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ORIGINAL

BUREAU OF MILITARY HISTORY 1913-21

BURO STAIRE MILEATA 1913-21

NO. **W.S.** 1495

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BUREAU OF MILITARY HISTORY, 1913-21.

STATEMENT BY WITNESS.

DOCUMENT NO. **W.S.** 1495.

Witness

Martin Walsh,
Dunmain,
Cassagh,
New Ross,
Co. Wexford.

Identity.

Adjutant, 2nd Battalion, South Wexford Brigade.

Vice O/C, 2nd Battalion, South Wexford Brigade.

Subject.

Activities of Gusserane Company, Ross Battalion,
South Wexford Brigade, 1914-Truce.

Conditions, if any, Stipulated by Witness.

Nil.

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Form B.S.M. 2

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No. W.S. 1495

STATEMENT BY MARTIN WALSH,

Dunmain, Cassagh, New Ross, Co. Wexford.

I was born at Dunmain, Co. Wexford, in 1893, and with the rest of my sisters and brothers I attended the local national school until I was 14 years of age, having then completed 5th standard.

My father, at the time, was a caretaker with a Mr. Downes who was then the owner of the famous mansion called Dunmain House which belonged to the Annesleys over 200 years ago. Those who have read the book "The Wandering Heir" by Charles Reid, or "Guy Mannering" by Sir Walter Scott, have a good idea of the happenings in this mansion.

Lord Annesley, the owner, died, leaving behind his young son, James, who was only about 10 years old. Shortly after the lord's death his brother came over from England, took over the mansion in his own name and ruled the place with an iron hand. Being cruel and unkind, it was no wonder that the boy fled to Dublin, where he was found and taken care of by a butcher and his wife. This butcher went to the Parliament House in Dublin and contacted a member from Wexford, who brought back the news of the whereabouts of the boy to his uncle at Dunmain. Immediately the uncle got moving, and one night later, with a band of men, forcibly took the youngster to the North Wall and arranged with the captain of the ship to have him sold into slavery.

In 1909-10 I can recall the many dances held in Slieve Coilthe of '98 fame, where Irish songs and recitations were the order of the day. Here, too, were many debates on Sinn Féin and John Redmond's Home Rule policy.

In 1913-14 Volunteer companies were formed throughout the country to oppose Carson in the North, and naturally I joined the local company with the boys. It was known as Gusserane Company. Tom Hanlon was company captain. We were drilled and trained by ex-British soldiers who had fought in the Boer War and had service in India. At the outbreak of World War 1 many young Irishmen joined the British Army and many others were advised to join John Redmond's Volunteers and fight for England, with the promise of Home Rule as a bait. Redmond and the others of the Irish Party appealed to the Volunteers to join the British Army. As we did not agree with this the company broke up.

About this time there was a strong company of the Redmond Volunteers in the town of Ross, supported and encouraged by the so-called "big shots" of the area, but also, on the quiet, was a strong company of Sinn Féin Volunteers who were arming and drilling in secret. Well I remember a Mr. Sullivan, an organiser, addressing the boys in a field, advising them to stay at home and fight for Ireland but not for the British Empire, and help to restore to this old nation her lost independence by following in the footsteps of the United Irishmen and the Fenians; a thorny path, but let it be our choice.

After the prisoners returned from Frongoch Internment Camp and other prisons in England things began to move. The execution of the 1916 leaders had opened up a new life

in the minds of the Irish people and Sinn Féin clubs sprang up all over the country. I joined the Gusserane Club where we had a membership of twenty. At this time there was a football team also in Gusserane, captained by Tom Hanlon. The bulk of the team were members of the Sinn Féin Club and followed Hanlon into the ranks of the Volunteers, of which he was company captain. Some Ross men, notably the late Comdt. Phil Lennon, and others came out to the company and gave all the help they could, drilling, etc.

At this time County Wexford was organised as one brigade, with its headquarters in Enniscorthy. Our company (Gusserane) was attached to the Ross Battalion. The members of the Battalion Staff were Phil Lennon, O/C; Joseph McCarthy, Vice O/C; Paddy Hayden, Adjutant; and John O'Neill, Quartermaster. There were many subsequent changes, due to promotions, arrests, resignation, etc.

Shortly after our company was formed I was appointed 1st Lt. and Frank Myler was Company Adjutant. There were twenty-seven men in the company.

About this time I composed and sang songs at concerts all over the country to help to raise funds for "The Cause". One of my favourites ran like this:

Hark the loud rumours of a European war;
 The clang of the battle is heard near and far,
 Blood runs on both sides like rivers of red,
 Strewing mountain and valley with wounded and dead.
 It was Serbia and Austria started the fight,
 Russia told Prussia that Serbia was right,
 France, Belgium and Italy moved into it then,
 And John Bull ran to Paddy, sayin' "we want ye again
 For the whole German Army is crossing the Rhine.
 You'll want to come quick, Pat, we haven't much time,
 Shoulder that knapsack, make no delay,
 You're never more wanted that you are to-day".
 Pat, cool and daring, faced the case blunt,
 "What about Ireland while I'm at the front?
 When I won the West Indies and South Africa
 The tax of the whole thing you then made me pay".

"That's nonsense" said John, "Don't be a fool, Remember I'm giving you Colonial Home Rule. So sing 'Tipperary', it's a good marching song And join the brave throng that goes marching along. Pat, my old rogue, you'll sing no hymns of hate About Boolavogue or the three bullet gate, Get down in the trenches and keep your head cool And remember you're getting Colonial Home Rule."etc.

Another of my songs ran like this : -

While in prison a story we honour,
The names of our truest and best,
Who flung to the breeze Erin's banner
And hailed her High Queen of the West.
Dublin was dreaming in sunshine,
'Twas the eve of a bright Easter Day
When the Irish Republican Army
Marched out in her ancient old quay.
They captured the wireless station,
Soon spreading from south to the east,
Rang the tidings of Ireland a nation
They hailed her proud Queen of the West.
Hurrah for Pearse, Daly and Plunkett,
Connolly, MacBride and the rest
That sang to the breeze Erin's trumpet.
To hail her proud Queen of the West.

In Gusserane we also had a set of mummers, all members of the Volunteers. We gave exhibitions throughout the area, mainly for propaganda purposes. A set of mummers represented twelve patriots ranging from Columcille to the men of Easter Week. Each patriot recited a rhyme representing the history of his period. For instance, Wolfe Tone would step forward when called upon by the captain and recite: -

Here I am, Wolfe Tone, founder of the Cause
All creeds and classes to unite,
Long bound by alien laws.
One day I swore on Caye Hill brow
To set my country free
Or share the fate of William Orr
Upon the gallow's tree. etc.

The O'Rahilly

Wrap the green flag round me boys,
The O'Rahilly is my name.
My life I gave in Erin's cause
To win undying fame.
No coward I who feared to die,
I scoffed at fear of death;
And God and Ireland were the words I spoke
With my last drawn breath. etc.

Padraig Pearse

I'm Padraig Pearse, first President of Ireland's Republic
 'Twas mine to fight and mine to die, to free my native
 grand,
 land.
 And when you read in later days, in history and in verse
 No words more sweet your eyes will greet:
 Than Easter Week and Pearse. etc.

Thomas Ashe.

My name is Ashe and like a flash
 From Kerry's hill I came
 And in the tree of liberty
 I carved a deathless name.
 The stars that gem old Erin's skies
 Look down upon my grave
 But I am with you, comrades, still
 To cheer the true and brave.
 Near Ashbourne town I held the pass,
 The foe I put to flight
 And proudly flung upon the breeze
 The Orange, Green and White. etc.

de Valera.

De Valera is my name
 And to this isle our fathers came
 From out the sunny lands of Spain
 In days of long ago.
 And by a Spaniard 'tis decreed
 That we would see Old Ireland freed,
 And in her hour of direst need
 Would see the dawning glow. etc.

We will leave the mummers at that and get back to our activities with the company. Conscription WAS about to be forced on the country by Britain and our H.Q. ordered each company to raid and collect all shotguns in our area, an order which was duly carried out. In some cases raiders wore masks, but I never wore a mask on such jobs as I always believed that we had public opinion, or the greater part of it, on our side.

We selected a cave at Abbeybraney in the Gusserane district as a dump where the boys and myself oiled and looked after those guns weekly. This cave was also used to store explosives which had been taken from the Tower of Hook. Luckily, this dump was never discovered during the trouble. I remember one night having a narrow escape

in this cave. Harry Donovan and I were filling a land mine with tonite. During the process the place filled up with dust and a rainbow of light flashed around a carbide lamp which was laid in front of us on a box of explosives. Donovan, sensing danger, grabbed the lamp and flung it over his shoulder into a stream outside. A flash of fire followed the lamp out. We both threw ourselves flat, waiting for something to happen, and we were more than lucky to escape with singed eyebrows.

In this cave we found many human bones and it is believed that a certain Dr. Rossiter, who owned the place at one period, employed body snatchers to unearth corpses as soon as they were buried and take them to the cave for examination by him as to the cause of death. Oftentimes friends were obliged to guard the graves of their dead from those body snatchers.

The first attack on Clonroche Barracks comes to my mind. A few members of the Gusserane Company, including myself, got orders to proceed to Lacken Cross and join the Ross men there, thence to Clonroche which was in the Enniscorthy district. We numbered about seventeen, all armed with shotguns. We were put on road blocks during the attack on the barracks. The attack was called off at 4 a.m. The barrack was not captured.

About this time the police and Tans kept raiding Tom Hanlon's home, with the result that he had to go "on the run". Into our area came two young men who were also "on the run", Willie Owens of Shankill, Co. Dublin, who was later shot by the Tans in a hall near his home, and Mick Walsh, formerly of Portlaoighise (Maryboro). Both fell in with Hanlon and activities in the area increased.

A large amount of explosives was taken from Hook Tower Lighthouse and some of it was dumped in our area. Land mines and hand grenades were made at different places. The hand grenades were made from pipe iron about 6" long and 5"-6" circumference. The land mines were made from shell cases which had been seized at Pierce's foundry, Wexford. When loaded, they weighed about 17-18 lbs. Land mines were also made from cart wheel boxes. These were made similar to the hand grenades. A timber block was put in one end of the case, through which was put an iron bolt. When the case was filled with tonite, a detonator and fuses were inserted, the fuses coming through a hole in the block at the other end. At a later stage the land mines were exploded electrically. Buckshot was made by moulds. The moulds were made by the Rochfords, Ned and Patsy, who were blacksmiths and members of the Gusserane Company.

About the end of October or early November, 1920, the Wexford Brigade was divided and two brigades - North Wexford Brigade and South Wexford Brigade. Our area was included in the South Wexford Brigade. Dr. Jim Ryan was the first O/C of the brigade. Up to the reorganisation we were in the Ross Battalion, but it now was divided into two battalions, the 1st and 2nd. Our company was in the 2nd Battalion and our company captain, Tom Hanlon, was appointed O/C 2nd Battalion. I succeeded Hanlon as company captain.

On instructions from the Battalion Staff, cartridges were filled and preparations made for an all out attack on Foulksmills R.I.C. Barracks. On the night of the attack all companies in the battalion took up positions as ordered. Our company, Gusserane, armed with shotguns,

crept into positions directly opposite the barrack, behind a fence, only the roadway between. It was planned to blow a breach in the building with two land mines. Another section would then use bottles of petrol and hand grenades to fire the barracks. The mines exploded but the walls were not breached. Immediately the attack started the police replied with rifle fire and sent up Verey lights. Our shotguns went into action, and with grenades exploding it was a very lively place. As the morning was approaching and daylight coming in and as our shotgun ammunition was running out, we were forced to withdraw under heavy enemy fire which was continuous on our position. The police in the barracks numbered about 14 men and kept up rifle fire and sending up Verey lights until the late hours of the morning. Gusserane Company withdrew one by one by creeping in a drain which ran parallel to the barracks. All got back safely to the pre-arranged assembly point.

About the spring of 1921, or soon after, we got our first consignment of rifles. They were Lee Enfields and I think we got about twelve. A rifle or two was sent to each company in turn for instruction. An organiser came to us from H.Q. and gave lectures as to how rifles were to be handled etc. It was not long until each man had a practical knowledge of how to use a rifle. Later I was given one of these rifles. It was a long Lee Enfield and its number was 250732.

Soon afterwards it was decided to form a Battalion Active Service Unit as there were a number of the lads "on the run" in the area. I myself had not slept at home for many a month. Up to now we had only shotguns, but

since the rifles came we were anxious to ambush the enemy, capture barracks etc. and do our part like the men of Cork, Longford, Tipperary and Kilkenny.

Around this time, too, I remember being ordered, as Capt. of Gusserane Company, to select eight men to attack the R.I.C. barracks at Foulksmills. The main purpose of the attack was to force the police to send up Verey lights which would bring reinforcements from Wexford, while our active service unit would ambush them on the way. The plans were put into operation on the appointed night. My party crossed the country to the barrack, which was about 6-7 miles away. We were armed with shotguns and carried with us a crude land mine, each man taking the load on his back in turn. It was a fine night in the month of May when we arrived to take up positions, the active service unit making tracks for their posts at the same time. A few of my party were told off to concentrate shotgun fire on the barracks, and Jim Colfer, Harry Donovan and myself approached the building and crossed the barrack wall with the mine. Donovan held the mine in his arms while I lit the fuse with a cigarette butt. We then placed the mine in position against the barrack wall and hurriedly got back to cover, seized our guns and waited for the mine to explode, which happened in a few seconds. We opened fire on the iron-plated windows and at the same time lightning flashed, followed by a loud peel of thunder which shook the whole locality as buckshot rained like hail. From the barrack chimney went up rocket after rocket, the countryside being illuminated. The police replied with heavy rifle fire and flung out hand grenades and kept on sending up Verey lights which, we knew, would bring out the military from Wexford Town. The police in the barracks

were expecting a major attack when the mine exploded. In a short time reinforcements were on the way, but unfortunately they came on a different road from the main Taghmon-Wexford road on which the column had taken up positions, and, worse still, they returned by another route - the Duncannon Line, having come out the Mountain Road. We had by this time collected the empty cartridge cases and withdrawn.

I might mention that it was most essential to recover all empty cases for re-filling. Those cartridges were so tight fitting that after firing, the gun extractor would not eject the empty case, so it was necessary for us to carry a long iron rod for the purpose and each man used it in turn.

When Dr. Ryan, Brigade O/C, was arrested, Tom Hanlon was appointed to succeed him. Pat Carty, who was Vice O/C, 2nd Battalion, became Battalion O/C. Tom Howlett became Vice O/C and I was appointed Battalion Adjutant. Jack Kent was Quartermaster and Peter Cummins Engineering Officer. Harry Donovan succeeded me as Captain of Gusserane Company. Later on I became Vice O/C of the battalion, and Frank Myler became Battalion Adjutant.

Around this time, too, it was planned to take a police barracks in Arthurstown, but a car from New Ross with petrol and some rifles was held up by military and forced to return to the town. Fortunately the car or its occupants were not searched. The men at the mobilisation point waited in vain, and when the late hours of the morning came they had no alternative but to abandon the attack. Needless to say, this was a great disappointment to the men,

as the barracks would have been taken that night and a further supply of rifles would be available to the companies.

Many a time we lay in ambush on main and by-roads for military patrols, but Wexford being such a network of roads you would want several columns operating there at the same time, but we did manage to do a bit of sniping now and again.

There came to this area another man 'on the run'. He was Capt. Joe McMahon and a native of County Clare. He gave us great support and took part in the major activities of the battalion, having already done his part in other counties. Many a time I travelled the area on a Sunday with him, seeking out good positions for ambushes, but he always remarked that Wexford roads were so plentiful that successful ambushes would be very difficult to carry out as the military would have so many advantages.

In the summer of 1921 we were well organised, fairly well armed, sound men and officers, ready for any emergency. Next came the Truce, with new recruits and the battalion training camps, where I remained for the duration of the Truce.

Signed: Martin Walsh

Date: 11th Sept 1956

Witness: Sean Brennan Lieut. Col.

