

ORIGINAL

BUREAU OF MILITARY HISTORY 1913-21
BORD STAIRÉ MILEATA 1913-21
No. W.S. 1,410

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BUREAU OF MILITARY HISTORY, 1913-21.

STATEMENT BY WITNESS.

DOCUMENT NO. W.S. 1410

Witness

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8 Parkmore Drive,
Terenure,
Dublin.

Identity.

Lieutenant, E. Company, 2nd Battalion, Dublin
Brigade, I.R.A.

Subject.

Burning of the Custom House,
25th May, 1921.

Conditions, if any, Stipulated by Witness.

Nil.

File No S.2730.

Form B.S.M. 2

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STATEMENT BY LIEUT-COLONEL MICHAEL O'KELLY

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Dublin
NO. 1,410

8, Parkmore Drive, Terenure

Burning of the Dublin Custom House - 25th May, 1921.

On the 25th May 1921, the Irish Republican Army accomplished the total destruction of the Dublin Custom House, thereby paralysing British Civil Administration in this country.

The scheme had its origin in a Council meeting of the Headquarters Staff of the Republican Forces held at The O'Rahilly's house, 40, Herbert Park, Dublin. The purpose of the meeting was to discuss the military situation and the following were present:

Cathal Brugha	J.J. O'Connell
Michael Collins	Seán McMahon
Austin Stack	Seán Russell
Richard Mulcahy	Liam Mellows
Pierce Beasley	Eamon de Valera.
Gearóid O'Sullivan	

They were all agreed that the time had come to deliver a smashing blow to England, some bigger military operation than anything yet attempted.

Two projects were laid before the conference, one, the taking of Beggars Bush Barracks, a strong military position in the hands of the enemy, or the destruction of the Custom House; both these suggestions came from President de Valera.

The following Government departments were housed in the Custom House: -

Inland Revenue
Local Government
Estate Duty Control Registers
Staff office
Income Tax and Joint Stock Company
Registers.

Its destruction would reduce the most important branch of British Civil Government in Ireland to virtual impotence and would, in addition, inflict on her a financial loss of about £2,000,000.

The Officer Commanding the Dublin Brigade was ordered to investigate the relative merits of the two schemes, and a member of the Intelligence Department was ordered to take up his residence in a house opposite Beggars Bush Barracks and make his report. This report, received in due course, expressed the view that to take this strongly fortified position by surprise was almost impossible, and after some deliberation, the Custom House operation was decided upon.

The Officer Commanding the Dublin Brigade was successful in carrying out a personal reconnaissance of the building; carrying some envelopes in his hand, he entered the building one day and, under the pretext of looking for someone in one of the numerous departments, made his way through the huge building without arousing any suspicion, thus making the fixing of details possible.

A ground plan of the building was copied from one in the National Library.

Comdt. T. Ennis, Officer Commanding 2nd Battalion, was appointed to take charge. He was informed he could have the pick of the Brigade. The number required to carry out the job was estimated at 120. This number did not include a covering party for outside, nor a guard for the city fire brigade stations, which were provided for by the Officer Commanding the Brigade. The units actually engaged inside the building were the 2nd Battalion A.S.U. and squad. Outside was a party of the 1st Battalion.

The opinion was expressed by President de Valera that if these 120 men were lost and the job accomplished, the sacrifice would be well justified.

Equipment. The material required for the operation was - paraffin oil and petrol (280 gallons; tins, petrol 140). Bales of cotton waste - 2. All these had to be procured at the earliest possible moment and, accordingly, the O/C. B/Coy. 2nd Battalion, was detailed to commandeer the paraffin and petrol. O/C. D/Coy. 2nd Battalion to get the tins and cotton waste a week prior to the operation, which had been fixed for the 25th May 1921. Both these officers were successful in getting the material; the paraffin and petrol were got by holding up horse-drawn tanks in the streets and making prisoners of the drivers; the tins, by carrying out a raid on the Shell Company's yard, and the waste from the Broadstone Railway Station. The process of filling the petrol tins was started immediately in one of the company dumps. The other equipment necessary was as follows: hatchets, bolt-cutters and transport, these being left over until the morning of the 25th.

Assembly. Oriel Hall was the assembly point. Orders were issued to report there at 12 noon on the 25th and, accordingly, the boys drifted along in the usual groups of twos and threes. It was, however, observed by the first few to arrive that the goods yard of the G.N.Rly. was occupied by the enemy, some of whom were actually leaning over the wall overlooking the Oriel Hall. Word to this effect was dispatched to the Battalion Commander at 100 Seville Place, who immediately gave orders to have assembly point changed to Sean Connolly Hall.

It was about 12.15 p.m. when the last man arrived at the new venue. The Manager (by which name Comdt. T. Ennis was known to all) was present. He had already given instructions to the O/C. D/Coy. 2nd Battalion, earlier on that morning, to commandeer a heavy motor lorry, proceed to the dump, load

the stores and report to him at 12.15 p.m. at the venue. The lorry duly arrived at this moment. This car was commandeered from outside Findlater's shop in O'Connell St., where it had been in the process of being unloaded when O/C. D/Coy., accompanied by his driver and one other, came on the scene. They were all agreed that the vehicle met the necessary requirements, so the officer in charge informed the men who were unloading, as politely as he could, that he required the car for a few hours. The men handed over the car without any fuss, whereupon the vehicle was driven to the dump and loaded with the stores. This done, it was driven to Connolly Hall where all officers, section leaders and men were paraded for orders.

Orders. The Battalion Commander briefly explained the operation to all present and told them what was required of them, also the result it was expected to have upon the enemy. He was in possession of a plan of the inside of the building by which he pointed out the allotted positions to be taken up upon entry, at the same time detailing the officers for each floor. There were four company commanders present, one of these (O/C. D.Coy) being appointed 2nd i/c. The route was outlined and the following orders issued. The guard to enter at 12.58 p.m., man all entrances, dismantle telephonic communication, allow in all persons who so desired, but none to be allowed to leave, and make prisoners of the two policemen at the main entrance. The lorry to be at this entrance at 12.59 p.m.

Every man to be in possession of a hatchet on arrival. They would raid likely shops on the way for these.

The main body to enter at 1 p.m. and, on arrival at the main entrance, each man to take two 2-gallon tins of petrol off the lorry. They would then proceed to allotted corridors,

instruct the members of the staff to collect all personal belongings and proceed to the Main Hall, taking particular care that no person pocketed any official documents; close all windows, smash all presses, collect all papers in a heap on the floor and thoroughly soak the floor and all inflammable material with petrol.. As each floor was ready for firing the Officer i/c. of floor was to report the fact to 2nd i/c., he, in turn, to inform the Battalion Commander, who would give orders to set fire, starting at the top floor. In order to guard against possible confusion, it was strictly forbidden for any man to have a whistle in his possession.

In the event of any hitch occurring that would prevent the job being finished, the Battalion Commander would give a whistle blast which would be the signal for every man to get away. This completed the orders and all proceeded in the direction of the Custom House by the routes indicated.

Armament: Every man was armed with a revolver and six rds.

Protection. The Officer Commanding Dublin Brigade had arranged for a covering party to be posted on the railway bridge overlooking Custom House. He also had men posted in all fire brigade stations to prevent their being of assistance to the enemy.

Operation. At 1 p.m. (the appointed time) the party converged on the Custom House from the direction of Store St., Gardiner St. and Amiens St. There were a large number of people about at the time, it being the mid-day rush hour; therefore, the various groups of men passed unnoticed. The success of the operation depended on the elements of surprise and speed, but unfortunately a lot of time was lost in the herding of the staff to the Main Hall, all of whom were completely

surprised at the audacity of the attack. The suddenness with which the building was entered threw them into a state of panic, though at first some were inclined to take the whole thing as a joke; but, on seeing the number of guns in evidence they realised that real business was intended. Others who were stout supporters of the enemy administration, were very reluctant to do as ordered, and here a little gentle persuasion was necessary.

The lady members of the staff, in particular, became panicky and hysterical, and a considerable amount of time was lost on this account. The caretaker rushed to the telephone, although previously warned against doing so, and had to be shot. The enemy were, however, warned from some unknown source, with the result that they arrived in strength at 1.17 p.m. - seventeen minutes after the building had been entered and before preparations for firing had been completed.

The first lorry to arrive was engaged by the covering party from the railway bridge with grenade and revolver fire. (According to official reports, four Tans were wounded).

The unexpected had happened and the men inside, on hearing the shooting, took up position at the doors and windows and opened up on the enemy who were also taking up positions.

At this time excitement was running high amongst the staff. Above the din could be heard the blast of a whistle; this came from one of the Volunteers who apparently had become excited too. The men on the top landing, on hearing the whistle and thinking it was the whistle to get away, rushed to the ground floor towards the main entrance. Just at this time the Battalion Commander appeared in the Main Hall and realised that his original plan had miscarried through one

of the men giving a blast on a whistle, contrary to orders. He, with characteristic decision, ordered Lieut. J. Slattery, who was posted at the main entrance, to close the door. He then ordered all men from the Main Hall upstairs, at the same time giving the order to "set fire". The promptness with which the Battalion Commander acted saved the situation and succeeded in re-establishing control when all looked like being lost. The men, on their part giving ready obedience to their leader, rushed up the stairs after him and set about the task of destroying the top portion of the building with thoroughness, leaving nothing to chance. By the time they had completed their task, the second floor had also been set alight, and it was only with the greatest difficulty, fighting through the blinding smoke, that they succeeded in making their way back to the ground floor.

The building was now completely surrounded by the enemy. The Black and Tans had been reinforced by military who were keeping up a continuous fire on the building with M.Gs., from armoured cars and Lewis guns which they had brought into position underneath the railway bridge.

A number of casualties occurred amongst the staff from stray bullets coming through the windows and doors (newspaper reports give one killed and six wounded). The men inside were replying to the fire whenever an inviting target showed up. Some of the A.S.U. were armed with Peter the Painters and used them to good advantage.

The position was now becoming impossible inside with the fire spreading rapidly when the Battalion Commander gave the order for every one to get out. The staff rushed out shouting: "friends, friends"; it was a case of every man for himself now, so most of the men, having fired their six rounds,

dumped the guns and filed out behind the staff. Once outside, the higher officials of the staff picked out their own who were set free; the remainder, being all I.R.A., were placed under a heavy guard to await the arrival of lorries.

Just at this time there were a few rushes from the building in twos and threes, men trying to fight their way through the cordon. For most, it was a futile effort. A few were fortunate in getting away, but others were badly wounded, including the Battalion Commander. His was a miraculous escape, as he was one of the very last to leave the building and had to decide between being burned to death, captured, or chance getting away by a rush. The odds were one in a hundred against getting away. If he were captured it would in all probability mean shooting, he being a very much wanted man. This fact, I think, decided him upon attempting to get away. He selected the only point where the enemy appeared to be weak and, with a gun in each hand, made a rush from a side gate towards the lane opposite. He had only gone about 20 yards when he fell wounded with a bullet in his hip. He picked himself up and made a second dash, firing as he went, was struck again, this time on the leg, but he kept on going as best he could until he arrived at the top of the lane where he saw a horse-drawn cart, into which he scrambled. Luckily, the driver of the cart, who was friendly towards the I.R.A., recognised him and willingly took him to safety.

The entire operation was successfully carried out in the face of an enemy in superior numbers and firepower and was a hazardous undertaking in itself, calling for a high degree of determination and skill on the part of the Commander and of unwavering courage on the part of the remainder.

Casualties: Killed - 5. Wounded - 3.

Captain Paddy O'Reilly	Comdt. T. Ennis
Lieut. Stephen O'Reilly	Lieut. J. Slattery
Dan Head	J. Ward
Eddie Dorrins	
Sean Doyle.	

Taken prisoner - 80 all ranks.

Total enemy casualties unknown, as the true figures were never published by the British Authorities.

And so ended what history will record as one of the most daring and intrepid battles fought by Ireland's Volunteer army in the Anglo-Irish war. The story of that fight cannot fail to awaken in the hearts of the young men of this generation a desire to serve their country in its need when that need arises, but it will not be enough that they should answer the call to arms. When the invader is at their door. They must be up and doing now to fit themselves for the task of defending the liberties and institutions won at the cost of so much blood by their predecessors - the Volunteers of 1916 - 1921.

Signed:

Michael J. Keary Lt Col

Date:

30th April 1956.

Witness:

Mr Ryan Comdt.

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