

1513

ORIGINAL

BUREAU OF MILITARY HISTORY 1913-21
BURO STAIRIE 1913-21
No. W.S. 1513

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BUREAU OF MILITARY HISTORY, 1913-21.

STATEMENT BY WITNESS.

DOCUMENT NO. **W.S.** 1513.....

Witness

Bernard Meehan,
Mullaghmore,
Co. Sligo.

Identity.

Coy. Lieut. and acting
Company Capt.

Subject.

I.R.B., Sinn Féin & I. Vol.
activities Cliffoney, Co. Sligo,
1914-1921.
I.R.A. activities Liverpool.

Conditions, if any, Stipulated by Witness.

Nil.

File No **S.2837**.....

Form B.S.M. 2

ORIGINAL

BUREAU OF MILITARY HISTORY 1913-21

BURU STAIRÉ MILEATA 1913-21

No. W.S. 1,513

STATEMENT BY BERNARD MEEHAN,

Mullaghmore, County Sligo.

I was born at Cliffoney, County Sligo, in 1898 and received my primary education in the National School there.

In 1914-15 a Company of the National Volunteers, sometimes called Redmond's Volunteers, was organised in Cliffoney. I joined this unit and we got instruction in foot and arms drill, using wooden guns for instruction in arms drill. Very soon I realised that Redmond was a recruiting agent for the British Army and I severed my connection with that organisation.

In November, 1915 I was introduced, with a few other men in the district, into the I.R.B. (Irish Republican Brotherhood) by the late William Gilmartin and Alec McCabe, then a National Teacher in Sligo. The I.R.B. Circle at that time consisted of eight members and was later increased to twelve. William Gilmartin and myself then organised a Company of the Irish Volunteers in Cliffoney area. At that time we had a Catholic Curate - the late Father Michael O'Flanagan, a great Irishman and strong supporter of the Republican Movement. He gave us every assistance and encouragement and advised the young men of the parish to join the Irish Volunteers. In all, forty men joined the Cliffoney Company.

Around this time, fuel was very scarce in this area, due to lack of bog for turf cutting. At the same time, Colonel Ashley, landlord, owned a large tract of bog but would not allow the tenants to cut turf there. We decided on taking over the bog for the tenants and, having organised them, we commenced turf cutting. Very soon the

British Forces were on the scene. Although some arrests were made we succeeded in saving and removing the turf.

At the end of 1915 we had collected some funds and arranged for the purchase of twenty single-barrel shotguns in Dublin. Our next job was to get the guns down to Cliffooney. At that period motor cars were very scarce and the only car available was one the property of a Protestant man named Millar from Ballyshannon. As a ruse to get Millar to drive us to Dublin, Willie Gilmartin had himself heavily bandaged and we told Millar that he was seriously injured and that it was necessary to have him conveyed to a Dublin hospital immediately. Millar agreed to drive us but on discovering our mission he was considerably annoyed. We ordered him to keep going and later impressed him as to what his fate would be if he gave any information about the episode. In all fairness to Millar I must say that he never mentioned the matter afterwards. We collected a few more shotguns locally. In addition, we secured two Service rifles from Finner Camp, then occupied by British Military Forces. These were stolen out of a store by a man named Daly from Ballyshannon, who was employed as a labourer in the Camp and who succeeded in smuggling them over to us.

Together with a few revolvers, the above was our armament prior to the Rebellion in Easter Week 1916 when we got orders to mobilise under arms. Andy Conway, Willie Gilmartin and myself got instructions to mobilise our Company and have them assemble at a farmhouse at Bunduff near Cliffooney. We were to be ready to march on Sligo on Easter Monday morning and captured all R.I.C. barracks en route. Sometime in the early hours of Easter Monday morning we got instructions, via Sligo town, from Eoin McNeill to cancel active operations pending further instructions from our

General Headquarters. We were later confused with contradictory orders and rumours. It was finally decided to take a vote as to whether the Company be disbanded or remain in readiness. The majority, mostly the older men, voted in favour of disbanding. Our men then returned to their homes.

On Sunday morning, 5th May, 1916, with thirteen or fourteen members of the Cliffooney Company I was arrested by British Forces. We were conveyed to Sligo Prison, thence to the then Richmond Barracks, Dublin, and from there to Wandsworth Prison, England, where I was interned until July, 1916. After my release from internment, the Volunteer Force was again organised in the Cliffooney area. With Willie Gilmartin and Andy Conway I took an active part in the re-organisation. There was no hall in or around Cliffooney where we could meet but there was a vacant school-house, the property of Colonel Ashley. This we decided to take over and use as a hall. A party of Volunteers marched up on a Sunday evening and entered the school. In a very short time the R.I.C., who were stationed just across the road, came into the school to investigate. We were prepared for any questions they might ask. We had already provided ourselves with Irish Trade Union membership cards and told the R.I.C. that we were holding a Union meeting. Apparently they were satisfied with our story as they did not molest us there for some time. We cleaned up the place and it was used as a Sinn Féin hall for some time afterwards. It was burned in October, 1920 by British Forces.

During the year 1917 most of our time was devoted to organisation and training. Early in 1918, prior to the General Elections, in the company of Willie Gilmartin and Hugh McCarron, I acted as an armed escort to Father O'Flanagan and other leaders

while they were on an election organisation tour in Donegal and Tyrone. During our tour the R.I.C. attempted to hold us up on a few occasions but we refused to stop. We also had a lot of annoyance from the A.C.H., which organisation was bitterly opposed to Sinn Féin at that time. We had several clashes with Orangemen especially in County Tyrone. On one occasion we were staying overnight in an hotel in Omagh, when a large party of Orangemen and some members of the A.C.H. surrounded us and adopted a very threatening attitude. We got good support from the Volunteers in Omagh and, after some scuffles with the mob, they eventually withdrew and left us in peace for that night. In all we spent two to three weeks with Father O'Flanagan in the northern counties. Later on we did armed escort duty for Fionan Lynch.

In 1918 the British Government proposed conscripting the young men of Ireland into the British Army. The proposal was opposed by old and young alike and large numbers flocked to the ranks of the Irish Volunteers. The British Government, faced with such opposition, decided to abandon the idea of forcing Irishmen to fight her battle against their will. When the conscription scare died away most of the men that joined our ranks fell away and only the stalwarts remained.

It was decided in 1918 to take over and till some land the property of Colonel Ashley. Cliffoney is a congested area with little land available for the production of sufficient food. Accordingly, the land was entered and ploughing commenced. When approached by Colonel Ashley's agent, I took full responsibility. Very soon the R.I.C. from Cliffoney were on the scene but they soon decided that they were unable to deal with the situation and requisitioned Military forces from Sligo and Finner Camp. We had scouts posted, who, on observing the approach of the British forces,

tolled the Church bell as a warning. By the time they had arrived on the land all the men and equipment had been cleared. This was repeated on a few more occasions until the British forces decided to remain on duty on the lands all day. We then decided that we would work during the night. Sometimes it was too dangerous to bring horses on the lands at night and it was not unusual to see teams of men pull the ploughs, afterwards carrying them away on their shoulders.

As a result of this agitation I had to go 'on the run' as the R.I.C. had got a warrant for my arrest. I decided that I would go to Liverpool where I had a cousin working. Shortly after my arrival in Liverpool I got in touch with and became attached to the Liverpool branch of the Irish Volunteers where there was a very good organisation. Thomas Kerr, a native of Dublin, was O/C. His son Nial was a Customs official who did invaluable work in getting our men to and from Ireland to Liverpool; also in the smuggling of arms from England to Ireland.

Towards the end of 1920 it became the policy of the British forces in Ireland to burn the homes of prominent members of the Volunteer force; also the indiscriminate burning and looting of towns and villages where any of their men were ambushed. In Liverpool it was decided to carry out counter reprisals by burning. When we got information about any member of the British forces who committed extreme acts of violence, which was often the case, his home in England or, failing that, the home of some of his relatives was looked up and burned.

We got instructions to mobilise on the 27th November, 1920, our objective being the burning of Liverpool Docks. All available men were mobilised, the task being big - the docks were nine miles long. The party was divided into sections, each section being allotted a

specific job. When all was in readiness it was discovered that the docks were heavily guarded by a large force of police and military. Whether this was as a result of a leakage of information or intelligent anticipation of our intentions I cannot say. Plans were changed immediately and speedy arrangements were made for the burning of the warehouses on the other side of the docks. As in the original plans, each section was detailed for a specific number of warehouses.

My section was detailed to burn a timber and cotton warehouse, which we succeeded in doing without encountering any opposition. Very soon there were fires raging along the nine miles. Further along the line some of our men met with opposition from the police. In an exchange of gun fire two policemen were killed and one of our men seriously injured.

The following are a few extracts from the "Evening Express", Liverpool, March 10th, 1921, ~~a copy of which I hand over to the Bureau of Military History:~~

Bm

"Inquiries by the "Express" into the Sinn Fein incendiarism in and around Liverpool and on the Cheshire side of the water last night - thirteen separate fires being thus occasioned - reveal some salient points of remarkable significance.

IN EVERY CASE THE FIRES OCCURRED WITHIN EASY REACH EITHER OF A RAILWAY STATION OR A TRAM TERMINUS, AND STRICTLY ACCORDING TO PLAN ON THE PRINCIPLE OF THE WAREHOUSE FIRES OF LAST NOVEMBER, ALL BEING WELL ALIGHT WITHIN THREE QUARTERS OF AN HOUR.

The fires occurred as follows :-

- 7.35. - David Rushton's Woodend Farm, Maghull.
- 8.0. - Farm of Mr. John Rainford, Little Crosby.
Farm of Messrs. J. and W. Birch, Sefton.
Church Farm, Bidston.

- 8.10. - Harris's Farm, Strawberry-lane, Walton Hall Farm,
Walton.
- 8.15. - Dunabin's Farm, Heathfield-road, Woolton.
Dutch barn, corner of Heathfield and Woolton-roads.
- 8.20. - Childwall Farm. Childwall-lane.
- 8.25. - Atkinson's Farm, Wavertree.
- 8.30. - Sutton's Farm, Reed's-lane, Leasowe.
- 8.35. - Parkinson's Farm, Leasowe.
- 8.42. - Wheat Hall Farm, Leyland's-road, Gateacre.

. "

"£20,000 DAMAGE.

Men armed with Revolvers or Life-Preservers.

"All the men engaged in the enterprise; so far as they were seen, were young and athletic, and all were respectably dressed.

As to the five men arrested, it is stated that each one was armed either with revolver or life-preserver.

It is difficult to estimate the damage caused, but it is believed that it will amount to the value of fully £20,000. The only property other than farms attacked was the recreation pavilion of the Liverpool tramway employees at Green-Lane, which was burned to the ground. . . ."

"LITTLE CROSBY SENSATION.

Dramatic Capture of Panting Fugitives.

"The capture, following the outbreaks at Little Crosby, last night, of four of the five men detained by the county police under D.O.R.A. provided an exciting few minutes at Hall-road station. The men were caught through the prompt action of civilians. The fifth man was secured on the shore at Waterloo.

Eight men, evidently travelling together and each of whom carried

"a parcel, arrived at Hall-road station by the electric train leaving Liverpool at 7 o'clock. The appearance of such a number of strangers at this time aroused suspicion, and they were watched. On leaving the station the men crossed the railway as if intending taking the road leading to Little Crosby. Instead of doing this, however, they made off over the golf links in a north-westerly direction, going towards a small wood some little distance from the roadway.

Twenty-three minutes later flames were seen to burst out in Little Crosby village. Few people were about at the time, but it is stated that the police at Great Crosby had been notified of the arrival of the suspicious looking visitors "

"FIRES WITHIN THE CITY.

Men in Motor: Valuable Horses Saved at Childwall.

There were four fires on farms in the Liverpool area, viz., at Childwall, Woolton, Walton, Wavertree, two resulting in considerable damage.

In each case the time of discovery was within the half hour after 8 o'clock, and the fact that one followed the other in quick succession at once convinced the authorities that an organised scheme was afoot to destroy property.

The first alarm was received a few minutes after 8 o'clock in connection with the outbreak at Mr. Harris's farm, known as Walton Hall Farm, Strawberry-lane, Walton. This was the most serious fire in the Liverpool area, eight or ten bays of hay, straw and unthreshed oats being almost completely destroyed.

When the Westminster-road brigade arrived they found that the fire had got such a hold on the contents of the bays as to

"make it impossible to save any of the produce. They worked hard and succeeded in preventing the flames from spreading to the other buildings.

PEDIGREE HORSES SAVED.

The most serious outbreak was in the stackyard of Mr. Walter Cunningham, Gorse Hey Farm, Well-lane, Childwall.

Everything was quiet, and in order a few minutes before eight o'clock. Soon afterwards Mr. Henry Fazakerley, the local stationmaster, saw flames break out in the stackyard and gave the alarm

There was a large number of valuable pedigree shire horses on the farm. The stables are situated close to the stackyard and at one time one at least of these horses was in considerable danger.

Fortunately as soon as the outbreak was discovered, no time was lost in removing the horses, and this was accomplished successfully but only just in time. This morning the two barns had been reduced to a still smouldering mass of debris, and a number of valuable implements had also been destroyed.

MYSTERY MEN IN MOTOR.

A boy first drew attention to an outbreak of flames from a haystack in the yard of Messrs. J. and R. Atkinson's farm in Dunbakin-lane, Wavertree. Here three stacks, comprising 35 tons of hay and 15 to 20 tons of straw, were almost entirely destroyed. Fortunately, the farm buildings were saved.

A boy stated that shortly before eight o'clock two men in a motor car pulled up in the roadway near the farm.

THEY GOT OUT AND WALKED ABOUT. HE DID NOT WATCH THEM FURTHER, BUT SOON AFTER THEY HAD GONE HE SAW FLAMES COMING FROM A HAYSTACK.

The fourth fire in the city area was on the premises of Mr. Morley, hay dealer, in Mill-lane, Wavertree. Three wagonloads of hay were drawn up in his yard and the fire broke out in the middle wagon.

"Fortunately, it was found possible to drag the other wagons into safety, and the fire was confined to the centre one.

In no instance has the cause of the fire been directly discovered."

 "DUTCH BARN BLAZE.

200 Tons of Wheat and Straw Destroyed.

Something like 200 tons of straw, wheat, peas, and beans, stacked in a Dutch barn at Church Farm, Bidston, was destroyed as the result of an incendiary fire last night, but, thanks to the efforts of the Birkenhead Fire Brigade, which was at work under Second-officer Beazley, ^{itself} the barn/was saved.

The farm is owned by Mrs. Lamb and her sons, and stands directly opposite the little picturesque church in the village.

Almost at the identical moment that the Bidstone outbreak was discovered, one of the bungalow dwellers on the Leasowe-road had his attention drawn to three haystacks standing in a field close to the Wirral Railway on the Bidston side. These were the property of a farmer named Mr. Parkinson, and the bungalow resident was standing on the verandah when one of the stacks burst into flames.

While it is impossible to say at the moment what amount of damage has been caused, a rough estimate places that on the Cheshire side at £2,000 to £3,000."

 "STILL SMOULDERING.

Leasowe Outbreaks: Lack of Water Handicap.

The biggest fire which the Wallasey brigade had to deal with was at Sutton's Farm, in Reed's-lane, which lies between Leasowe Castle gates and Leasowe station. Here there were completely destroyed two stacks of unthreshed oats and one stack of straw. A stack and a half

"of hay were burning all night, and were still smouldering this afternoon.

Two Wallasey engines turned out last night, and had great difficulty in dealing with Sutton's farm owing to scarcity of water. The river Birket was practically useless, and when the supply from the farmyard was exhausted the police and a number of civilians attempted to salvage part of the corn by scattering it on the ground.

FLAMES UNDER CONTROL.

The adjoining farm buildings were in danger, but the brigade succeeded in getting the conflagration sufficiently under control to save them from the possibility of destruction.

When proceeding to Sutton's farm the Wallasey brigade passed a number of ricks on fire, but as these appeared too far gone to deal with they pushed forward to the spot where the fires were more serious.

All the fires started simultaneously, and appeared to have originated from the interior of the stacks, which pointed to "preconcerted incendiarism".

In February, 1921, we got instructions to collect passports from emigrants, who disobeyed Irish Government orders and had left Ireland under police protection and were under strong police protection during their wait in Liverpool. These people were staying in a boarding house. One of our men was born in England and as a result he spoke with an English accent and acted as spokesman. We posed as C.I.D. officers to gain admission. We then overpowered and disarmed the police guard and collected all the passports. There was great police activity as a result of the raid, and descriptions of the men taking part were posted in all police stations. I read a description of myself outside a police station on the following day. This was given by a woman from whom I collected a passport.

From time to time we got instructions to burn farm buildings in the Liverpool area. We usually got these orders in time to give us an opportunity to reconnoitre the position and plan our escape route after carrying out this operation. This was necessary, as the farmers, as a result of so many farm fires and acting on police advice, had organised protection parties. On the 9th March, 1921, we got orders to burn the farm buildings, the property of a man named Rainford, at Little Crosby, Liverpool. Our instructions were to carry out this job immediately and we had no time to map out our route or have a look at the place in advance. Charles O'Gorman, John Pinkman, Edward Joseph Hayes, James O'Malley and myself proceeded there and set fire to the place. On our return we were surrounded by about 200 civilians armed with shotguns. These men were nearly all ex-Servicemen and were led by a party of twenty policemen. Our chance of escape was hopeless as we had a canal on one side and an electric railway on the other. Pinkman, O'Gorman and I dumped our revolvers in the canal hoping to bluff our way through but it did not work and we were arrested. O'Malley and Hayes refused to dump their arms and took a different direction from us. After an exchange of shots they were captured with their firearms in their possession.

After our arrest and before our trial we had instructions from our headquarters to deny any connection with the I.R.A. From a legal point of view I was of the opinion that the charges against us could not be proved as the police had no evidence that I had any connection with the firing of Rainford's place. In spite of that, the trial Judge at the Liverpool Assizes, in his summing up, addressed me and said that on account of my extreme youth he was disposed to take a lenient view of the case and he would sentence me to five years' penal servitude as from that date, the 9th April,

1921.

I told him he could make it twenty years for all the difference it made to me as I expected we would have an Irish Republic before another year had passed. Pinkman and O'Gorman got a similar sentence. O'Malley was sentenced to ten years' penal servitude and Hayes to seven years.

The following is a copy of a report on the case taken from the "Evening Express" of the 9th April, 1921:-

"The trial was concluded at the Liverpool Assizes, today, of the five young Irishmen who were charged in connection with the Sinn Féin incendiary farm fires at Little Crosby on March 9. There were five counts against each prisoner under the heads of arson, conspiracy to arson, and having in their possession fire-arms and ammunition with intent to endanger life or cause injury to property.

The names of the accused were :-

Edward Joseph Heyes (20), labourer;

James O'Malley (23), cleaner;

Bernard Meehan (22), motorman;

Charles O'Gorman (20), engineer;

John Pinkman (19), engineer.

At the conclusion of the case for the Crown, Mr. Justin Lynskey submitted that there was no evidence against his clients, Meehan, O'Gorman and Pinkman, on the charge of having possession of firearms. Although Heyes and O'Malley had firearms in their possession when arrested, there was nothing to show that the other prisoners ever had control over them, or that the revolvers were intended for use in a joint enterprise.

On behalf of the Crown, Mr. A.T. Miller, K.C., said that Mr. Lynskey had overlooked one important feature - the statement of Heyes when asked by the police why he was carrying a revolver:-

"We have to take precautions on these jobs. . . . "

"Mr. Justice Rigby Swift ruled that there was evidence which the Jury could reasonably consider. Possibly the salient evidence that O'Malley, with a revolver, went with one section of four, while Heyes, with another revolver, went with another section of four. That indicated that there might be some ground for the suggestion of the Crown that the party went as an armed party and if the jury came to that conclusion, he should think every member of the party was in possession and control of the munitions they were carrying.

None of the prisoners went into the witness box.

THE DEFENCE.

Mr. W. Madden, addressing the jury for Heyes and O'Malley, drew attention to the fact that only 25 minutes elapsed from the arrival of the suspected party at Hall-road farm a mile away. The prisoners did not admit that they did or said any of the things attributed to them by the police. They could not get away from the fact that four of them were in the neighbourhood of Hall-road station, but O'Malley was found on the seashore, two and a half miles away, and it was for the jury to consider whether he could possibly have had anything to do with the alleged offences.

It would have been much more satisfactory if plaster casts had taken of the footprints in the fields near the farms, as the jury had no opportunity of testing the police evidence on that point. The prisoners said they did not cause the fires, but they ran away because, as Irishmen they might be suspected.

Mr. Lynskey emphasised the fact that the prosecution had failed to produce evidence to show that the fires had anything to do with Sinn Fein activities.

In his summing up Mr. Justice Rigby Swift warned the jury not to

"be influenced in their judgment by any political prejudice. They must consider their verdict on the pure facts of the case as common sense business men, and in accordance with British Justice.

VERDICT AND SENTENCES.

The jury found the prisoners guilty on all charges.

In passing sentence his Lordship remarked that he was not influenced by the political principles of the prisoners. He treated them as having committed serious offences against the laws of the country. There were differences between them. O'Malley, who had possession of a revolver and who, but for the merciful intervention of providence, might have used it, would have to go to penal servitude for ten years. Heyes, who also had a revolver in his pocket, but who did not attempt to draw it, would be sent to penal servitude for seven years.

The other three prisoners were each sentenced to five years penal servitude.

The men took these sentences cheerfully, shouting "Up the Rebels" as they went down.

The Judge said the warders would arrange for the prisoners to see their friends before they left the building. His Lordship also paid a tribute to the intelligence and skill of the police in the case, singling out specially the work of Sergeant Moffet!

We were sent to Dartmoor Prison to serve our sentence. There I met Andy Conway, Seamus Devins, and Eugene Kilbride, all Sligo men, with whom I was well acquainted, Conway being an officer in the Cliffoney Company.

While in prison we were treated as criminals. We demanded recognition and treatment as political prisoners. When our request

was refused, we refused to obey orders and a party of British troops was called in. They gave us a very bad beating, although I was fortunate to escape that. John Pinkman, already referred to, was so badly beaten that his life was in danger for some time. When we made enquiries from our Catholic Prison Chaplain, who was Irish, as to Pinkman's condition, he told us he would not die and if he had his way he would get a more severe beating. After getting that reply we refused to go to Mass. We were put on bread and water for varying periods. I was on the bread and water diet for two weeks but some others were on it for three months. Any concessions such as letters were withdrawn.

Eventually news reached us of the cessation of hostilities in Ireland which we, in prison, were glad to hear and we looked forward to our release and our return home to Ireland.

I was released from Dartmoor Prison on the 14th February, 1922, after serving ten months of my five years' sentence.

SIGNED: B. Meehan

DATE: 10th October 1956

WITNESS: J. Conway

