Eamon was O/C 1st Battalion and I was Captain of 'A' Company at the time. He stopped me and whispered the very important news that I had been chosen with two others, Mick Sinnott (brother of T.D. Sinnott) and Joe McMahon, a native of Kilmaley, Co. Clare, employed at the time as a coach builder at Breen's Rock Factory, Enniscorthy, (Joe died three months later as a result of injuries received when experimenting with "the Tailor Bomb" in Co. Cavan) to accompany two G.H.Q. officers on a special job.

The presence of those two officers - Frank Thornton (New Ireland Assurance Company) and Liam Tobin - in our area meant there was something special on the political menu. I knew I was being honoured when I was asked to accompany those men, but I was nervous and felt much afraid; no, not, I hasten to add, afraid for my own personal safety, but afraid I would let down those who placed their trust in me.

Though I had been under fire a few times I guessed this was going to be different, and it was too; but later that evening when I met those four brave men, felt their confidence and heard their plans for the execution of District Inspector Lee Wilson, Royal Irish Constabulary, Gorey, all my fears vanished.

I did not sleep much that night and was up early next morning to see Joe Goodall, the driver of a Ford hackney car that was jointly owned by Jim Cullen, O/C 2nd Battalion, and T.D. Sinnott, O/C North Wexford Brigade. This was the car that was to be used on the job. Joe handed over the keys of the car and garage and Mick Sinnott soon had her tank filled with good British petrol, and in less than half an hour we were on our way to keep a date with death at Gorey.

On the way to the rendezvous I was told that Wilson was an officer in the English Army during the 1914-18 war and was in charge of some prisoners, one of whom was Tom Clarke (one of the signatories to the 1916 proclamation) after the insurrection in Dublin - 1916. It was for something he ordered or allowed his troops to do to the person of Tom Clarke that night as he lay asleep on the grass in the Rotunda Gardens that he was now going to pay for with his life.

We arrived in Gorey in good time to see the 9.35 a.m. train steaming into the station. It was the custom of the D.I. to visit this train each morning accompanied by a Sergeant from the local R.I.C. barrack, where he collected his own special mail-bag, got the morning paper on his way back through the town and was regularly seen scanning its headlines as he walked to his house, a fairly big country house surrounded by trees and standing well back from the road about a quarter of a mile on the south side of Gorey. The Sergeant sometimes went the whole way home with him but usually stood on the bridge and kept a watchful eye on him as he went down the hill to his home a few hundred yards away. Sometimes it would happen that the

D.I. would be suffering from a "hangover" and would lie on in bed recovering from its effects. In that case the Sergeant would collect the mails and morning paper and fetch them along to the D.I's. home. Unfortunately (for us) this was one of his "hangover" mornings. From our position on the bridge we could see the Sergeant standing alone on the platform, so we folded our tents like the Arabs and silently stole away to laze on the strand at Courtown Harbour. This picturesque seaside resort is about two miles from Gorey and much frequented by visitors.

We were lying around chatting and enjoying the warm summer sunshine when the sound of a Crossley tender interrupted the conversation. About forty yards away it pulled up outside a pub. There were eight or nine R.I.C. men seated back to back on a long form that was placed lengthwise along the centre of the tender. They did not get out but the cab door opened and out jumped our man the Inspector. He was in uniform. He did not look our way but hopped into the pub, delayed a moment and all were gone as suddenly as they came.

Next morning we were again at our post on the bridge overlooking the railway station waiting for the 9.35 from Dublin. The Sergeant was at his post before us but the link that connected him with us was missing. We had a hurried council of war and decided to do a bit of cruising round Gorey town in the hope of meeting Wilson. We met him about midday but under circumstances favourable to the enemy. We were driving down the main street when a car just like our own passed. Wilson was seated beside the driver. There were two or three other R.I.C. men in the back. We all laughed when Thornton said "The armed forces

of the two governments pass each other in the street without a word of greeting". We went on to Courtown and had lunch there.

Coming back to Gorey a few hours later we met the Inspector and his wife driving a pony and trap to Courtown. He was in civilian dress. Tobin was the first to recognise him. Then I heard him say to Sinnott not to stop as he had orders not to shoot him in the presence of his wife. Fate was certainly being kind to this tyrant. However, to-morrow is another day and it might be third day lucky for us!

Thornton and Tobin have decided that if we don't get him to-morrow they must return to Dublin, but McMahon, Sinnott and myself will remain in Gorey until we pay back the debt incurred in the Rotunda Gardens 1916.

On the third morning of our date with death we were at our post on the bridge earlier than usual. There were very few people waiting for the 9.35 from Dublin. The Inspector and his escort hadn't arrived yet, but just when we were giving up hope of seeing either of them they walked on to the platform. The Inspector was in civvies. So this was it at last! Now to action stations.

The bridge where we were standing was the highest point on the long stretch of road known locally as the Ballycanew road. The road slopes away on either side of the bridge for about two hundred yards. On one side there is a low wall and a footpath. It is along this path that the Inspector will walk on his way home. It was decided to attack him at a point about two hundred yards from the bridge. This will place the Sergeant (if he decides to part company

with the D.I. at the bridge) four hundred yards from the scene of the execution.

We drove to this point and stopped the car at the edge of the footpath. Thornton and myself took up a position in front of the car. We were leaning over the radiator; the bonnet of the car was up and we were looking for an imaginary fault in the engine. We were hidden from view of anyone approaching from the bridge though we had a good view through the windscreen and the window in the back of the car. Tobin was on the road side of the car and standing close in to its side. Sinnott was seated at the wheel. McMahon sat crouched in the back, a kind of reserve in case of a surprise. We were "all set" when the Sergeant's cap (he was taller than the Inspector) appeared on the horizon. They appeared to be coming up out of a hole in the ground as they walked up the incline to the bridge where they chatted for a moment. The Sergeant saluted as they parted company, the Sergeant back to barracks and the Inspector back from whence he came. He opened his newspaper and was reading its headlines as he walked towards the place of execution. (I wonder if he was the first to read a newspaper as he walked to his death). A woman dressed in black had now appeared on the bridge. She was about thirty or forty yards behind Wilson. She was a young woman and was walking much faster than the Inspector. Thornton whispered that the Inspector would reach the ambush position first, and that's how it worked out. He got there first and when he lifted his eyes from the paper as he was passing our car Thornton and myself fired at point blank range. He dropped the mail-bag and newspaper, covered his head with his hands and started to run towards his house. We blazed away at him as he ran. Tobin was firing from his

position on the road. Joe McMahon jumped out of the car and fired as he ran along the footpath. When the Inspector fell dead, about fifteen or twenty yards from our car, he must have been hit at least a dozen times, but just to make sure we hit him again as he lay stretched full length on the footpath. We left him, his mails and gun to show it was an execution and not a hold-up.

As we reloaded our guns I looked back to see what happened to the woman in black and saw her coiled up on the footpath like a dog asleep on a door mat oblivious of the whole affair. We collected the Inspector's morning paper - it was The Irish Independent. Thornton started to sing "The Constitutional Movement must go on and on and on for evermore". We all joined in the chorus as we sped away to the safety of the home of the brothers Pat, Jim and Tom Doyle at Coolree, Ballindaggin, Enniscorthy.

Signed: Sean Whelan

(One time Capt. 'A' Coy., Q/M North Wexford Brigade, O/C Flying Column and Q/M 3rd Eastern Division).
(Sean Whelan)

Date: 3rd February 1955

Witness: Sean Brennan Lieut. Col.

(Sean Brennan)
Investigator.

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