

ORIGINAL

BUREAU OF MILITARY HISTORY 1913-21

BURO STAIRÉ MILEATA 1913-21

No. W.S. 1516

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BUREAU OF MILITARY HISTORY, 1913-21.

STATEMENT BY WITNESS.

DOCUMENT NO. W.S. 1516.

**Witness**

P.H. Doherty,  
Carndonagh,  
Co. Donegal.

**Identity.**

Company C/C, Carndonagh.  
O/C 2nd Battn., 2nd  
Donegal Bde.

**Subject.**

Sinn Féin and I.Vol. activities:  
Carndonagh area 1914-1921.

**Conditions, if any, Stipulated by Witness.**

Nil.

File No S.2827.

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ORIGINAL

BUREAU OF MILITARY HISTORY 1913-21

BURO STAIRÉ MILEATA 1913-21

No. W.S. 1,516

STATEMENT BY P.H. DOHERTY,

Carndonagh, Co. Donegal.

I was born at Glebe near Carndonagh in the year 1892. I received my primary education at Glassalts National School. I later attended night classes and agricultural classes.

I joined the A.O.H. (Ancient Order of Hibernians) in 1908. It was the only known Nationalist organisation in this area at the time. I joined the National Volunteers, organised by John Redmond, in 1914 and attended the big National Volunteer parade in Dublin in 1915. Carried away by love of adventure and recruiting propaganda and also believing in the promise that the Home Rule for Ireland Bill would be implemented on the termination of World War 1, then under way, I thought I should join the British Army and was about to do so when a friend of mine came to me and told me that he would beat me up if I attempted to join the British Army. After discussing the situation with my friend, I realised that my responsibility lay at home.

By this time the National Volunteer organisation was falling through, only about twelve, including myself, remaining, though we felt that we owed no allegiance to John Redmond. Then came the Rebellion of 1916 which made me decide to leave the National Volunteers and join the Sinn Féin Club then being organised in Cardonagh. The original members of the Club were John Doherty, Frank Lanagan, Jim Lanagan, Phillip J. Doherty and myself. I was appointed Treasurer of the Club.

In 1917 I got an appointment in Letterkenny as an instructor in agriculture. There I became acquainted with James McMonagle, his brother Patrick, William McMenamin, Sam Flaherty, Jim Dawson, John Bradley, Dr. P.J. McGinley and some others. The Irish Volunteers were being organised there at that time and I joined the ranks. While in Letterkenny I was told about the existence of the I.R.B. (Irish Republican Brotherhood) organisation. When the aims and objects of the organisation were explained to me I was anxious to become a member. I was recommended and about to be enrolled when I was transferred to Ballyshannon. As a result I never joined that organisation.

I was working in Letterkenny in 1918 during the general election in that year. Joseph Sweeney from Burtonport was selected as the Sinn Féin candidate for West Donegal. Joe Sweeney was a popular choice as he had fought in Dublin during the Easter Week Rebellion of 1916. He was very bitterly opposed by the Unionist element, which was formidable in many parts of the constituency, and also by the A.O.H. or Nationalist Party as they were sometimes called.

Prior to the election, political feeling and expression was running very high and it was necessary for both Volunteer and Sinn Féin organisations to throw all their weight into the contest to ensure the election of our candidate. I recall one occasion, around Easter 1918, when Mr. de Valera arrived in Raphoe to address a meeting on behalf of the Sinn Féin candidate. The meeting was to start at 3 p.m. but due to the hostile attitude of the Unionist party it was impossible to commence. An urgent call was sent out for Volunteers

to Letterkenny, Castlefinn and other companies to proceed to Raphoe immediately. About thirty-five Volunteers set out by train from Letterkenny. On arrival in Raphoe we were joined by about one hundred men from surrounding companies. After arming ourselves with various weapons, including bill hooks, hedge knives and other tools which we procured in a hardware store, we fell in on parade and marched up the street. The R.I.C. Inspector said he would not allow the parade to go on but James McMonagle went up to him with an old Queen Anne rifle with bayonet fixed and ordered him to move off, which he promptly did, so also did the Unionists, and the meeting was held without further disturbance. Afterwards we marched back to Letterkenny, a distance of twelve miles, and paraded through the town before we were dismissed. I was one of a party that provided a guard for Mr. de Valera all over the county while he was addressing meetings. We were quite satisfied that we were compensated for our work as Joe Sweeney was elected by a large majority.

In 1918 the British Government decided to conscript Irishmen into the British Army. The proposal met with complete opposition from the people of this country, no matter what their political opinions were, and a large number of men joined the Volunteer force at the time. Protest meetings were held all over the country. At one such meeting in Letterkenny at which the Parish Priest presided, on the platform with him were some speakers who registered their protest and advocated passive resistance. The speeches were heard with no show of enthusiasm until Dr. McGinley was asked to speak. He started off by telling the people that passive resistance would not deter the British Government from enforcing

conscription. "There is only one way" he declared, "that is, the Unionists and Ulster Volunteers are all well armed; go out and collect those arms and we will resist this threat at the point of the rifle". This advice was received with great applause. The Rev. Chairman was not expecting to hear the use of force being advocated from the platform where he presided and it left him very embarrassed. In face of such strong opposition all over the country, the British Government decided that it would be wise to abandon the idea. After the conscription scare had passed, a number of men who rushed in to join the ranks of the Volunteers fell away again, bringing the organisation here back to its original strength.

During my term of office in Ballyshannon a meeting under the auspices of Sinn Féin was announced for Bundoran at which P.J. Ward and Seán Milroy were to speak. The meeting was proclaimed illegal by the British authorities and a large force of British military was drafted into the town to enforce the order. At the same time, a large force of Volunteers was organised and taken into Bundoran. A strong force came in from North Sligo and North Leitrim areas carrying a Sinn Féin flag and this the British forces attempted to seize but were unable to do so. Although surrounded by a complete ring of British bayonets, the two speakers addressed the meeting.

About this time I was sent on a refresher course to Athenry. There I met a number of men who were members of the Volunteer force. We were only a short time on the course when the armed R.I.C. arrived at the college and took our names. In a few days after we were informed that we were dismissed from our jobs, so there was nothing for it but return home.

On my return home I joined up with my local company, Carndonagh, and was appointed Company Adjutant. The Company Captain was Leo Lafferty. He was a civil servant but refused to take the oath of allegiance to Britain when requested to do so and was dismissed as a result. Michael Collins sent him down to this area to organise the Volunteers here. On the reorganisation of the area into battalions and brigades, Lafferty was appointed O/C of the 2nd Battalion based on Carndonagh. James Diver was Vice O/C. The battalion incorporated the following companies: Clonmany, Culdaff, Malin, Malin Head and Carndonagh. Early in January, 1921, Leo Lafferty was arrested and I was appointed Battalion O/C. My brother, Niall T. Doherty, had served four years in the British Army. On his return home he joined the Irish Volunteers and was appointed Captain of Carndonagh Company.

In the Local Government elections of 1920 I was requested to go forward as a Sinn Féin candidate in the Inishowen area. This, to my recollection, was the first election in which proportional representation was in operation. I obtained sufficient votes to get elected on the first count and sufficient surplus to secure the election of two more Sinn Féin candidates. I was Chairman of the District Council in 1920-21 and 1922. I was able to attend only very few meetings as I was obliged to go "on the run" towards the end of 1920. The British forces very often turned up at a council meeting in the hopes of apprehending me there. We were one of the first District Councils to disassociate ourselves with the British administration. Trustees were appointed to control and administer the funds, and all documents relating to the affairs of the Council were carefully hidden.

In 1920 I took charge of a party for the purpose of collecting all arms from the Unionists in the area. I issued receipts under my own name and did not attempt to disguise myself in any way. This, I am sure, was responsible for bringing me under the notice of the R.I.C. rather earlier than usual and my home was repeatedly raided.

In 1920 the Courthouses in Malin and Carndonagh were burned by the Volunteers so as to prevent British courts being held. At this time Sinn Féin arbitration courts were set up and functioned satisfactorily. We had very little difficulty in persuading litigants to take their cases before our courts and in all cases but one they were satisfied to abide by the decision. In this particular case the litigant, an old man, decided to take his case to the Co. court at Letterkenny. We called on him with the intention of kidnapping him so as to prevent his appearing. On our arrival at his home we found the old man looking so frail and ill that we thought he might die on our hands. We made him swear, on his knees, that he would not attend the court. Frail as he looked, he attended at Letterkenny the following day and told the judge about the raid and threats, leaving us determined to be less soft-hearted in the future.

Early in the summer of 1920 we got orders to burn the documents in the Income Tax office in Carndonagh. The office was situated in a room on the second landing in a house next door to the R.I.C. barracks. It was impossible to enter this house from the rear as it entailed entry by the barrack yard. On inspection we noticed that the front window was slightly raised at the bottom. We considered that when all the R.I.C. had returned to barracks we could effect an entry quietly by using a ladder and

pushing up the window. The Company Captain, L. Lafferty, decided that James Diver, Charlie McLoughlin, Barney Fitzsimons and myself would assist him in carrying out the operation. McLoughlin and Fitzsimons, who were working in McDonagh's hardware store, were instructed to bring suitable levers for the purpose of opening the drawers where documents would be kept. A ladder was procured and towards midnight, when it was observed that all the R.I.C. had returned to barrack, the coast was clear to carry out the raid. When McLoughlin and Fitzsimons arrived they informed the Company Captain that they had forgotten to bring any levers. He immediately called off the operation. I went in search of and found a rough bar of iron down the street, and told him that as I had been waiting there for over three hours I was determined to go ahead with the job on my own. He told me he was O/C and his orders must be obeyed. As a result, the raid was never carried out. Lafferty was a peculiar man. If his plans were upset in any way he was not prepared to alter them and carry out an operation in any other manner.

About January, 1921, it became necessary for me to leave home completely as the British forces were raiding for me continuously. The narrowest escape from capture was when I came into Carndonagh one particular night. My brother, who owned a dance hall in the town, was running a dance when the hall was surrounded by a large party of British forces. When he got the opportunity he sent me word to clear out, as it was obvious that the British forces had information that I was in town. I started down a laneway towards the railway line. On my arrival beside the line, even though the night was very dark, I could see the outline of four R.I.C. men patrolling the line,



presumably anticipating my escape in that direction. I lay low for some time but I was in a bad trap. I must cross the river, which was in heavy flood at the time and the only means of crossing was by the railway bridge. At this time the R.I.C. were between me and the bridge. After some time the patrol moved along the line in the direction of the bridge. I decided my only chance was to follow them. I crawled up on the line, got into a sunken footpath along the rail and crawled after them. The patrol passed over the bridge and I succeeded in crossing unnoticed. I was now on the safe side of the river. I left the line and was proceeding cautiously along a garden hedge when suddenly I hit a tin can a resounding blow with my foot. I moved a short distance from where I had created the noise and lay low. Immediately, from another direction, came a number of R.I.C. with torches and revolvers at the ready. As I was unarmed at the time there was nothing I could do but lie still. Torches flashed all round me but failed to pick me out. I was wearing a black overcoat. After what seemed an eternity to me, the R.I.C. gave up the search and withdrew. That was a lesson to me not to travel unarmed in future.

The R.I.C. at this time seemed to have good information as to my movements. If I stayed in a particular house one night the chances were that the house would be raided on the following night. I decided I would draw them off that particular locality where I was in the habit of staying. One Saturday night I cycled to Culdaff, where I first went to Confession. I then went to the home of a cousin named Doran, where I got a bed for the night. I went to Communion in Culdaff Church the following morning,

which caused some comment. I stayed at Doran's until about 4 p.m. that day and returned to my usual haunt by a circuitous route. At midnight that same night Doran's house was surrounded by a large party of British forces. A number of them entered the house and went direct to the room which I occupied on the previous night. Two days later, on a Church Holiday, Fr. McGlynn denounced informers and stated from the pulpit that the information must have been carried direct from the church to Carndonagh.

On checking up on all the circumstances a few days later, we came to the conclusion that the only person who was in a position to give so much information was a young man named O'Connell, son of a retired R.I.C. man, who was present in Doran's on my arrival there. About three months later O'Connell was arrested by members of the Clonmany Company, courtmartialled and sentenced to death. I was not called upon to give evidence at his trial and I considered the sentence too severe. The evidence was purely circumstantial and I suffered no ill effects. In addition, I considered that this boy was of slightly weak mentality. As it happened, I would say fortunately, O'Connell was handed over to me as a prisoner until such time as the sentence would be carried out. Immediately I got him alone I told him to run as far from the area as he possibly could and not return. He took my advice and never returned. I heard years later that he was a patient in the mental home. Whenever I remember the incident I feel happy that I allowed him to escape.

In April, 1921, I ventured a return home to do some gardening. After working for a short time and dressed in very shabby clothes, I found it necessary to go along the

road to a neighbour's house to procure some seeds. I had only proceeded a short distance when I saw a car-load of R.I.C. halted on the roadside. I had no option but continue walking in their direction and trust to luck. At the same time, I knew that the R.I.C. had a good photo of me which they had taken from my house in an early raid. When I drew abreast of the car I recognised District Inspector Geelin and Sergeant Stanton. Due, I think, to the shabby and dirty condition of my clothes they failed to recognise me and let me pass without question. On the following Sunday I was on my way home to get a change of clothes. As I crossed from a field on to the roadway two R.I.C. came cycling along. I was unarmed at the time but automatically I put my hand to my right hip. This action may have been responsible for making them pass on without even pretending to see me, but in a very short time a large party of British forces came out and raided my home.

About May 1st 1921 I got a message from William Doherty, Buncrana, to join an Active Service Unit then being organised in the area. I contacted this unit immediately. It was a small unit consisting of about twelve Volunteers armed with four Service rifles, eight shotguns and a few Service revolvers. Our instructions were to avoid a large scale operation and keep harassing the enemy so as to pin down a large number of British forces with headquarters in Buncrana so that those forces could not be utilised to assist in a large scale round-up of our No. 1 A.S.U., already hard-pressed in the Dungloe-Burtonport area. William Doherty, Buncrana, was O/C of our A.S.U.

Our first job was the demolition of Drumandare Bridge. This was a high bridge and when demolished would compel the British forces to walk seven or eight miles to reach the Illies area. Having no explosives, we had to demolish the bridge by manual labour, the job taking two days. One of our men was badly injured by a hand spike in the process.

One of our first operations was to attack an R.I.C. patrol in Carndonagh. The patrol was fired on but the night was very dark and, as far as I know, there were no casualties. An R.I.C. man named McLoughlin was fired on that night as he left his home to return to barracks. Fortunately he was not hit, as he was friendly and helpful to us but only a few knew that. On several occasions McLoughlin passed on information to our P.P., Fr. Philip O'Doherty, about forthcoming raids. Fr. O'Doherty was a staunch supporter of ours and any information he got from this or any other source was passed on to us with the least possible delay. On one occasion I got a message from him at 2 a.m. about an intended raid. The message enabled me to escape capture. I never met McLoughlin afterwards as he was transferred from Carndonagh before the Truce.

Our next operation was a nuisance attack on Carndonagh R.I.C. Barracks. We had no hope of capturing the barracks. We fired several rounds at the shuttered windows from selected positions in the town. The British forces returned our fire and sent up several Verey lights for assistance. We then withdrew to the hills and crossed into the Illies area where we had about thirty blankets and some straw in a sheep hut on the mountainside.

The blankets had been taken from a military store in Buncrana some time previously. On arrival at the hut one man was posted on guard and the remainder lay down on the blankets and straw to get some sleep.

I took over first guard duty and all was quiet. I had only handed over to the next detail and was about to lie down when the sentry roused us and told us that there was a large force of British military advancing in our direction. Due to a heavy mist on the mountain, leaving visibility bad, the British forces were not more than 150 yards distant when first observed. We dashed out to a turf cutting where we had cover from view, only to find that we were right in the path of the advancing British forces. It was now necessary to dash out in the open mountain. We were immediately observed, but for some reason that I could never understand the officer in charge, instead of issuing an order to his men to open fire on us, blew his whistle and waved his men back. At this time wisps of mist were blowing across the mountainside. Taking advantage of these, we proceeded to climb and eventually reached the summit of Slieve Snagth, over 2,000 feet high. Here we were enveloped in such a heavy mist that we were obliged to hold hands to avoid getting separated. The mist moved slightly and on coming out on the verge of it I observed, to my consternation, that a fresh force of British troops had arrived in support of the first party. The situation now was: three-fourths of the mountain was surrounded with the troops steadily advancing upwards; our only hope of escape lay in that gap, not yet closed. We made our way down the mountain in the direction of Clonmany. Coming near the roadway we reached some cover, where the men rested while I went forward to

reconnoitre. On reaching the roadway I met two farmers who had come down a by-road from the Clonmany direction. They told me that all was clear on the road they had travelled. I called over the Volunteers waiting in the hills and we proceeded to a house owned by a man named William Gill, Meenavogy, where we got a very welcome cup of tea. We had been travelling up and down Slieve Snagth for eight hours.

We might have avoided all this danger and hardship had our Column Commander reacted in the right way to a message he had earlier received from Fr. William O'Doherty, Buncrana. Fr. O'Doherty was friendly with some of the British officers stationed in Buncrana and, perhaps for that reason, was looked upon as a Loyalist supporter. During the course of conversation with some of the British officers he learned of the intended raid on the Illies area and had the information conveyed to our Column O/C, who, on receipt of the message, looked on it as a ruse by Fr. O'Doherty to get us to move out of his parish.

We continued to make plans to harass the enemy and it was decided to remove the telephone equipment from the post office in Carndonagh. The post office was situated across the market square, almost opposite the R.I.C. barracks. I was in favour of putting up and manning a barricade in front of the post office and entering the office from the front. In favour of that plan I argued that our men would be together in the dark and would be in a better position to provide protection for the raiding party. I was overruled, however, by the Column O/C who decided on posting sentries around the square and entering the office by the rear. I was one of the party

detailed to enter the office. We proceeded to the back door of the premises and when we knocked and called on the post master to open the door he immediately blew a whistle. The R.I.C. must either have information or anticipated such a raid. Following on the whistle blast fire was opened from various houses around the square already occupied by the R.I.C. and a bomb burst in the yard of the premises where we were. There was nothing left for us to do only get out of the town as quickly as possible. We withdrew and later mobilised at our rendezvous without casualty.

As the British forces had withdrawn from the Illies area we returned there and decided to carry out a raid for arms on a few houses owned by Orangemen near Merville. We had information that the occupants of these houses were in possession of firearms. In addition to procuring the arms, the raid would cause military activity in the area and, consequently, keep them on the move. We travelled 22 miles across the mountains to a place near Merville. There our column was divided up into three raiding parties. Volunteers from Merville Company acted as guides. Joe McLoughlin and myself proceeded to a house occupied by a man named Campbell and his six sons. According to local information these men were all armed and would be likely to put up a strong resistance. We arrived at the house and on knocking on the door, Campbell, who must have been in the kitchen, at once asked who was there, and on receiving the reply "British military" he opened the door. We pounced on him at once and when I saw that Joe McLoughlin was able to deal with him I ran upstairs. There it was laughable to find six hefty men standing in their night attire with their hands up

and their knees shaking. We were late in carrying out the raid as the British forces had collected the arms some days earlier.

We next proceeded to the home of Colonel McNeece. On knocking on the door and announcing that we were members of the I.R.A., we were immediately admitted by the Colonel who treated us very courteously, invited us to partake of some refreshments and discussed the political situation in Ireland. On being informed of the reason for our visit, he handed over a shotgun and cartridges and a very good telescope. When the three raiding parties again mobilised, Cecil Doherty informed us that when his party approached Captain Nolan's house fire was opened on them from the windows and they failed to secure an entry. It was by now too far advanced in the morning to return to Nolan's house and we decided to call at a later date.

At this period every member of the column had got a severe attack of scabies. We retired to Glenagivney where we rested and spent a few days bathing. We then returned to carry out the raid on Captain Nolan's house. On arrival there Joe McLoughlin and myself made an entry through a scullery window. We crossed the kitchen and on reaching the foot of the stairs in the hall we were greeted with two shots from a double barrel shotgun. Had we been careless in our approach, Nolan would have got some of us. We fired up the stairs in the direction of his shots but did not succeed in getting him. All this time a woman was screaming in a room upstairs. After a number of shots were exchanged there came a lull in the firing and I looked around to find myself alone. Joe McLoughlin had gone out by the scullery window. I was on



the far side of the hall and would have to cross it to reach the kitchen and the scullery window. This would be a dangerous move so I decided to worm my way to the front door. I reached the door and had just succeeded in releasing the lock when another shot rang out from the top of the stairs, narrowly missing me. Before Nolan had time to fire again I got the door open and dashed out. Outside we debated the matter and decided that it was not worth risking any man's life to secure a shotgun. We discussed burning him out but decided against it as there was at least one woman in the house.

We then returned in the direction of Moville where a party of British Marines were stationed on a gun boat in the bay. Here we went to a supporter who had a motor car and we pushed the car out of the town, so as to attract no attention, and on to the coastguard station, also used as a custom house. We broke in the door, saturated the place with petrol and oil and set it alight. The roof was blown completely off in the first burst of the petrol fumes. The place was completely destroyed. On our return journey two Crossley tender loads of British troops were noticed approaching. We just had time to run the car up a laneway out of view. The enemy did not come as far as our position, having turned on to the Carndonagh road a short journey away.

We next selected an ambush position on the Buncrana-Illies road for the purpose of ambushing a cycle patrol that occasionally travelled that road. The position selected was a good one and we lay in wait for a considerable time. Eventually the cycle patrol came along the road, but, much to our disgust, on reaching a point a short distance from our position they turned off on a by-road.

We next carried out a raid on the mail wagon travelling from Derry to Merville. This raid was carried out on the main road where British forces were constantly travelling. The raid had a dual purpose: No. 1 to censor the mails, and No. 2 to enforce the Belfast boycott. We held up the truck, drove it into the hills, removed all stuff from Belfast, including a suit of clothes the property of an R.I.C. Sergeant; a gold watch despatched by mail was returned to the owner.

In June, 1921, Peadar O'Donnell, our Brigade O/C, made an appointment to meet the O/C and some of the officers of the Flying Column. As the O/C was absent on that date, Joe S. McLoughlin, Buncrana, O/C 3rd Battalion, and myself met the Brigade O/C. After he listened to an account of the activities of our unit, he enquired what was the enemy position and strength between Buncrana and Derry. On being informed that convoys of British forces numbering anything from two hundred to five hundred travelled that road daily, he instructed us to <sup>immediately</sup> arrange / to have these convoys ambushed and prevented from travelling that road. From the strength and armament at our disposal, the order seemed to us impossible to comply with and we simply ignored it.

In the end of June, 1921, I found it necessary to visit the Company Captains in my area so as to collect intelligence reports, as I was then acting Intelligence Officer for the column in addition to my appointment as Battalion O/C. Having collected a number of reports and on my way back to join the column I saw, coming round a sharp bend in the road, what I recognised as the radiator of a Crossley tender loaded with British forces.

I had just time, without being observed, to throw my bicycle across a hedge and jump after it. I made my way to cover at the back of a dwellinghouse nearby and concealed the dispatches I was carrying. Just then the British forces pulled up at the entrance gate. I was convinced that they had seen me leave the road and as I had no means of escape there was nothing for me to do but stay where I was. After an anxious wait of, perhaps, ten or fifteen minutes, but which seemed hours to me, the British forces drove on. Needless to say, I abandoned my bicycle and kept to the fields and mountains after that.

The Flying Column was composed of the following members at the cessation of hostilities on the 11th July, 1921:

Philip Doherty, Buncrana, O/C Flying Column

Joseph McLoughlin, Buncrana, member and O/C  
3rd Battalion.

Anthony Cassidy, Column Quartermaster.

P.H. Doherty, Carndonagh, O/C 2nd Battalion  
and Column I/O.

James Diver, Carndonagh, Vice O/C 2nd Battalion.

- Gill, Malin.

Mick (Stout) Doherty, Illies.

Mick (Watt) Doherty, Illies.

Charles Gilmartin, North Co. Leitrim.

Cecil (now Dr.) Doherty, Clonmany.

Owen McEleny, Carndonagh.

David Quigley, Malin.

The last two named were arrested in a British forces round-up at Illies. Quigley was arrested twenty-four hours after he had joined the column.

In May, 1921, a raid was carried out on the train at Ballymagan. A consignment of money in transit to the post office in Carndonagh was removed from a mail bag. The money taken helped to maintain the column in cigarettes and food until the truce.

Signed: Patrick H. Doherthy

Date: 16<sup>th</sup> October 1956

Witness: J. Flourey  
(Investigator).

