

W.S. 1,385

ORIGINAL

BUREAU OF MILITARY HISTORY 1913-21
BURO STAIRE MILEATA 1913-21
No. W.S. 1385

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BUREAU OF MILITARY HISTORY, 1913-21.
STATEMENT BY WITNESS.

DOCUMENT NO. W.S. 1,385.....

Witness

Lieut.-Col. James McMonagle,
Custume Barracks,
Athlone,
Co. Westmeath.

Identity.

O/C. Letterkenny Company 4th Battalion
2nd Brigade 1st Northern Division.

Subject.

National activities, Letterkenny,
Co. Donegal, 1917-1921.

Conditions, if any, Stipulated by Witness.

Nil

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STATEMENT BY LIEUTENANT COLONEL JAMES McMONAGLE,

Custume Barracks, Athlone, Co. Westmeath.

I was born in Letterkenny, Co. Donegal, on the 16th May, 1898. I attended school at the local monastery staffed by the Presentation Order of teachers. Apart from the fact that these men were excellent teachers, they were also very patriotic Irishmen and never let an opportunity pass to impress on us what our country suffered as a result of British rule. Practically every day one or other of them would point to the map of the world, across the face of which was printed in large letters, "British possessions coloured red", and draw our attention to the fact that Ireland was included in that colour and pointed out to us our duty to have this rectified when the opportunity arose.

In 1913, when I left school, the Ancient Order of Hibernians, which was benevolent and pacifist, was the only nationalist organisation in the county. About this time units of the National Volunteers under the leadership of John Redmond were organised in Letterkenny under the auspices of the A.O.H. I joined this movement on its inception and we were subsequently equipped with obsolete Italian rifles. These rifles were very heavy and awkward; there was no suitable ammunition available for them nor could any be obtained.

Subsequent to the Rebellion of 1916 I realised that the National Volunteers did not intend to take any active part in nationalist affairs, so early in 1917 a number of us left and organised the first local Sinn Féin

Club and Volunteer company in the district. Young men were slow in joining with us, but in 1918, due to the scare of conscription, large numbers flocked to the ranks but as the scare receded they disappeared again. During the height of the Anglo-Irish fight up to the truce the active Volunteers in our company numbered fourteen.

In the early stages the company was organised on a parish basis but was later put on a military organisation. In all, four companies were formed, i.e. No. 1, Letterkenny, where I was O/C; No. 2, Manorcunningham Company, under the command of William Holmes (now deceased); No. 3, Churchill Company, commanded by Hugh McHugh (deceased); and Fanad Company where Niall Blaney (deceased) was O/C. The brigade was under the command of Samuel Flaherty from Castlefin. James Dawson, now a Superintendent in the Garda in Kilrush, Co. Clare, was O/C of the Letterkenny Battalion, commonly known as the 2nd Battalion, East Donegal Brigade.

In 1918 East Donegal was one of three constituencies in which Sinn Féin decided not to contest the election so as to avoid a split in the nationalist vote which would give the Unionist candidate a decided advantage. All our efforts, therefore, were devoted to West Donegal in an endeavour to secure the election of Joseph Sweeney, Sinn Féin candidate for that constituency. Our efforts were successful. Joseph Sweeney was elected by a large majority. I was detailed for election duty in the Churchill district. There I found that the A.O.H. had become openly hostile towards us and had sent out patrols in the area who were preventing voters with Sinn Féin sympathies from registering their votes at the polling

booths. I called out the local Volunteers. I also sent an order to the Volunteers in Letterkenny to send on additional help. I organised the men into small parties, drove off the A.O.H. patrols and so gave the Sinn Féin supporters an opportunity to exercise the franchise.

After the 1918 elections until early in 1919 our principal duties consisted in perfecting our organisation raiding for arms, cutting roads and railway lines and generally restricting the movement of enemy forces in our area. Most of the raids for arms were carried out in the Lagan area, which was predominately Unionist. Many of these Unionists were members of the Ulster Volunteers and in that area we obtained a good supply of arms and ammunition. About this period, together with another Volunteer I was detailed to watch a drill hall used by the Ulster Volunteer force which was located on the Boyd estate, Letterkenny. Unfortunately I made too much noise and was discovered, captured and held prisoner for twenty-four hours, during which time I was closely questioned as to the reason for my presence in the vicinity of the hall. Apart from that no other action was taken against me.

Early in 1919 I was instructed to attend a Brigade Staff meeting at Castlefin, presided over by Brigadier O'Flaherty, at which he gave instructions for the burning of all evacuated R.I.C. barracks and the raiding of excise offices in our area in accordance with a G.H.Q. direction for a nationwide operation of this nature. This direction was later postponed for almost six weeks from the original date fixed. When we finally got orders to proceed, a party of us under James Dawson, Battalion O/C,

moved out to burn Glenswilly R.I.C. barracks. Knowing that it was an all Ireland operation that had been postponed for such a long period, I was very nervous as I felt sure that details of a plan on such a large scale were nearly certain to reach the ears of the enemy, but the following morning when I read in the Sunday newspaper that something like 400 evacuated barracks had been destroyed throughout Ireland and that the British forces had been taken by complete surprise, I realised that our organisation was effective and watertight.

The Volunteers now became very active, by the cutting of roads and the only railway with West Donegal; also, owing to the boycott by traders of the members of the British forces at our request, they (the British forces) found it very difficult to procure food supplies in the village of Dungloe in West Donegal and found it necessary to have food and petrol conveyed by rail from Derry. Our Intelligence staff brought information to me that a passenger train from Derry had two wagons of supplies for the British forces at Dungloe and that a small party of British soldiers in mufti were travelling with it as escort. On receipt of this information I hurriedly mobilised a party of about ten Volunteers and, travelling in two motor cars, we proceeded to Churchill railway station, where the train stopped to set down passengers. There we disarmed the escort, consisting of one N.C.O. and four men armed with revolvers, and seized the supplies. Unfortunately we had no transport to remove the foodstuffs, so the only alternative was to put them on the railway track, pour petrol (which was part of the consignment) on them and destroy them by fire. There was a sequel to this raid later, as I was recognised

by the N.C.O. in charge of the escort while a prisoner in Ballykinlar camp and to which I will refer later in this statement.

Although I had a Company Quartermaster during the period that I was O/C, I kept all the rifles under my control. My reason for this was: my father was manager of a large corn mill in Letterkenny and, as I had access to the keys, I considered the mill the most secure and central place for their location.

Early in August, 1920, I was summoned to a Brigade Staff meeting at Castlefin, where plans were discussed for a daylight raid on Drumquinn R.I.C. barracks in the County Tyrone. The barracks was occupied by two sergeants and eight men. The attacking force consisted of twenty Volunteers, ten of whom were drawn from the Letterkenny Company. The remainder were drawn from units along the Tyrone border and a few men from East Tyrone. I may mention here that up to this period the Volunteer organisation was inactive in East Tyrone. The following is a list of names of the men from Letterkenny who took part in the attack: Dr. J.P. McGinley, James Dawson, E. Gallagher, Hugh McGraughan, Hugh Sweeney, William McLoughlin, my brother, Patrick, and myself. There were two other men whose names I cannot now recall.

The date of the raid was fixed for August 29th 1920, which was a cattle fair day in Drumquinn. We chose that day so as not to draw attention to a party of strangers entering the town. We planned to collect a drove of cattle, drive them up to the barracks and, under the pretext of buying and selling, we could get our men right up to the required positions. The barracks was a

semi-detached two storied building located in the main street. A Volunteer named Curran from East Tyrone and I were detailed to take up a position at a garden seat located beside the barrack door. When the remainder of the party was in position, our plan was to knock at the barrack door, which was locked, and endeavour to gain admission quietly by enquiring for the address of a cattle buyer who lived convenient, and when we got the door open to rush the place.

~~WHETHER~~ the plan in that particular form would have succeeded was never put to the test. The commotion caused by our party, with a large herd of cattle, pretending to make a bargain and talking loudly, which is customary at a fair, was apparently responsible for bringing one of the R.I.C., who was armed with a revolver, to the door, which he opened to have a look around. The Brigade O/C, on seeing the door opened, then gave the signal to proceed with the attack. The pre-arranged signal was: the lowering of a newspaper which he pretended to be reading and placing it in his pocket. I immediately drew my revolver and called on the constable to put up his hands, with which order he immediately complied but in an instant dropped his hands and reached for his revolver. He was in the act of drawing it from the holster when I fired, hitting him in the forehead. He slumped down across the doorway and died almost instantly. I leaped over his body and dashed into the day-room, followed by the party detailed for that particular task. After some seconds in the day-room, where we held up and disarmed three constables, I suddenly realised that the party of Volunteers detailed to rush the upper portion of the building had not done so but had followed me into the day-room.

I moved out to the hall and called on a few of my men to follow me up the stairs. On reaching the hall I saw Dr. McGinley kneeling, with his back to the stairs, beside the body of the constable in the doorway, presumably examining him with a view to rendering first-aid. At the same time I saw an R.I.C. sergeant at the top of the stairs taking deliberate aim with a rifle at Dr. McGinley's back. I fired two shots at the sergeant and he and his rifle came rolling down the stairs, up which we then rushed and found three more constables in a room overhead. One of them apparently made an effort to escape through a skylight on to the roof, but he got held fast there and the combined efforts of our party failed to dislodge him, so we just left him to his fate.

We then collected all the arms and equipment in the barracks, which comprised twelve service revolvers, twelve Lee Enfield rifles and a quantity of rifle and revolver ammunition. All this delayed us greatly and we could not risk wasting any further time for the destruction of the barracks as the headquarters of the Enniskillen Fusiliers at Omagh, where a strong garrison was maintained, was only six miles distant.

We had travelled from our area to Drumquinn by motor cars. On the return journey the leading car of our party pulled up to enquire if my brother was in the second car - he had travelled with them on the outward journey. On it being ascertained that he was missing, the entire party was anxious to return to Drumquinn to locate him. I refused to allow them to return. Although this was a hard decision for me, I could not risk the lives of the men for the sake of one. Anyhow, my brother eventually made

his way back to Letterkenny. Although he was held up and questioned he managed to bluff his way through. Our timing for the whole operation was fairly accurate. We were obliged to pass two occupied R.I.C. barracks on our return journey - one at Castlederg and the other at Castlefin - and at each of these stations the ^{ENEMY} force's appeared to have been alerted as they were preparing to block the road as the last car passed through. One minute later might have meant a different story. The R.I.C. sergeant who was shot on the stairs recovered from his wound. An account in the daily Press at a later date showed that he was awarded £700 compensation for the loss of his left testicle.

At this time there was a District Inspector of the R.I.C. named Walsh stationed in Letterkenny. Some short time after the raid on Drumquinn barracks the D.I. called to the surgery of Dr. McGinley on the pretext of getting medical treatment, where he produced a slip of paper and told the doctor he had there a description of three men in the town of Letterkenny who were members of an attacking party on the R.I.C. barrack where there were some casualties. He also said that from the description in his possession he would have no difficulty in apprehending them. He then told the doctor: "You answer the description of one, James Dawson fits in with the description given of the second man and James McMonagle is the third". He then let the doctor see the description, where he saw himself described as being over six feet in height, athletic, and a professional looking type. The second man was described as having red hair, pale complexion and walked with a swinging stride. This would fit James Dawson exactly. Finally, I was described as being a man

5' 10" in height, brown hair and a very prominent nose. While the doctor was recovering from the shock of this information, the D.I. informed him that the information was transmitted to him from his superiors, but as they were becoming suspicious of the loyalty of some of the rank and file in the force, it was left to his own discretion whether he would disclose the information to the lower ranks. He then told the doctor that he was in touch with and working for Michael Collins and, therefore, was destroying the document so that no further use could be made of it. At the same time he warned the doctor to be more careful in the future.

On a subsequent date, during the course of a raid by British forces on Dr. McGinley's house, the D.I. arrived on the scene and asked him if he had any arms in the house. On being informed that a revolver was lying in a chest of drawers in a bedroom, the D.I. proceeded there. On his arrival in the bedroom he found that a British soldier was about to commence a search of the drawers. He instructed the soldier to proceed to another room and continue the search there, telling him that he would personally search the room they were in at present. When the soldier had left the D.I. transferred the revolver to his own pocket. Some few days later he returned the revolver to the doctor.

Early in August, 1920, the Fanad Company reported to us that Fanad Head coastguard station, occupied by eleven marines armed with service revolvers, might be an easy target to capture. A battalion conference was summoned, where it was decided to attack the post on the night of September 4th, 1920. It was decided that the

attacking party would be drawn from the Letterkenny Company as the Fanad Company had little or no arms and less experience. The party from Letterkenny consisted of ten men. Members of the Fanad Company were employed in blocking roads, scouting, etc. The attacking force arrived by car to within a few miles of the coastguard station, covering the remaining distance on foot across country. The building, which was a two storied one and capable of accommodating about fifty men, was a solidly constructed cement house surrounded by a low cement wall about 50" from the building. As there was no hope of gaining admission by a ruse, we took up positions along the wall and fired five rounds rapid at the building. Dr. McGinley, who was in charge of our party, then called on the garrison to surrender, and the reply was: "We are members of the bulldog breed who don't surrender". Rapid and continuous fire was again opened on the station. After about half an hour the garrison called out "We will surrender if you spare our lives". We told them we had no intention of taking their lives; all we required was their weapons. They agreed to surrender and we instructed their O/C to come down to the wall with his hands up. On this instruction being complied with we moved into the building and disarmed the garrison. Due to the nature and construction of the building we were unable to burn it. The booty consisted of eleven service revolvers, some revolver ammunition and a quantity of gelignite and one Verrey light pistol.

During a hearing of a claim for damages to the building and claims by personnel of the station at a later date, we learned that on the night of the attack there was a British Admiralty sloop anchored in Mulroy Bay,

quite convenient to the coastguard station, salvaging gold from the ship "Laurentic" which was chased into the bay by German submarines during World War 1 and sunk with £2½ million worth of gold aboard. When the commander of the sloop was questioned by the trial judge as to why he did not go to the assistance of the garrison in the station, he replied that a quantity of gold already salvaged was that day landed on the opposite shore and placed under a small naval guard in readiness for transportation by road to Derry on the following day. He went on to say that on hearing rifle fire and seeing the signals sent up from the station by the defenders, he came to the conclusion that the whole thing was a ruse to occupy his attention while a raid was being made on the gold on the opposite shore. He then decided to move his sloop across the bay and send reinforcements ashore to strengthen the small guard posted there earlier. The Fanad Company officers had not acquainted us of the presence of the sloop in the bay. Had the sloop commander decided to come to the assistance of the station garrison the situation would be extremely dangerous for us.

Around this period railway workers had decided to refuse to work on trains conveying armed British forces. One evening in September, 1920, information was conveyed to Dr. McGinley that a party of armed British forces had boarded a train at Strabane bound for Letterkenny. The driver and fireman had stepped off the engine and refused to take the train while the armed forces were aboard. After a short time another crew of two was located, who agreed to take the train. The two men were pro British. A company meeting was summoned

immediately and, believing that the driver and fireman would remain overnight in Letterkenny, plans were being prepared for their arrest and courtmartial. While the conference was in progress information was received that the two men concerned were having a meal at the railway station, on completion of which they were to take the engine back to Strabane, leaving the coaches behind. Dr. McGinley instructed me to get a shotgun and a few cartridges loaded with buckshot and meet him at a certain spot where he would have a motor car in readiness. He picked me up and we proceeded to endeavour to ambush the train on its way back to Strabane. On reaching a point near Glenmaquinn railway station we heard the engine whistle. I jumped out of the moving car and raced across a field towards the railway line. Just as I reached the railway embankment the engine was passing at a fast pace. I fired both barrels simultaneously, hitting the engine plating a foot behind and in line with the driver's head, leaving a heavy dent in the plating. The driver received a few grains of buckshot in the back of his neck but he increased speed and kept going. When the engine driver reached Strabane he reported the incident to the British forces there, who, when they examined the engine, stated that it had been hit by a heavy projectile.

It was not customary for me to stay at home at night at this period but on the night of December 5th, 1920, I found it necessary to go home and I thought it safe to remain for the night. On the following morning at 5 a.m. my home was surrounded by British forces and I was arrested. I was taken to the local R.I.C. barracks and there I found that James Dawson, my Battalion Commandant, had been arrested and was there before me.

Arrested at the same time was a man named Deery who had no connection with the movement. The same day we were taken to Derry prison. After a few days there we were transferred to Ballykinlar internment camp. On our arrival at the railway station in Belfast on our way to Ballykinlar we were attacked by a hostile Orange mob, using such expressions as "you bastards, you are not behind a stone wall in Donegal now". For our safety our escort found it necessary to clear the station platform and keep us in the station waiting-room until our next train would arrive which would take us to a station convenient to the internment camp. While waiting there we could see lorry loads of prisoners coming in who had been taken by a sea route to Belfast. These prisoners also had been attacked on the way. There were about two hundred prisoners in this batch and they were a pitiable sight. Practically every one of them was cut and bleeding about the head and face.

On arrival at Ballykinlar we were all searched, then allocated to different huts in batches of thirty to each hut. On arrival at our hut we found bales of straw covered with about three inches of snow outside. This was intended for our bedding, but as we had no means of opening the bales we were obliged to lie on the cold floor for the night.

The British forces alleged that we were being treated as political prisoners, but the food was so bad that were it not for the parcels received from home we could scarcely exist. The food, such as it was, was delivered in bulk at the cookhouse by the British forces. There it was taken over and its distribution supervised by our own camp staff which had then been

organised. The staff also supervised the administration of the camp generally. After some time there our clothes were practically worn out. We were then issued with what was known as "Martin Henry" coats and corduroy trousers. On the right hip of the trousers a circular piece about eight inches in diameter was cut out and a piece of blue cloth sewed in its place, obviously for speedy identification in case of escape.

After about two months in the camp, one day when standing near a hut and a short distance from a wire barrier I saw a man dressed in prison clothes taking exercise under escort of a British Army sergeant. The man was endeavouring to signal to me to move away. I could not understand the reason for the signal, but, taking no chances, I moved off. A few days later this man came to my hut accompanied by our Camp Adjutant and introduced himself as Hubert Wilson from Longford. He told me he was the man who signalled to me a few days previous and his reason for doing so was that the sergeant that acted as his escort on that day had recognised me as the man in charge of an armed party of men who had held up and disarmed him together with four soldiers at Churchill railway station some time previously. Wilson said the sergeant told him that he intended reporting the fact to his superior officer. Wilson then informed me that he had many discussions with this particular sergeant on the Irish situation. In Wilson's opinion the sergeant was a broad-minded type. He was a conscript and was due to leave the army in about a month's time. Wilson was now of the opinion that he had talked the sergeant out of reporting me or taking any further action in the matter. He appears to have been successful

as I heard nothing further about it. The Camp Commandant, on being informed of the particulars, ordered me as a precaution to have my hair cut, my head shaved, change my name with another prisoner and move to a different hut. I complied with his instructions, but when nothing happened after the lapse of a month I again reverted to my own name.

About this time there were large-scale rounds-up by British forces and it may be interesting to recall an error on their behalf in the transfer of prisoners to the camp. Amongst a party of prisoners were four Volunteers who were captured under arms at Mount St. Bridge, Dublin, on "Bloody" Sunday. The four men were held awaiting trial on a charge of murder and would undoubtedly have been sentenced to death. Through some error they were sent to Ballykinlar with a number of other prisoners. It would appear that a month had elapsed before the British authorities realised their mistake and a check revealed that the four men must be in our camp. By that time every prisoner had his head shaved, had a beard grown and all endeavoured to look as much alike as possible. Some four men would answer to the names of the wanted prisoners but when brought for trial would disclose their correct name. This entailed identification by members of the R.I.C., after which they would be sent back to the internment camp. This was repeated at least three times and we finally succeeded in preventing the British forces from identifying them, although at one stage all the prisoners in the camp were put individually on an identification parade. The four men were eventually released with the remainder of the prisoners in the camp on 6th December, 1921, and were never identified.

On my release on 6th December, 1921, I reported to my unit in Letterkenny. At the time James Dawson was appointed Vice O/C of the brigade and I was appointed O/C of the battalion. In that capacity I had great pleasure in taking over, on behalf of our own Irish Government, the following British forces posts on their evacuation, i.e. the R.I.C. barrack at Newtowncunningham and the two R.I.C. barracks in Letterkenny town.

Signed: James McMonagle Lt Col
 (James McMonagle) Lt.-Col.

Date: 28 March 1956

28 March 1956

Witness: James Conway, Colonel (James J. Conway) Colonel.
 (Investigator)

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