

ORIGINAL

BUREAU OF MILITARY HISTORY 1913-21

BURD STAIRÉ MILÉATA 1913-21

No. W.S. 1,629

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COSANTA.

BUREAU OF MILITARY HISTORY, 1913-21.

STATEMENT BY WITNESS.

DOCUMENT NO. W.S. 1629.

Witness

Kevin Murphy,  
"Mount Alto",  
Cobh,  
Co. Cork.

Identity.

1st Lieut., Cobh Sluagh, Fianna Éireann.

Subject.

Fianna activities, Cobh, County Cork, 1914-21.

Conditions, if any, Stipulated by Witness.

Nil.

File No S. 2951.

Form B.S.M. 2

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STATEMENT BY KEVIN MURPHY,

"Mount Alto", Cobh, Co. Cork.

I am a native of Cobh. As far as I can recollect, a sluagh of the Fianna was formed in the town in the year 1913. It was started by a young national teacher named John O'Connor and a man named Philip O'Neill. The latter was an ex-British naval man who was dismissed from the navy for anti-British sentiments.

We drilled in the fields during the summer and in a hall in Cobh during the other times of the year. Philip O'Neill was our drill instructor. In the hall, John O'Connor taught us Irish history, Irish songs and prayers in Irish. He tried to instil an Irish and a militant national atmosphere into all the boys.

The whole tradition of Cobh was built around the British navy. Most of the men of the town and neighbourhood were employed in the naval dockyards at Haulbowline and many of the local boys started work as apprentice fitters and suchlike there. Their bosses, foremen and charge -hands, were nearly all British and, consequently, their general contacts were of a type not conducive to inculcating the spirit of Irish nationalism, quite the contrary in fact.

Practically all of the boys who joined the Fianna in Cobh had some connection with British forces, either a family connection or by reason of the positions they, or members of their families, held in the British naval stations, forts and dockyards in the immediate vicinity of the town.

It was with a view to counteracting this ever-present British interest that Messrs O'Connor and O'Neill lectured us on the subject "England, our enemy and not our friend", and we were taught to put the cause of Irish freedom before all else. We were exhorted not to look to England for everything; that freedom, not good jobs under the British flag, should be our motto.

There were upwards of a hundred boys in the Cobh sluagh of the Fianna. Their ages ranged from six to sixteen. This number was maintained to the Truce of 1921. My two brothers and I were members from the inauguration to July, 1921.

As the years prior to 1916 went by we went on an occasional route march with the local Volunteers, something of which we young lads were very proud. I remember the Countess Markievicz coming to Cork in, I think, 1914. A parade of the Fianna took place in Cork on the occasion of her visit, at which a good muster of the Cobh sluagh attended. I remember she addressed us in much the same strain as our Fianna leaders in Cobh, stressing our duty to our country and our willingness, if the occasion arose, to lay down our lives in defence of our freedom.

At the time of the Volunteer split in 1914, it is of interest to record that not one single member of the Cobh sluagh deserted to the John Redmond (Home Rule) camp. John O'Connor must have felt very proud at this first evidence of the effects of his teaching. There was no split in the Fianna in Cobh; all stood for the policy of the Irish Volunteers and a free, independent Ireland. In fact, we considered those Volunteers who took the side of Redmond as being deserters.

John O'Connor was regarded by us as our slough captain up to 1916.

At Easter, 1916, some Cobh Irish Volunteers went to Cork on, I think, Easter Saturday, and with them went a small number of the older Fianna boys, to the number of about six so far as my memory serves me.

My particular recollections of Easter Week, 1916, in Cobh concern mostly the expressions of antagonism to the Rising heard on all sides, and an armoured plated train, the plating of which was done by men in the naval dockyard at Haulbowline. I remember seeing this train leave Cobh for Cork, apparently to accommodate British troops.

After 1916 our training continued under the same two men, O'Connor and O'Neill, this time, however, in the use of the rifle. We had a .22 rifle for instruction purposes, plus a revolver. The older Fianna boys were allowed to practice firing with the rifle in our hall, which was a long store where a .22 rifle could be fired. The younger boys were now allowed shooting practice.

Up to December, 1918, we marched to meetings of Sinn Féin in our uniforms of green shirt and hat, saffron scarf and short blue pants, but after that the wearing of uniforms was forbidden by British orders and we were advised by our leaders not to wear them in Cobh, which was a British garrison town with many pro-British sympathisers.

From 1918 onwards some of our lads began to get revolvers for themselves. (We had very few in the slough). These boys worked as apprentices in the British naval dockyard at Haulbowline and occasionally entered the officers' quarters when nobody was about. They laid hands on anything of

military value lying around, particularly spare rounds of ammunition or revolvers. Similarly, in the case of naval vessels coming in to dock in Haulbowline, apprentices were allowed to go aboard to help in some repair work to be done, and at the same time they were alert to pick up any stray small arms when the opportunity offered.

Haulbowline is an island in Cobh Harbour, and there was a ferry (launch) service to and from Cobh for those employed in the dockyard. It was customary at the time for civilian personnel to be searched by the R.I.C. each evening before leaving the island for the mainland. Not every civilian was searched; this would be a difficult task, seeing that upwards of six hundred civilians were employed there. About one in every twenty was usually searched, for which task two R.I.C. men were detailed.

On two days of the week we apprentice boys had to attend school on the island in connection with our jobs, and on these two days when we left school we arrived at the ferry before the main body of civilians had 'knocked off' work for the day. We were never searched on these occasions as the R.I.C. men would not have arrived at the searching point until later when the main body of civilians were leaving. As a result, we could 'get by' with any revolvers, ammunition or other material without any trouble, and on many occasions we were asked by Volunteers employed at Haulbowline to take stuff over for them on our two school days, when it could be got across safely to the mainland.

Here I might mention that we frequently picked up German revolvers which were taken as souvenirs by British naval officers from captured Germans in the 1914-18 war then in progress and nearing its finish. A quick look into the officers' quarters on a naval boat often revealed the

presence of one of these revolvers, which was promptly stowed away in a safe spot until the opportunity arose to get it safely across to the mainland.

Sometime in 1919 our first casualty occurred when one of our slugh section leaders, Joseph Reid, aged about 17 years, was cleaning a revolver in his home. He shot himself accidentally and died from his wound. The R.I.C. visited his house immediately news of the occurrence leaked out, but Joe Reid's brother, who was also a Fianna boy, had the presence of mind to remove the revolver to a place of safety. Young Reid's funeral was the first one of its kind seen in Cobh. It was attended by contingents of Irish Volunteers, Fianna and Cumann na mBan, and three volleys were fired over the grave.

As the year 1920 came in, Volunteer activities in the Cobh area increased and there was a corresponding increase in enemy activity too. In addition to the ever-present British marines, a regiment of the Cameron Highlanders arrived. These were quartered in "The Hutments", Belmont, on the high ground on the outskirts of the town, and took up patrol duty day and night along with the marines and R.I.C.

Our leaders, O'Connor and O'Neill, having done their work and apparently being satisfied that we were capable to look after ourselves, left us to join the Volunteers. Other Fianna lads, as they reached the age of eighteen, did likewise. We, therefore, proceeded to appoint our own officers as follows: - Captain, Jim Aherne (killed in action at Clonmult, Co. Cork, in February, 1921), 1st Lieut., Harry O'Brien, 2nd Lieut., Ernie Fowler. We had a Company Adjutant, four section leaders and eight squad leaders.

We now started on our own to carry out raids for arms on private houses in the locality where we had reason to believe we might be successful in obtaining some. As can readily be understood, there was a large number of retired navy and army officers living in Cobh. We concentrated principally on their houses. These raids were carried out at night by small parties of three or four of the older boys, one of whom usually carried a revolver. We were fairly successful in our efforts, getting together quite a varied assortment of sporting guns and pistols, with an occasional serviceable revolver. We were engaged on this type of raiding for a few months, when we learned that the R.I.C. had 'called in' the guns held by the pro-British element, and so our raids ceased. One of our lads, John Glanville, was captured in one of these raids and was sentenced to six months' imprisonment. In his case only two took part in the raid, neither being armed. The British army captain to whose house the two Fianna boys called, hit Glanville and held him while the police were called by phone. The other boy escaped.

Other Fianna activities in Cobh which might be recorded were the collection of money from known sympathisers for the I.R.A. arms fund. As the local I.R.A. were too well known to the R.I.C., the job of collection was entrusted entirely to the Fianna. At Sinn Féin Courts, which were held frequently in the Town Hall, Cobh, the Fianna were stationed at various points in the town to give warning of the approach of any enemy forces. A civilian working in the Admiralty House, Cobh, was known to be fraternising with the enemy and picking up information about I.R.A. men in the town. A party of us (two armed with revolvers) raided a dance hall one night

where this man was, arrested him and warned him to be out of Cobh within twenty-four hours or he would be shot. He cleared out of the town and was not seen again. As we were returning from the raid, one of our lads, Robin Leahy, decided to take the two revolvers for safety to his home in Rushbrooke. On his way a lorry of troops pulled up beside him. He was captured (with the guns) and sentenced to five years' imprisonment.

In March, 1920, a daylight hold-up by I.R.A. of an armed party of British troops took place at Bunker Hill, midway on the road between Cobh and Rushbrooke. The soldiers were disarmed and the guns taken away to a safe place. In this affair, four of our Fianna boys who were apprentices at Rushbrooke docks acted as scouts to warn the I.R.A. of the approach and the strength of the military party.

In August, 1920, a very successful I.R.A. hold-up of a party of Cameron Highlanders took place at The Quarry, Cobh. This raid also took place in daylight. So far as I can remember, about a dozen rifles were captured by the I.R.A. on the occasion. Two Fianna boys named Daniel Healy and Owen Lynch took part.

In a big military round-up in Cobh late in 1920 quite a number of Fianna boys were arrested, amongst whom were Ernie Fowler who had succeeded Jim Aherne as Captain, and William Kearney, a section leader. These two lads were sent to prison at Wormwood Scrubbs. They took part in a hunger-strike of Irish prisoners there and were released as a result.

Many Fianna boys in Cobh had to go 'on the run' to avoid arrest, and two of them, Jim Aherne and Jimmy Gavin, joined up with the East Cork I.R.A. Flying Column in the Midleton district. They were both killed in action at



Clonmult in February, 1920.

On 7th January, 1921, my own home was raided at night by a party of Cameron Highlanders. They proceeded to wreck the place, tearing up floor boards, breaking open presses and causing great damage. I was arrested and taken to the military camp at The Hutments, Belmont, Cobh, where I was put into the guardroom. Here two soldiers stood in front of me, loading and unloading their rifles and all the time threatening to shoot me if I failed to give information regarding the I.R.A. After half an hour or so of this sort of business, and failing to make me give them any information, I was put into a cell adjoining the guardroom and left there for the night without a bed of any kind on which I could lie. In the morning I noticed what appeared to be clotted blood on the floor of the cell, and after a while the soldiers brought me a bucket of water, a scrubbing brush and cloths to clean up the floor. I refused point blank to do this. I learned later that an I.R.A. prisoner named Hoare from East Cork who had been shot by the Cameron Highlanders, tied with ropes to a military lorry and dragged for miles along the road, had been thrown into the cell which I now occupied. This accounted for the clotted blood on the floor which I was ordered to wash.

Following my refusal to scrub out the cell, I was taken out and put into another cell where two military policemen beat me badly with trenching tools. Having done this, they took my coat, socks and shoes and left me bare-footed, wearing only a shirt and trousers. There was no glass in the cell windows and I suffered from the bitter cold. I was left there for three days and nights with nothing to eat. After three days my coat, shoes and socks were returned to me and I was taken for interrogation to the office of the

Adjutant of the Cameron Highlanders, whose name, so far as I can remember, was Morrison. While I was being questioned by Morrison, a Cameron Highlander stood behind me jabbing a revolver into the back of my neck. Most of the questions were about I.R.A. men on the run. I was asked where was Michael Burke, Daithi O'Brien and Mick Leahy, all of whom were prominent I.R.A. officers and Cobh men. I said I didn't know anything about these men. After about a half hour of questioning and threats, I remember saying to Morrison, "If I did know, do you think I would tell you?" to which he replied, "I don't suppose you would". That finished the interrogation and I was put back into a cell.

The next day I was brought by lorry with a heavily armed escort of soldiers to Victoria Barracks, Cork, where I was thrown into a cell off the guardroom. The conditions here were very bad, the food consisting of cold tea and biscuits - known as "hard tack". I was there about five weeks, during which I remember seeing members of the Cork Corporation coming in as prisoners. I was taken out and repeatedly lined up with other prisoners for scrutiny. I noticed that one of those who looked us over wore a mask. I was again beaten up and put into a cell with a young Kerry man whose scalp had been opened by a crack of a gun from a soldier. He and I were eventually sent to Cork Gaol. While in Victoria Barracks I was frequently taken out at night after curfew with some other prisoners as hostages in military lorries. On these occasions we were first handcuffed and then literally thrown into the lorry. One night I was driven through Cork in a lorry full of drunken Black and Tans who, when they reached the gates of Cork Gaol, took me out and threatened to shoot me. Were it not for the intervention of an R.I.C. sergeant who was in the lorry with me, I would undoubtedly have been shot that night.

I was detained a prisoner in Cork Gaol until May, 1921, when, owing to my bad state of health, I was removed to the Mercy Hospital, Cork, for an operation. I was in hospital until the Truce of July, 1921, when I returned to Cobh and rejoined the Fianna. I took part in the taking over of the barracks when the British garrison evacuated them in 1912.

Signed:

*Kevin Murphy*

Date:

*17<sup>th</sup> June 1957*

WITNESS:

*P. Sorman*

(Investigator).

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