

W. S. 1,090

ORIGINAL

BUREAU OF MILITARY HISTORY 1913-21
BURO STAIRÉ M'LEATA 1913-21
NO. W.S. 1,090

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BUREAU OF MILITARY HISTORY, 1913-21.

STATEMENT BY WITNESS.

DOCUMENT NO. W.S. 1,090.....

Witness

Sean Hennessy,
Ballynoe,
Tallow,
Co. Waterford.

Identity.

Lieut. Ballynoe Company Fermoy Batt'n.
I.R.A.

Subject.

Ballynoe Company Fermoy Battalion
Co. Cork, 1914-1921.

Conditions, if any, Stipulated by Witness.

Nil

File No. S. 2392.....

ORIGINAL

BUREAU OF MILITARY HISTORY 1938-1990
BUREAU STAIRS MILITARY 1913-21
No. W.S. 1090

STATEMENT BY SEÁN HENNESSY

Ballynoe, Tallow, Co. Waterford

I was born in Ballynoe, Co. Cork, in November 1894.
My father was a baker by trade.

My grandfather on my mother's side was connected with the Fenian movement in Midleton area. During my early days I can recollect that my parents were supporters of the O'Brienite Party.

I attended school at Ballynoe National School until I was about 16 years of age when I went to serve my time at the bakery business with my father who had a bakery business in Ballynoe.

The first company of the Irish Volunteers was formed in Ballynoe in the summer of 1914 and I was one of the pioneer members. Amongst the other early members were Richard O'Keefe, Martin O'Keefe and the O'Mahoney brothers. The first company captain was Peter O'Neill. The company was controlled by a committee composed of representatives of the political parties, mainly A.O.H. The strength of the company was about 40. The only type of drill carried out was ordinary foot-drill and, later on, arms drill with wooden guns.

Following the outbreak of the 1914-18 war in August 1914, the company was taken on a route march to Curraglass where they were put through some drill by an ex-captain of the British army (Captain Carew) at Lisnabrin House. When the parade was dismissed at Lisnabrin Dick O'Keefe, Martin O'Keefe and I decided to sever our connection with the organisation, as we were of the opinion that we were being led into the British army. We did not parade with the company for the return march to Ballynoe.

During the week following this incident, we were approached by the company captain, (Peter O'Neill). He

appealed to us to rejoin the unit and not to create a split. We informed him that the split would come sooner or later and it was just as well to have it then. However, we agreed to attend a general meeting in the local hall and to hear the views of the other members. When we went to the hall one night at the end of that week I saw displayed there a poster signed by Eoin MacNeill which said:

"IRISHMEN UNDER WHICH BANNER ARE YOU GOING TO FIGHT?

THE BLOOD-STAINED BANNER OF ENGLAND
or
YOUR OWN IMMORTAL BANNER OF GREEN"

When we entered the hall this poster was taken down by Patrick O'Mahoney who was the head man in the A.O.H. in the district.

While in the hall the three of us (Dick O'Keefe, Martin O'Keefe and Sean Hennessy) were approached by Peter O'Neill (company captain). He informed us that he intended to propose a vote of confidence in John Redmond when the full meeting assembled. I told him that I would propose a vote of confidence in Eoin MacNeill, and Dick O'Keefe stated that he would second my proposal. O'Neill then said that he would not proceed with his proposal for a vote of confidence in John Redmond. We left the meeting at this stage. This was the last meeting held by the Volunteer company which slowly faded out.

There was no further attempt to organise a Volunteer unit in the area till late in 1915 when I heard from some men from the neighbouring area of Clonmult that Terry McSwiney Tom Kent and David Kent were to hold a meeting to organise an Irish Volunteer unit there. With Dick O'Keefe I attended this meeting and we invited the organisers to come to Ballynoe to form a company there.

Early in January 1916 Terry McSwiney, Tom, David and Richard Kent came to Ballynoe to address a meeting.

Tom Kent and Terry McSwiney spoke at the meeting. During the course of his address Terry McSwiney was heckled by one of the A.O.H. supporters as to what the Irish Volunteers had to fight with. From a holster on his belt Terry McSwiney produced an automatic pistol, saying at the same time: "This contains a bullet that will kill at a half mile and there are plenty more where this came from". At this meeting I took the names of 60 men who were prepared to join the company.

Following the meeting Terry McSwiney and Tom Kent were arrested for the first time. They were charged with making seditious speeches, and the case was heard in the Police Office, Cornmarket St., Cork, before a bench of magistrates. One of the magistrates was Sir Edward Fitzgerald. The case was really turned into a farce as all the magistrates had been approached by the Volunteers in Cork and told what to do. I was present on the occasion of the trial and I recollect that, following the decision of the Court to fine the defendants 1/- each, one of the Cork officers informed me that when Sir Edward Fitzgerald was approached his reply was: "Always go with the waves and you'll never drown".

Tom Kent and Terry McSwiney refused to pay the fines, but I think that the fines were paid by Claude Chevasse. When the case was over all members of the public present stood up and sang "God save Ireland".

When the new unit in Ballynoe got under weigh it had an initial membership of about 30. The officers were:- O/C. Martin O'Keefe; 1st Lieutenant, Dick O'Keefe; and 2nd Lieutenant, Sean Hennessy (witness).

Other pioneer members of this unit were Jim Fitzgerald, John and William Rumley, Joe Hogan, Tim Hurley, David O'Sullivan, Peter and James O'Callaghan.

The first arms held by the company were obtained by me

from Sean Murphy (Adjutant, Cork Brigade) in February 1916. These arms were:- three .32 revolvers. A considerable number of the members, who were mainly farmers, had shotguns.

The usual footdrill was carried out by the company under its own officers. About the middle of February 1916 a joint parade was held with the members of the Clonmult and Dungourney companies. This parade was in charge of Pat Higgins and Bob Langford of Cork who put the Volunteers on parade through their first bout of Field Drill. The usual drilling and training was carried out by the unit up to Easter 1916.

On Good Friday 1916, Fred Murray, Cork, delivered to me a dispatch from the Brigade O/C. Tomás McCurtain. The dispatch stated that all members of the unit should attend at the Volunteer Hall, Sheares St. Cork, on Easter Saturday evening for 'brigade exercises'. The following members of the unit proceeded to Cork in accordance with this order: Sean Hennessy, Tim Hurley, Martin O'Keefe, David O'Sullivan and Peter O'Callaghan. The first three were armed with .32 revolvers with about 30 rounds of ammunition each while the other pair had shotguns and a supply of cartridges. This party marched to Mogeely railway station (10 miles) where they met the members of the Clonmult and Dungourney companies to the number of about 40. The combined body left by train for Cork about 7 p.m. When we reached Cork we marched to the Hall in Sheares St. where we billeted for the night. Guards were posted at front and side of Hall.

The small muster from Ballynoe can be attributed to the short time between the receipt of the mobilisation order late on Friday and the time fixed for mobilisation, and also to the wide area over which the members were scattered, as well as the fact that many of them could not get away from their work at short notice. Most of them had no idea that the situation was so serious.

While on guard duty between 3 a.m. and 5 a.m. on the morning of Easter Sunday 1916, I admitted Sean O'Sullivan, Cork, to the Hall. The password during my spell of guard duty was 'Liberty'. When Sean O'Sullivan had entered the Hall I was approached by Mick Leahy, Cobh, who was captain of the guard. He instructed me to shoot and shoot to kill should anybody try to approach the Hall over a wall at the rere.

Sometime about 10 a.m. on Easter Sunday, the Volunteers billeted in the Volunteer Hall paraded with the representatives of the Cork City units at Sheares St. The assembled body marched to the Macroom Station where they boarded a train for Crookstown. The whole parade must have numbered about 300 men. When we reached Crookstown we detrained and formed into column of route with a dvance and rear guards to march to Macroom. The parade was in charge of Sean O'Sullivan.

When a short distance from Crookstown the parade was met by a party in a motor car including, I think, Tomás McCurtain and Terry McSwiney. After a short delay the parade continued on to Macroom and on the way was joined by several small parties from the local units in the area. The parade was dismissed when we reached Macroom and we were ordered to reassemble at the railway station about 9 p.m. We returned to Cork by train and marched through the city to the billet at Sheares St. Hall. With my Ballynoe comrades I billeted there on Easter Sunday night. About 11 a.m. on Easter Monday we were instructed to return home. We travelled by train to Mogeely and walked to Ballynoe.

We did not hear about the Rising in Dublin until late in the evening of Easter Monday when we had reached home. We remained on the alert during the week, but got no

further instructions. I recollect that, during Easter Week, David Kent visited us on at least two occasions to ascertain if we had any news from Cork, or whether we knew what Cork were going to do.

There was no change in the position in Ballynoe area and no arrests were made following Easter Week.

In the autumn of 1916 I attended a meeting to reorganise the Volunteers which was held in the Grianán, Queen Street, Cork. This meeting was presided over by Seán O'Sullivan and was attended by about two hundred people. The Chairman explained at this meeting that there was a possibility that the Volunteers might never be able to operate openly again. It was suggested that any of those present who desired should join the Irish Republican Brotherhood. I joined the I.R.B. on the occasion of this meeting. *at a private session later that evening.* I do not know who administered the oath to me. Martin O'Keefe, who attended this meeting with me, also joined the I.R.B. on this occasion.

Late in 1916 and early in 1917, the Ballynoe unit was reorganised. The strength remained constant at about thirty as before 1916. The members personnel was something the same. The officers of the reorganised unit were:-

O/C - Martin O'Keefe.
 1st Lieut. - Sean Hennessey.
 2nd Lieut. - Tom Griffin.

During 1917 the unit was mainly engaged on the usual drill and parades which were held in the open. At this period the Company O/C was arrested for illegal drilling. He was detained in Cork Gaol for some short time but, due to some hitch in the procedure for dealing with his case, he was released without being sentenced.

When the O/C was arrested, I took charge of the Company. Following a public parade in the village, I was arrested in November, 1917. I was detained in Cork Gaol with a number of other political prisoners, pending trial. At this time, it was customary to put prisoners, who had been tried and sentenced, on prison diet and those prisoners were usually transferred to Mountjoy Prison, Dublin. The persons in Cork at this time had elected Tomás MacCurtain as O/C. Word was received from Mountjoy that the prisoners there were going on hunger-strike as a protest against prison conditions and demanding political treatment. The O/C (Tomás MacCurtain) called a general meeting of the prisoners in Cork Gaol and proposed that we should go on hunger-strike in sympathy with the men in Mountjoy. He stated that anyone, who did not wish to join the strike, need not do so. The decision to strike was unanimous. All prisoners took part in a strike which was terminated by our release after about five days.

I was again arrested within about a fortnight with three others (Tom Griffin, Dick O'Keefe and William Rumley). We were charged with unlawful assembly on the occasion of the date in respect of which I had already been charged with illegal drilling. We were brought before Resident Magistrate Hardy in Fermoy. We were each sentenced to two months imprisonment and were taken to Cork Gaol. We decided to go on hunger-strike immediately and did so. We were released under the "Cat and Mouse" Act after about five days.

It was now the end of 1917 and there was no great change in the position in the area. The Volunteers continued to drill and parade. I should have mentioned earlier that the Volunteers in general in the district took

an active part in organising the political wing of the Republican movement - Sinn Féin. This latter organisation was mainly composed of Volunteers and the member of their families.

In January, 1918, the Volunteer organisation in the area underwent a change. It was at this time that the battalion organisation was introduced. The various units had, up to now, been treated as independent units of Cork Brigade. A parade of the following companies in the area was held at Castlelyons about the middle of January, 1918: Fermoy, Castlelyons, Ballynoe, Watergrasshill, Glenville, Araglin and Kilworth. Following the parade, a meeting was held at Kent's, Bawnard House, at which Tomás MacCurtain presided. It was decided to form the aforementioned companies into the Fermoy Battalion, Irish Volunteers. The Ballynoe Company was represented at this meeting by the Company officers (Martin O'Keeffe, O/C, Seán Hennessey, 1st Lieutenant, and Tom Griffin, 2nd Lieutenant). The other companies in the battalion were represented as follows:-

Watergrasshill	- Tom Connors.
Glenville	- Denis Hickey.
Castlelyons	- David Kent.
Fermoy	- Liam Denn.
Araglin	- Con Leddy.
Kilworth	- Batt Joyce.

The first officers of the Fermoy Battalion were:-

O/C	- Liam Denn, Fermoy.
Vice O/C	- Martin O'Keeffe, Ballynoe.
Adjutant	- Liam Lynch, Fermoy.
Quartermaster	- George Power, Fermoy.

All these officers were elected to their positions.

When conscription was threatened in the spring of

of 1918, there was a small increase in membership. The strength would have reached about forty. At this time, I was ordered by the Battalion O/C to go on the run, as was Martin O'Keeffe. We were ordered to evade arrest at all costs. It was about this time that a bomb factory was established in the area at Dave Higgins, Ballylegane, Ballynoe. This factory was later moved to Patrick Mulcahy's, Ballycullane, Ballynoe. The factory was staffed by witness (Seán Hennessey), Tom Griffin, Martin O'Keeffe and Paddy Bulman (Fermoy). We received instructions on the manufacture of bombs and explosives from Fr. Tom Roche (a native of Castletownroche) who was a professor in St. Colman's College, Fermoy.

The bombs were made by filling paint tins - both large and small - with a mixture of cement and scrap steel, with two quarter-inch bolts set in the cement to enable the cover to be bolted on. A space was available in the centre for a stick of gelignite, detonated and fused. The fuse, which protruded through a hole in the centre of the cover, was about three inches in length. The larger bombs contained two or three sticks of gelignite, similarly detonated according to size. We also manufactured a number of mines in this factory. The mines were made by packing the centre of the cast-iron box of a cartwheel with gelignite and paper wads. The openings at each end of the box were closed by steel plates held in position by a three-quarter inch bolt which ran right through the centre of the box. Gun-powder was made from three parts sulphate of potassium, two parts nitre and one part refined charcoal. Supplies of sulphate of potassium were usually obtained from Seán French who was a chemist at Lesters, Cork.

The other ingredients were readily available at most chemists. At this factory we also loaded cartridges with buckshot - five grains to the cartridge - the sealing wad in the cartridge being one-quarter inch of a tallow candle.

During the bye-election in Waterford in March, 1918, I travelled there in company with Martin O'Keefe and about six other members of the Company, to help to keep order and to protect the Republican supporters from the attacks of the Redmondite and "separation women" (wives of British soldiers) factions. During the remainder of 1918, as well as being engaged in the bomb factory, I took part in the training of the local company and in a few raids for arms, in which shotguns were taken. Amongst those who took part in the arms raids were: Joe Hogan, Tom Griffin, Martin O'Keefe, and Pat Leahy.

There was no change in the position - normal training activities being carried on - until February, 1919, when, while still on the run, I contracted double pneumonia. As a result, I was unable to take an active part in army activities for about eighteen months. It was now the autumn of 1920.

When I resumed my army activities, I joined the company as an I.R.A. man. During my prolonged illness, the company had been reorganised and the officers, on my resumption of duty, were:-

O/C	- Jack O'Connell
1st Lieut.	- Pat Leahy
2nd Lieut.	- Pat O'Sullivan.

Between the date of my re-joining the unit and the day of my arrest in a round-up on January 17th, 1921, I was engaged mainly in doing outpost and guard duty for the

flying column (battalion) when in the area, and also in maintaining dumps and keeping the contents in good condition. I also acted as despatch rider as and when required. One of the most effective dumps we had in the area was situated under the floor of the local Protestant church.

I was taken prisoner with twenty-three others, including David Kent, Bawnard House, Castlelyons, on January 17th, 1921, when a large force of British military encircled a considerable portion of the district. We were all marched to Fermoy where we were placed in the new barracks. We were later removed to Kilworth where we were detained until early in March, when we were removed to Spike Island. On July 11th, 1921, I was removed with about sixty other internees to Bere Island where I remained until released, following the signing of the Treaty in December, 1921.

I held no rank at the Truce.

The strength at the Truce was about thirty.

SIGNED: Sean Hennessy

DATE: 9th February 1955.

(Sean Hennessy)

9th February 1955.

WITNESS: _____

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