

W.S. 1,382
ORIGINAL

BUREAU OF MILITARY HISTORY 1913-21

BURO STAIRÉ MILEATA 1913-21

No. W.S. 1382

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BUREAU OF MILITARY HISTORY, 1913-21.

STATEMENT BY WITNESS.

DOCUMENT NO. W.S. 1,382.....

Witness

Lieut.-Col. Denis Houston,

Custume Barracks,

Athlone,

Co. Westmeath.

Identity.

Lieut. 'A' Company 1st Battalion

No. 1 Brigade 1st Northern Division;

Later I.O. No. 1 Brigade do.

Subject.

'A' Company (Dungloe Co. Donegal)

Irish Volunteer activities,

1917-1921.

Conditions, if any, Stipulated by Witness.

Nil

File No. S.2708.....

Form B.S.M. 2

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STATEMENT BY LIEUTENANT COLONEL DENIS HOUSTON,

Custume Barracks, Athlone.

I was born at Tubberkeen, Dungloe, Co. Donegal, on 20th December, 1900. My mother died at my birth and I was taken and reared by my aunts and uncles at Meenmore, Dungloe. I received my early education at Dungloe National School. My teacher was the late Hugh Doherty, who represented the constituency in Dáil Éireann after retiring from the teaching profession. He impressed me as a man with high national ideals who very much resented British rule in Ireland, and when teaching Irish history to the boys in the senior grade he told us boys that it was our duty to resist and break that rule. I attribute to a great extent my national outlook and my activities a few years later to his instruction in Irish history.

I had great admiration for the men who participated in the Rebellion of Easter Week, 1916, especially for a great friend of mine, Joseph Sweeney (now Major General). A number of young men of my age were also very enthusiastic about Sinn Féin and the Irish Volunteers. At that time we had a fife and drum band in the locality, of which I was a member. The normal coloured flag to lead a band at that time was green, but we changed our flag to one of green, white and gold, which gave rise to varying comments at the time.

In August, 1917, a cousin of mine, Mr. Patrick Sweeney of Cruckamore, Dungloe, told me that there was a secret national society being formed in Dungloe

called the Irish Republican Brotherhood. He asked me would I be interested and would I like to join. I was delighted and considered it an honour to be accepted as a member. Some short time afterwards, about the middle of August, 1917, he asked me to accompany him to a field outside Dungloe where we were to meet an organiser of the I.R.B. I went with him to the meeting, at which I met Mr. Patrick Healy, brother of Cahir Healy. Patrick Healy was then a shop assistant in Messrs. Sweeneys, Dungloe. He, as far as I can now remember, was then President of the local circle of the I.R.B. Amongst those present were Mr. Patrick Breslin, now District Court Clerk for County Longford, Mr. Anthony McGinley, Creeslough, Co. Donegal. Breslin, McGinley and Healy were all shop assistants in Sweeney's stores at the time. Others present were: Seamus McCole, later a Commandant in the National Army, now retired and living at Shannonhill House, Portumna, Co. Galway, and Patrick O'Donnell of Sheskinarone, Dungloe. I took the oath there and was then enrolled a member of the I.R.B. I then learned that it was necessary for me to be recommended and accepted before being invited to attend the meeting. My cousin had already recommended me. The aims and objects of the organisation were then explained to me, which were: to organise a fighting force, to procure arms by every means in our power, and to use physical force when the opportunity arose to secure the freedom of Ireland from British rule. I was quite prepared to abide by the rules of the organisation and carry out all instructions issued to me.

I made my first effort to collect arms a short time later by raiding the home of a Mr. Samuel Hanlon, a

retired Petty Sessions Clerk who lived in my locality. On this raid I was accompanied by Mr. Frank O'Donnell, Meenmore, Dungloe, who is now resident in the U.S.A. O'Donnell was not a member of the I.R.B. but was a member of the Volunteers just then organised. We raided the house at night when Mr. Hanlon was absent. We got one .22 rifle, on which, at that period, we set great value.

In the end of 1917 the I.R.B. organised a Sinn Féin Club and a company of the Volunteers in Dungloe district. The company was known as the Dungloe Company. There were no battalions or brigades organised then. I assisted in the organisation of Sinn Féin Clubs and Volunteer companies in the Gweedore and The Rosses districts.

In these districts the Volunteer organisation was now going well. Weekly parades were well attended and the members received instruction in the use of arms, although the facilities in this respect were very limited. Prior to the general election of 1918 their main efforts were devoted to preparations for that event, as it was very important for us to secure the election of the Sinn Féin candidate. This included checking voters' register, organisation, manning polling booths, canvassing voters and ensuring that all our supporters got to the polling booth. Joseph Sweeney was selected as the Sinn Féin candidate for the West Donegal constituency and was eventually elected by an overwhelming majority.

Early in 1918, as a result of an attempt by the British Government to enforce conscription in Ireland, which was opposed by the Church and people, young and old, who were prepared to resist any such attempt by every means at their disposal, a large number flocked into the ranks of the Volunteers. When the conscription scare passed and it was evident that the British had decided to abandon the attempt to enforce it, a number of these men left the Volunteer rank but the stalwarts remained to the end.

Towards the end of 1918, as a result of a visit to the area by Ernie O'Malley, who was sent down by Volunteer G.H.Q. as an organiser, the Volunteers were organised on a battalion and brigade basis. The West Donegal Brigade was now organised and comprised three battalions, one battalion in The Rosses, one in Gweedore and one in Creeslough. The brigade was commanded by Joseph Sweeney. I was then appointed an officer in the Dungloe Company in The Rosses Battalion.

The first operation for which I was detailed was a short time before the 17th March, 1918. I was one of a party detailed by Major General Sweeney to proceed to Kincasslagh Road railway station for the purpose of holding up a train there. The information was that the train was to travel from Derry to Burtonport and would be carrying gelignite under an R.I.C. escort. The train was due to arrive at 22.00 hours. We received our orders at 19.00 hours, which did not give much time to mobilise and make plans for the job. We arrived at the station in good time. Each member of our party had a special task assigned to him. Some were to deal

with the R.I.C. escort, others to remove the gelignite. My task was to hold up the engine-driver. Strangely enough, he happened to be my uncle-in-law. We all wore masks, as we were not "on the run" at that time and we did not want the risk of being identified later. All our preparations were futile as there was no gelignite on the train and, consequently, no R.I.C. escort. Seamus McCole was in charge of the raiding party. Other Volunteers present were: Patrick Breslin, George Meehan (deceased), Frank O'Donnell, Anthony McGinley, Patrick O'Donnell and Patrick McCole (deceased), together with some others whose names I cannot now recall.

There was a general order issued at Easter, 1919, to destroy all evacuated R.I.C. barracks. I had orders to take a party of Volunteers and destroy the R.I.C. barracks at Lettermacaward, which order was duly carried out. Assisting me in this operation were Captain Philip Boyle, Marameehan, Daniel Sweeney, Cruckamore, who is now a civil servant in the Irish Land Commission, and James Boyle.

On the night of the 10th December, 1919, two Volunteers were arrested in Dungloe, the charge being - selling Dáil Éireann bonds. They were detained overnight in the local R.I.C. barracks. Various plans were discussed that night for their rescue, but each had to be discarded as the risk of the prisoners being killed or seriously injured was too great. The prisoners were conveyed by rail on the following morning to Derry jail under an R.I.C. escort. General Joe Sweeney held a conference with some of his officers that day and it was decided to attack the escort on its return from Derry.

I might mention that at this time we had very little activity beyond routine training and organising. We were all in agreement that the time had now come to do some real fighting. It was ascertained that the R.I.C. escort would return by the last train from Derry on the night of 12th December, 1919. Plans were made for the attack and the following estimate of the situation was made and arrangements decided upon to deal with whatever situation might arise. The position was as follows:

- (a) The R.I.C. could leave the train at Crolly railway station.
- (b) They could get off the train at Kincasslagh Road station.
- (c) They could get off at Dungloe Road station.
- (d) They could travel to the terminus at Burtonport.

Scouts were sent out to discover and report back when they knew the station where the R.I.C. were leaving the train. In this work a Volunteer motor owner named John Gorman played an important part. He used his car to find out if they had got off at Crolly or Kincasslagh Road. With the car he was in a position to travel from one station to another and still have time to get to the mobilisation point. A cyclist was detailed to watch Dungloe Road station. It was at this station that the R.I.C. eventually alighted. The cyclist got back with this information in good time as the R.I.C. were returning on foot.

We were now in position and ready to carry out the ambush. As far as I can remember, the following is the number and type of arms in our possession for the attack: one Lee Enfield rifle, one double barrelled shotgun, one parabellum pistol (my property) and one

Colt.450. The night was inky dark but we were in a position slightly below the level of the road which gave us an opportunity of getting a vague outline of any person coming into the ambush position. Eventually we were able to distinguish the R.I.C. as they walked into the ambush position. Fire was opened and the engagement was short. When the R.I.C. got down it was impossible to see them. One R.I.C. sergeant was severely wounded and eventually lost his leg. Some one or two constables were peppered with shot. I was present in a shop in Dungloe the following day when District Inspector Wallace came in and showed the shopkeeper where some of the pellets had lodged in his coat collar. He described it as "a blackguardly attack on himself and his men". I sympathised with him and congratulated him on his escape.

The ambush had rather an amusing sequel. At that period the A.O.H. considered themselves the real nationalist organisation and looked on the members of Sinn Féin Clubs as usurpers and upstarts; consequently a good deal of antagonism existed between the two organisations. On the Sunday prior to the ambush the local Sinn Féin Club, of which I was then secretary, passed a resolution that no member of that club should attend or support any function sponsored by the A.O.H. Now immediately after the ambush we considered it necessary to put in an appearance in a public place at the earliest moment so as to establish an alibi, if necessary. A dance in the local hall seemed to us to be the ideal place for us. This dance was sponsored by the A.O.H. and there we repaired with all haste. It was while attending the dance that I was informed that

the R.I.C. were looking for the local doctor, so I knew some of our shots had found a target. On the following Sunday, at a further meeting of the Sinn Féin Club, we were severely censured for attending the dance. We were obliged to sit and listen as we could not explain the reason for our attendance at the dance. The following is a list of names of the Volunteers taking part in the ambush: Major General Joe Sweeney, i/c, Barney (brother of General Sweeney), Commandant Seamus McCole, his brother Patrick (deceased), John Gorman, John O'Donnell, Patrick Breslin, Dan Sweeney, Cruckamore, Frank O'Donnell, George Meehan (deceased), Patrick O'Donnell and myself.

Early in 1919, while proceeding from my home to the village of Dungloe I was accosted by D.I. Wallace and four constables. They stopped and asked me was I Denis Houston. I told them I was. The D.I. then asked me if I was the secretary of the local Sinn Féin Club. I had no hesitation in telling him that I was, as I felt quite proud of the fact. He then told me that he had orders to raid my home for documents pertaining to the Sinn Féin Club, and explained that, due to his recent arrival in the area, it might be thought that he was being aggressive and went on to say that orders had been issued to the police force all over the country to have the homes of all Sinn Féin Club secretaries raided on that date. This order, he said, would be published in the following day's Press where I could see it for myself. He then told me that if I accompanied him to my home and handed over all the documents in my possession relating to the club, he would not search the house. Now this suggestion put me in a "tough spot"

as, in addition to the Sinn Féin literature which I held, I also had in my bedroom one parabellum pistol and ammunition and a large quantity of gelignite which I had obtained from General Sweeney a week previous for safe keeping. I was now faced with the problem of handing over the documents, which would disclose the names of the members and also the activities of the club; also, I would be branded as a traitor then and in later years. Alternatively, I could take the risk of having the house raided with the almost certain chance of the arms and explosives being discovered. I there and then decided that I would not hand over the documents. I told the D.I., "If you have a raid to carry out, go and do it; you need not think that I will do your dirty work". He then proceeded in the direction of my home. I immediately proceeded to the village, where I contacted Patrick Breslin and informed him of what had taken place. While we were discussing what action we would take, we saw the R.I.C. arrive back to barracks. We noticed that they had no parcels with them and were convinced that the gelignite, at least, had escaped their attention. I hurried back to my home, wondering what had happened there. There my uncle informed me that the R.I.C. had called. The D.I. had stated that he had come to raid the house for documents relating to the Sinn Féin Club. He also informed him that he had met me on the road and told me that if I handed over the documents he would not be obliged to carry out the raid; that I refused to co-operate with him. He then asked my uncle was he prepared to hand over any documents relating to Sinn Féin in the house to him. My uncle, being aware of the arms, ammunition and gelignite in

the house, said that he was. He asked the D.I. to wait and he would collect the documents, saying that they would be a good riddance. He picked up a parcel of Sinn Féin leaflets titled "Faith and Morals of Sinn Féin" and handed them to the D.I., who then left, satisfied that he had done his duty.

On the 12th May, 1920, I took part in a raid on the Dungloe Excise Office. This office was located about 150 yards from the R.I.C. barracks, which was then occupied by about fifteen members of that force. It was situated on the ground floor of a building which had been previously used as an hotel but was occupied at this period by a Protestant Minister. A protection *PARTY* was posted to cover the barracks to prevent interference by the R.I.C. I was one of a party of three Volunteers who entered the office and removed all documents. We packed them in sacks and took them away. The two Volunteers accompanying me were Anthony McGinley and Frank O'Donnell. During the removal of the documents Frank O'Donnell came across a book by James Connolly. Notwithstanding the fact that it was necessary to get out of the place as quickly as possible, he proceeded to read extracts from it for us.

About this time District Inspector Wallace was becoming very officious and aggressive and it was decided to shoot him. The D.I. lived in a private house about 500 yards from the barracks and opposite Sweeney's stores, and passed up and down the street daily. Seamus McCole, Frank O'Donnell and I were detailed to carry out the job. About midway between the D.I.'s residence and the barracks there was an archway where we planned to pick him off as he passed by. As we could not stand

in the archway for any time without attracting attention, it was necessary to keep in cover from view until we received a signal that the D.I. had left his house. It was arranged with Patrick Breslin, who from his position in Sweeney's stores could see him leaving, would give us a signal, i.e. by blowing a few notes on a fife. We reckoned that the signal would give us time to move from a position, which we occupied on the night previous, to the archway already mentioned. The plan miscarried. By the time we heard the signal and rushed to our position the D.I. had passed the archway and was gone out of revolver range. We had spent the greater part of the night before in a hen shed the property of Mrs. Brigid Hughie O'Donnell, who is still alive and whose son took part in the Rampart ambush on the 12th December already mentioned. Mrs. O'Donnell came out in the morning to feed her hens. When she saw us there she said nothing but returned to her house and in a short time came back with tea, bread and butter for us. This woman never divulged, perhaps even yet, anything about presence there that morning.

I must say that the D.I. seemed to have a charmed life. A few weeks later Frank O'Donnell and myself made further plans to attack him. We knew that he had a habit of cycling along a particular road on a Sunday afternoon. One Sunday evening we lay in wait for him. He came along but we then saw that he was accompanied by his young son. Under the circumstances we could not open fire, as apart from the danger of shooting the young boy we concluded that the fright of seeing his father shot beside him would be too great. On a later occasion he cycled out to a place called Milltown. This particular

day he was very much under the influence of alcohol. He eventually lay down by the river bank and went to sleep. In this particular locality there was not even one man in the Volunteer organisation, with the result that it was too late to avail of the opportunity by the time we got the information.

On the 8th June, 1920, I took part in the burning of the old Rutland militia barracks which was situated in my townland of Meenamore. The barracks, which for years had been used as a summer residence by a Captain Maude, was destroyed on the instructions of Major General Joseph Sweeney who had information that it was about to be occupied by a detachment of British military from Derry.

From the time of the Rampart ambush I was "on the run". I did not consider it safe to sleep at home at night, although I worked on the land in the daytime. My home was often raided by British forces in the hope of capturing me there. I went to a cattle fair in Dungloe on the 4th December, 1920. There were no R.I.C. in the village at this stage. The barracks had been evacuated some time previously. Suddenly a party of military arrived in the village and rounded up everyone in the main street. I was not unduly alarmed as there was no one in the military party to recognise me and I felt sure that I had no documents in my possession that would lead to my identification. I was held up and searched with a number of other young men. Imagine my amazement when the officer in charge of the party opened my wallet and the first thing he picked out was my Volunteer membership card which I had completely forgotten about. For the moment I considered making a

break for liberty through the crowd, but on further consideration I realised that if fire was opened on me, even if I made good my escape, there was a great danger of a number of people getting shot, so I abandoned the idea.

I was taken in custody and conveyed to a military outpost at Bunbeg, where I was detained that night. On the following day I was taken to Victoria R.I.C. barracks in Derry. On Monday, 6th December, 1920, I was lodged in Derry prison. I was tried before a British court in February, 1921, and sentenced to six months' imprisonment. Strangely enough, my prison sentence expired on the 11th July, 1921, the day of the truce. Had it expired even one day earlier I would have been transferred to Ballykinlar, where I would have been detained for four or five months longer. As it turned out, I was released on the 11th July from Belfast prison where I had been transferred earlier.

During my term in Derry prison the late Frank Carty from Sligo, who was then a prisoner, escaped from the hospital portion of the prison. The prison warder in the hospital at the time of Carty's escape was known to us as "Black Jack", which name arose from the fact that he prescribed the medicine known by that name for all complaints, be it cough, cold or a broken leg. This warder was rather aggressive towards political prisoners and we took great delight in annoying him. After Carty's escape we thanked him and told him how much we appreciated his assistance in arranging the escape. He took a poor view of our idea of a joke and felt, I am sure, that if such talk reached the ears of his superiors he might be in serious trouble.

I remember St. Patrick's Day, 1921, in Derry prison. The political prisoners made preparations for celebrating the feast of the National Apostle. We were allowed to receive shamrock by post from our friends. In addition, we decided that each of us would have a tricolour badge. We constructed the badges by using a white portion of an envelope, a yellow piece of paper from the wrapper of a cocoa carton and green paper from the boxes containing the shamrock. It was only a matter of inserting a pin to complete the badge and attach it to the lapels of our coats. Further arrangements were made for the "wetting of the shamrock" and I tasted poteen that day for the first time in my life. There were a number of prisoners from the Innishowen peninsula which was a poteen-making district at the time. We also had, as temporary warders, a number of ex soldiers from World War 1 who were inclined to be friendly with us. Arrangements were made with these warders by the Innishowen prisoners to contact their friends in the peninsula, who would take in a quantity of poteen to certain specified houses in Derry where it could be collected by the warders and taken into the prison, where it would be divided.

Our normal exercise hours in the prison were from 10 a.m. to 12 noon and from 2 to 4 p.m.. We were locked in our cells for the remainder of the day. On St. Patrick's Day we were allowed two hours extra for exercise in the afternoon and we organised a concert. Before it was over some of the prisoners, and also some of the warders, were a bit "under the weather" from the effects of the poteen. The chief warders included a man called Fleming. I remember pinning my tricolour over

his British Army service ribbons on his tunic. It is doubtful if he knew it was there and perhaps at that stage he did not care. I feel sure that if he went out town wearing those colours he would find himself back as a prisoner with ourselves.

In April, 1921, I was transferred with a number of other prisoners from Derry to Belfast prison in Crumlin Road. We were handcuffed together in pairs during the train journey. This was my first visit to Belfast. On the way from the railway station to the prison we passed through a street where hundreds of people were assembled, apparently waiting for something. I had heard so much about vicious attacks by dockyard workers on political prisoners being conveyed through the streets of Belfast, I thought that we were going to be the victims of a similar attack. I think I closed my eyes and waited for the worst to happen. It was suddenly a great relief to hear shouts of "up the Republic" from the assembled crowd. I then discovered that it was a crowd of nationalist supporters assembled for the passing of the funeral of the McMahon family who were murdered by Crown Forces in Belfast two days earlier.

About the month of June, 1921, the Volunteers in Belfast got in touch with the political prisoners in Belfast prison and informed us that they were making plans to effect our escape. Their plan was to capture a Crossley tender, the type of transport in common use by the British forces at that time, also some British Army uniforms. They succeeded in capturing the Crossley tender and uniforms and drove to the front gate of the prison, where they gained admission without any difficulty. The task for

the prisoners was: On arrival of the tender to overpower the warders, get out, and as many as possible board the tender or get outside of the gate and try and escape, the party in the tender to hold open the gates for our escape. We overpowered the warders, but when the party in the tender got to the inner gate the warder in charge got suspicious and, instead of opening it, threw the keys through it in the direction of a British soldier on sentry duty just inside. The Volunteers in the tender, finding that their plan had miscarried, succeeded in driving out and the attempt at a rescue was a failure.

Immediately afterwards a large party of British forces took over from the warders. The prisoners were beaten up, all our bedding was removed and we were left to lie in a bare cell. An armed guard accompanied the prison orderlies when they were taking food to our cells. This treatment continued for about two weeks, after which our status as political prisoners was restored.

At this time there was an active organisation of Cumann na mBan in Belfast. Members of the organisation were detailed to visit political prisoners. The girl detailed to visit me was one Mona Delargy, from whom I received visits fortnightly. On my release on the 11th July Miss Delargy met me at the prison gate and brought me to her home, to which we travelled by train. On our way there I witnessed an orgy of destruction and violence that will always remain in my memory. This was caused by an Orange mob, who resented the truce, descending on the locality of Catholics and nationalists and, after setting fire to their homes, proceeded to open rifle fire indiscriminately. At one stage of the journey

all the passengers in the train in which I was travelling found it necessary to lie flat on the floor to avoid flying bullets and glass. It was pathetic to witness women and young children on the footpaths, guarding the few articles which they succeeded in salvaging, watching the smoking ruins of their homes.

Miss Delargy, after supplying me with a meal at her home, escorted me to the Great Northern Railway Station on the first stage of my journey back to Donegal and freedom. As I took my seat in the carriage, four members of the R.I.C. came in and sat down beside me. This made me doubtful as to my freedom in spite of the truce. I got off the train at Strabane and was greatly relieved to find that no effort was made to detain me.

In conclusion I would like to record the following narrative. After my release from prison and on my return home I was informed by some officers of the Brigade Staff (I have omitted to mention earlier that I was at this time Intelligence Officer on the Brigade Staff) about a man named Collins who had been knocking around the area for some time prior to the truce. He moved around with a horse and van under the guise of selling fish. On a Sunday morning about a week prior to the truce a party of British forces under the command of one Sergt. Duffy arrived in the village of Dungloe as the congregation were arriving for 11 a.m. Mass. Amongst the crowd assembling for Mass was the Divisional Engineer, Mr. McNelis. Collins, who was with the British forces, apparently had information about the activities of McNelis and pointed him out. McNelis got a very severe beating by the British forces. It was now definitely

established that Collins was a member of the British Secret Service. I immediately made arrangements to contact him. After some time I received information from Milford that my agents there had contacted him. I had him conveyed to Brigade Headquarters at Dungloe and, to my great surprise, I was now face to face with a man who was a criminal prisoner in Derry prison during my term there. We each recognised each other. I immediately played on my prior acquaintance with the man for the purpose of getting him to talk. I told him I was glad to see him but sorry to meet him this time as a prisoner in the hands of the Volunteers. He was kept in custody for some time and I visited him about every second day. For some time he refused to divulge anything. I told him that while I was anxious to save his life, it would not be possible for me to do so unless he disclosed the names of the agents with whom he had been in contact. Eventually he decided to give me the required information. He started off by giving the name of a man named McKeown, a member of the tramp class. He informed me that McKeown supplied him with the names of men who were active in the Volunteer organisation. I had McKeown arrested and brought into the presence of Collins, whom I had previously blindfolded and therefore had no knowledge of McKeown's presence when he made a statement concerning his activities. I then removed the bandage from Collins's eyes and he was confronted with McKeown, who made no attempt to deny the statement made by Collins. As a result, McKeown was ordered to leave the area and not to return, which he did with all haste.

Collins then made a statement which he signed and in which he gave me the names of British agents from

whom he had collected information. Some of the names included people who were already suspected. At the same time he gave me names of agents which surprised me greatly. I made it my business to check on his statement shortly after and found it to be correct. Collins concealed his report in the bodies of fish and forwarded it to Colonel McClintock, who, he said, was British Intelligence Agent in Omagh, Co. Tyrone. After receiving the information from Collins I released him and ordered him to leave the area, which he did.

Signed: *D. Houston Lt. Col.*

(D. Houston, Lt.-Col.)

Date: *26th Mar 1956*

Witness: *James Conway Col. Genl.*
(James J. Conway) Colonel.

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