

ORIGINAL

BUREAU OF MILITARY HISTORY 1913-21
BURO STAIRÉ MILEATA 1913-21
No. W.S. 1393

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

DOCUMENT NO. W.S. 1,393.....

Witness

Edmond McGrath,
The Cottage,
Cahir,
Co. Tipperary.

Identity.

Secretary of Sinn Fein Club;
Commandant 6th Battalion, Third
Tipperary Brigade.

Subject.

Tincurry Company, 6th Battalion,
Third Tipperary Brigade, 1917-1922.

Conditions, if any, Stipulated by Witness.

Nil

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STATEMENT BY MR. EDMUND McGRATH,

The Cottage, Cahir, Co. Tipperary.Commandant, 6th Battalion, 3rd Tipperary Brigade.

It was, I would say, about the year of 1912 that I first commenced to take an interest in Irish political affairs. I was then about twenty-three years of age, and I became a regular reader of Arthur Griffith's weekly paper, "The United Irishman", and some of the other weekly or monthly periodicals which expressed views of a similar nature and which were then in circulation. I was particularly impressed by articles written by P.H. Pearse which appeared in these papers, and probably thus influenced, I found myself opposed to the policy of John Redmond's Irish Parliamentary Party. In my native district of Ballylooby, with the exception, I might say, of myself and my companion, a man named O'Donnell, who subsequently emigrated to America and went to his eternal reward there, the people as a whole then gave their political allegiance to this Irish Parliamentary Party, and anyone who opposed or criticised the policy of the Party was looked upon, if not as foolish, at least as odd in his political views.

A company of Redmond's Volunteers, or the National Volunteers as they were called, was formed in Ballylooby in 1914. Holding the views which I did, I did not join it or take much interest in it, and I cannot say anything about it.

When the reorganisation of Sinn Féin and the Irish Volunteers started in 1917, I consulted Frank Drohan of Clonmel about the best means of getting both movements started in my neighbourhood. On my

invitation, Drohan agreed to come to a meeting in Tincurry. I then contacted some local men, including Michael Ladrigan of Cahir and James Tobin of Tincurry, and we arranged a small public meeting which was held on the roadside at Tincurry on a September evening in that year of 1917. Frank Drohan and the late Sean Morrissey of Clonmel addressed the meeting, and it was agreed there and then to start a Sinn Féin club. James Tobin was elected Chairman, Thomas Butler, Vice Chairman, James Reidy, Treasurer, and myself, Secretary. About forty or fifty men attended the next meeting of the Sinn Féin club, and I asked all those present, who were prepared to join the Irish Volunteers, to hand in their names. There was a full response, and that night was formed the first company of what was later to become the 6th Battalion of the 3rd Tipperary brigade. I was elected its first captain, and Michael Ladrigan of Cahir was elected company adjutant. I am now not sure if there were any other officers elected that night. If they were, I cannot remember their names.

Shortly afterwards, we arranged for a meeting at Skeheenarinka to which the Volunteers from Tincurry marched. Working on the same lines, a Sinn Féin club was first formed there, and from it was organised a Volunteer company. In similar fashion, Sinn Féin clubs and Irish Volunteer companies were formed in Ballyporeen and Clogheen.

Then in February 1918, the late Seán Treacy, afterwards Vice Brigade Commandant, came to see me. He had just arrived from Dublin on his way back from serving a term of imprisonment in Dundalk jail. He told me that he had instructions from Michael Collins to

organise the Volunteers in South County Tipperary. Together we visited the four existing companies and organised ~~two~~ ^{three} others, one in Ballylooby ^{one in Martletown} and the other in Ballybacon.

A meeting of the officers of all ~~six~~ ^{seven} companies was then arranged, and it took place at James Tobin's house in Tincurry. Sean Treacy attended this meeting, and at it, the ~~six~~ ^{seven} companies were formed into a battalion - at first known as the Cahir Battalion, but later designated the 6th Battalion. It was at this meeting that I was elected commandant of the newly formed battalion. Other battalion officers elected that day were:-

Battalion Vice Commandant - Michael Ladrigan,
Cahir.

Battalion Adjutant - William Casey.

The ~~six~~ ^{seven} companies comprising the battalion, their districts and their company captains at the time were:-

1. Tincurry - Jeremiah O'Dwyer.
2. Ballybacon - Robert Condon (later succeeded by Maurice O'Gorman)
3. Skeheenarinka - Michael McGrath (later succeeded by J.J. Kearney)
4. Ballyporeen - Patrick Kennedy.
5. Ballylooby - William Dempsey.
6. Clogheen - B.J. Condon.
7. *Martletown* - *Daniel Leahy*.

Later, four further companies at Graigue, Garrymore, Cahir and Rahill were formed with Patrick O'Donnell, Thomas O'Connor, Michael O'Donnell and William O'Connor, respectively as company captains. Still later, when designation letters were allotted to the companies, the order was as follows:-

- A. Company - Tincurry.
- B. Company - Ballybacon.
- C. Company - Graigue.
- D. Company - Skeheenrinka.
- E. Company - Garrymore.
- F. Company - Ballyporeen.
- G. Company - Clogheen.
- H. Company - Cahir *& Martinstown.*
- K. Company - Rehill.

The organisation of the battalion was scarcely complete when the conscription crisis of 1918 was upon us. We were then swamped with new members, many more than we could cater for. To procure arms was one of our biggest tasks. We collected shotguns from the farmers, and we raided the houses of those who refused to hand them over willingly, and took the guns by either force or threat. We contacted some soldiers in the military barracks in Cahir, and from them we purchased three service rifles. A raid on the office of the National Volunteers in Cahir yielded three .22 rifles. With the exception of a few revolvers, these rifles and the shotguns were the only arms we possessed. Towards the end of that year and after the conscription crisis had passed, our numbers dwindled considerably. As a matter of fact, in Ballylooby, where a few months before I saw one hundred and twenty men on parade, I then saw only five. Commenting on this aspect of the position which was general throughout the country, I remember Sean Treacy remarking to me that, if ever there was another such crisis, he would definitely be opposed to accepting large numbers of recruits into the Volunteers.

In October 1918, Michael Ladrigan, the battalion vice commandant, and myself represented the battalion at a meeting of battalion officers which was held on a weekday in a room over P.J. Maloney's chemist shop in Tipperary town. This was the meeting at which the 3rd Tipperary brigade was founded, and it was presided over by Dick Mulcahy, then chief-of-staff of the Volunteers, and now General Richard Mulcahy, Minister for Education. It was my first time to meet him. Before the meeting, Seán Treacy had a chat with us, and he said that we should elect Seumas Robinson as the brigade commandant. I did not know Robinson personally at the time - he was then serving a term of imprisonment in Belfast prison, but I was aware that, prior to his arrest, he had spent a lot of time organising the Volunteers in South County Tipperary. Personally, I was of the opinion that Seán Treacy himself was the best man for the post but, when I expressed this view to him, he went all out in his praise of Seumas, and was very definite in recommending him as our brigade O/C. At that time, we all looked up to Treacy for guidance in such matters and, as none of us would like to oppose his wishes, it followed that Seumas Robinson was unanimously elected as brigade commandant. The other brigade officers elected before the meeting adjourned were:-

Brigade Vice Commandant - Sean Treacy.
Brigade Adjutant - Maurice Crowe.
Brigade Quartermaster - Dan Breen.

There was no other business transacted at this meeting.

During the remainder of that year of 1918, our activities centred, I might say, almost exclusively on assisting Sinn Féin in the general election. Here in

South Tipperary, the Sinn Féin candidate was the late Mr. P.J. Moloney of Tipperary in whose home the Brigade meeting, to which I have already referred, was held. He was opposed by Mr. John Cullnane who then represented the constituency in the Irish Party interests. The Volunteers did police duty at the Sinn Féin meetings, at the polling stations and in escorting the ballot boxes. It was good training for them. On polling day there was an incident in Cahir when a party of ex British soldiers attacked some Sinn Féin supporters on their way to a polling station. The Volunteers dealt effectively with the attackers, and after this incident, there was no further interference with Sinn Féin sympathisers. After the result of the count was made known, we had our hour of glory for Moloney won the contest easily.

Brigade council meetings were held regularly at intervals of about once a month in various places. Even when Robinson, Treacy and Breen were so much sought for by the British forces after the ambush at Soloheadbeg, they still contrived to attend these meetings. As an added precaution, the venue for the meeting was often changed at the last minute, and it was a regular thing when, on arriving at the original venue, to be directed on to a new venue, perhaps a mile or more away.

On the night of the ambush at Soloheadbeg, Sean Treacy, Dan Breen and Sean Hogan came to Tobin's of Tincurry. I contacted them there next day, and took them that night to my own townland of Clogheenafishogue where I got them accommodation for the night at good friends named Butler. Next evening, I took them to my own house, but as it was dangerous for their safety to remain there, I took them to Thomas O'Donnell's house

at Burncourt Castle where they remained for that night. Treacy told me that he wanted to get to Mitchelstown, to see Willie Ryan there and that he intended to go from Mitchelstown via Limerick to Dublin, and that he was bringing Breen and Hogan with him. On the following night, accompanied by my cousin, Patrick McGrath, I took the three of them to Mitchelstown where I handed them over to Willie Ryan, the man Treacy wanted to see.

It was, I think, some months later before I met Sean Treacy again. Then, as far as I can recall, he called to my house one day. Beyond the usual training, organising and efforts to get arms, there was no activity of any particular significance at the time. Treacy put his heart into the organising work, and I remember he was then very keen on establishing signal corps in each battalion. About the time of the German Plot business, he warned me to remain from home, and I then went on the run for some time.

During the latter part of 1919, a trickle of arms arrived for the battalion. Anything sent to us from G.H.Q. was sent under a covering address to Irwin's shop in Cahir where it was handed over to the battalion adjutant by Pat Crowley, the foreman in Irwin's. Crowley was not a member of the Volunteers, but he was a staunch supporter and sympathiser, and he had a few contacts in the military barracks in Cahir from whom he managed to purchase an odd revolver for us. There were several small instances during that period, such as, raids for arms, and it was about that time too that, with four or five others, I raided the railway station at Cahir and seized steel shutters which had arrived there for three R.I.C. barracks. I was tipped off about the arrival of the steel shutters

by a Volunteer named Ned Connolly who was employed as a porter at the railway station. As Connolly was one of those who accompanied me on the night of the raid, we had no difficulty in locating the shutters in the store, and we disposed of them by dumping them into the river Suir at Cahir railway bridge.

In March of 1920 I attended a brigade council meeting which was held in Dualla, and at which Sean Treacy told us not to sleep at home as he had information that there was about to be a round-up of Volunteer officers. He was going to Dublin himself and he gave me a covering address in Dublin to which I was to keep him informed of any developments in my area, and at which I could contact him if I wanted to get in touch with him about anything. Returning home, I gave the covering address to my sister for safe keeping, and made some necessary arrangements as I intended to clear out on the run next day. About 2 a.m. next morning, my home was surrounded and searched by British military and R.I.C. men. I was taken into custody and brought to Cahir barracks, from where, with Anthony Fogarty of Cahir who had also been arrested, I was taken under military escort by train to Cork.

When we arrived at Glanmire station in Cork, Fogarty and I sat down on the platform and refused to march with the escort to Cork prison. We were then put into a waiting-room, with the escort, to await transport. The escort enjoyed this part of the proceedings, for it meant that we saved them a march from the railway terminus to the prison.

On arrival in the prison, I was permitted to go

out to the exercise ground, and the first man I met there was Sean Duffy of Tipperary town from whom I had parted the night before near Cashel on our way home from the brigade council meeting. He had been captured going into his digs on his return from Dualla. Mr. P.J. Moloney, T.D., whom I have previously referred to, was also a prisoner there.

After about a week or ten days in Cork prison, we were brought to Belfast jail where there was then a large number of political prisoners confined. The question of a hunger-strike was under consideration, but before it came off, I was one of a batch of fifty prisoners taken from Belfast to Wormwood Scrubbs' prison in London. There was already a large number of Irish political prisoners in Wormwood Scrubbs and, while we had somewhat better conditions than in Belfast and more latitude to talk and chat in the exercise yard, to my mind at any rate, it did not appear that we were receiving the treatment proper to political prisoners. The question of going on hunger-strike to secure our release was debated. It met with a mixed reception; many were in favour of it, and many more were against it. Frank McGrath of Nenagh was being released on parole at the time, and we arranged with him that during his parole he would see Michael Collins and that perhaps Collins would order the hunger-strike.

On his return, McGrath told us that he had seen Collins and that Collins told him that he could not order a hunger-strike, but that he (Collins) thought it might be a damn good thing if it came off. We then had a ballot taken, and over seventy prisoners were in favour of the hunger-strike but were in a minority. We then had a

further ballot taken amongst those who were in favour of the hunger strike, to find out if they were prepared to go on strike without the others, and only three voted against.

We were about a week on hunger strike when on a Sunday morning Pax Whelen of Dungarvan, who was in another part of the prison, contacted me to find out exactly what the position was. Later in the day, he sent me word that the remainder of the Irish prisoners were joining in the hunger-strike. That night, by arrangement, all prisoners attacked their cells and did as much damage as possible. Cell windows were broken and, in many cells, the doors were wrenched off. This was done by inserting a book between the jamb and the door, at the hinged side of the door, and then applying all possible pressure to close the door. The prison authorities repaired the doors and put us back into the cells. Despite the fact that we were on hunger-strike, our breakfasts, dinners and teas were cooked each day and put into our cells at the usual meal times. I would say that the longest anyone had to remain on hunger-strike on that particular occasion was twenty-one or twenty-two days. As men grew weak and the prison doctor considered that they were in danger of death, they were taken from the prison and brought to civilian hospitals in London. My turn came after I had completed nineteen days on hunger strike. I was taken to St. James' hospital in Highgate. After recuperating there for some days, my fare home was paid by the London branch of the Irish Self-Determination League which, I understand, had received money from Michael Collins to pay the fares of the prisoners as they were discharged

from the hospitals. It was on a Friday or Saturday, early in June of 1920, that I arrived back home. I was still very weak and sick.

On the day following my return home, Michael Ladrigan, the battalion Vice Commandant, told me that plans had been prepared to destroy the British military rifle range which was situated about two and a half miles from Cahir, on the Cahir-Mitchelstown road. It was proposed to do the job on the Sunday night and during the early hours of Monday morning. He also told me that Sean Treacy was coming to take charge of the operation. I remarked that they had selected a bad night as many cars were likely to be passing that way on the way to the fair in Fermoy on the Monday. Later I met Sean in Tincurry and, after telling him about the fair in Fermoy on the Monday and offering to do the job any other night during the week, he said that, as the arrangements were made, he would go ahead, and anyhow he considered that it would only be good training for the Volunteers. He then sent me home to go to bed as I was still feeling the effects of the hunger-strike.

That night, a patrol of British military captured and handcuffed a party of four or five Volunteers whom they surprised on the road near the rifle range. Treacy and Ladrigan, who were on the range at the time, heard the commotion on the road, and fired some shots over the heads of the military and the prisoners. It was dark at the time and, for fear of hitting the prisoners, they had to fire in the air. The military ran for cover and the prisoners escaped. The next day, two men who were not there at all were arrested by the R.I.C. and charged with illegal assembly at the rifle range. At their

trial, an R.I.C. man swore that he actually saw them there. They were sentenced to six months imprisonment each.

About a week later, British forces again raided my home, but this time I was not there. I was on the run at the time. Between then and the first Sunday in September 1920 when I was captured again at Maher's of Blackcastle, Seán Hogan spent a good deal of time with me in my battalion area. Seán Treacy visited us on a few occasions and, on his last visit before my final meeting with him at Blackcastle, he gave me five rounds of .45 revolver ammunition, an incident to which I will refer again.

Accompanied by William Casey, the battalion Adjutant, I went to Maher's of Blackcastle to attend a brigade council meeting on the first Sunday in September 1920. I met Casey by appointment outside Cahir, on the Cahir-Cashel road. He told me that a patrol of Lancers from Cahir military barracks had gone out the road. We cycled on for some distance, and ran into the patrol where they were halted around a bend in the road. I dismounted and, letting the air out of one of the tubes, pretended I had got a puncture. Some of the soldiers sympathised with me, saying, "Hard luck, Paddy!", but they did not search us or question us about our business, or where we were going. When the Lancers moved off and we had "moryah" mended the puncture, Casey and I went by bye-roads to Blackcastle. There I reported to Seán Treacy, and told him that the Lancers were out from Cahir and that we had met them on the Cashel road. He said that there was an armed guard of Volunteers out to protect the meeting, and he was sure that it was strong

enough to deal with any patrols which might come along. He asked me if I had the five rounds of revolver ammunition which he had given me shortly before, and when I handed them to him, he looked at the mark on the shells and said, "These are duds. Leave them to me. I will give you five good rounds instead of them". He had not got as far as handing me the five rounds in exchange when word came that the Lancers were coming through the fields towards Mahers. Treacy told me to clear away at once. I had not got more than the second field away when I was surrounded by a party of the Lancers and captured. Seumas O'Neill, Commandant of the 2nd Battalion, and the late Jack O'Keefe of Carrick-on-Suir, then Adjutant of the 8th Battalion, were also captured.

We were taken to Cashel barracks, and all three of us were put into one large cell there. During the night, we had an unpleasant visit from a big, burly and scar-marked Black and Tan. He twirled a revolver on his finger, and said that he proposed to make us eat it. The corporal of the guard ordered him out of the cell, but he refused to go until the corporal brought in some members of the guard, with fixed bayonets, and put him out. The corporal told us that the Black and Tan was an ex convict who had been released from Dartmoor prison to join the forces.

From Cashel, we were taken to Cahir military barracks, from there to Fermoy and then to the detention barracks in Cork. We were detained in Cork for five or six weeks, awaiting trial. Meanwhile, summaries of evidence and charge sheets were prepared. We were tried by court martial on the charge of illegal assembly in a martial law area, and sentenced to two years hard labour each.

After two weeks in Cork prison, the three of us, with ten other political prisoners, were taken across the water, and I again found myself back at Wormwood Scrubbs prison. On our way, we decided that, on arrival at the prison in England, we would demand political prisoners' treatment, and would refuse to wear prison clothes. I was appointed to act as spokesman.

It was night time when we arrived at Wormwood Scrubbs prison, and we were told that the prison garments would be ready for us in the morning. I told the warders that we had no intention of wearing the prison clothes, and threatened to go on hunger-strike if any attempt was made to force us to do so. To prevent our clothes being taken, we slept in them that night. Next day, I was taken to the Governor of the prison. He told me that some Irish political prisoners were wearing prison clothes and that they (the prisoners) had petitioned the Home Office for permission to wear their own clothes. I made it clear to him that we had no intention of either wearing the prison clothes or of petitioning the Home Office. For the moment, the matter ended there, but later I was again before the Governor, this time on a charge of having spoken to Seumas O'Neill during exercise in the ring. The Governor sentenced me to three days solitary confinement on bread and water. During these three days, Seumas O'Neill acted as spokesman and, after my term of solitary confinement, there was no objection to our talking during exercise.

About ten days later, we were moved from Wormwood Scrubbs to Brixton prison. On the way, I again issued a warning to resist any attempt to force us to wear prison garb. On arrival at Brixton, our names were called in

alphabetical order for medical examination. The first prisoner to be called was a man named Harrington from Limerick. He refused to take off his clothes for the prison doctor, and he told the Governor that he had orders from me not to do so. The Governor then sent for me, and told me that we would be treated as political prisoners, but that, first of all, we would have to go through the prison routine of medical examination. He assured me that we would be handed back our clothes after the examination. The news that we were to be treated as political prisoners seemed almost too good to be true, so I insisted on getting an assurance to that effect in writing from the Governor before I agreed to tell the prisoners to take off their clothes for the doctor's examination.

Well, we had no further trouble in Brixton. The prison authorities kept their agreement to treat us as political prisoners, and I was detained there until my release on January 13th, 1922, after the terms of the Treaty had been approved by Dáil Éireann.

SIGNED:

Edmond McGrath

(Edmond McGrath)

DATE:

28th March 1956

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WITNESS

J. Grace (J. Grace)