

ORIGINAL

BUREAU OF MILITARY HISTORY 1913-21

BURO STAIRÉ MILEATA 1913-21

No. W.S. 107

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BUREAU OF MILITARY HISTORY, 1913-21.

STATEMENT BY WITNESS

DOCUMENT NO. W.S. 107

Witness

Mortimer O'Leary

Identity

Member of Castlegregory Coy. I.V. 1916.

Pilot for German arms ship, Easter 1916.

Subject

Plan for piloting German arms ship S.S. Aud
to Fenit pier.

Conditions, if any, stipulated by Witness

File No. 720

Form B.S.M. 2.

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STATEMENT OF MORTIMER O'LEARY, FAHAMORE,
MAGHAREES, CASTLEGREGORY, CO. KERRY.

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In April, 1916, my father was a licenced pilot in Tralee Bay and I worked with him. I was then too young to receive a pilot's licence myself, but I had had a good deal of experience and would have no difficulty in taking a boat into Fenit Pier. We lived then on Leary's Island, two miles from the mainland of the Magharees.

I was a member of the Castlegregory Company, I.V. On Holy Thursday, 1916, I was ashore and met Tadg Brosnan, the Company Captain. He told me that a small steamer carrying arms was due to arrive on Easter Sunday night and that arrangements for piloting her into Fenit Pier were to be made. He said he thought she would be a small boat about the size of the "Glen Cloy", a lighter of about 150 tons then in the basin. He instructed me to come up to him on Saturday afternoon when he would give me final instructions.

On that (Holy Thursday) evening when I got back to Leary's Island I saw a two-masted Steamer of about 3,000 tons. She was then about two miles north of Leary's Island and two miles east of Innistooskert. I watched her from the back window from nightfall until 12 midnight. I did not see her make any signal during that time. She was so much larger than the size of boat which Tadg Brosnan's description had suggested to me that I did not connect her with the arms ship. It did not enter my mind at the time that she was the expected arms ship.

My sister, Hannagh O'Leary, now a Carmelite nun in Dublin, took over the watch at midnight and I went to bed. About 2 a.m. she came and woke me up and said the ship was burning a green light from the bridge. I jumped up at once and went to the window. The green light was not visible. I asked my sister if she was sure the light was green, not blue; she said it was green. A blue light was the ordinary signal for a pilot. At that time I knew nothing of a pre-arranged signal with a green light, and I do not think Tadg Brosnan knew anything about it either. I watched the boat until dawn on Good Friday morning but did not see her make any signal during that period.

At daylight she steamed east for Kerry Head, well into Ballyheigue Bay. She turned inside Kerry Head, steamed west and dropped anchor north of Innistooskert about 8 a.m. I got suspicious then and began to form the opinion that this was a British vessel waiting for the arms ship to turn up. British decoy vessels patrolled the coast at that time for the purpose of attacking German submarines. No other vessel had appeared in the bay during the night, and none other did appear until about 11 a.m.

The anchored steamer flew no flag. I had noticed on the previous evening that she had a blue funnel with a red belt and was deep in the water as if laden. On Friday morning the colour of the funnel had been changed. It was now grey and the red band was gone. She was also higher in the water as if her ballast tanks had been emptied.

About 11 a.m. a British armed steam trawler came towards the anchored steamer from the east. He came alongside, stayed about an hour and a half, then steamed west for the Blaskets. About 3 o'clock I saw two big British destroyers coming from the west. One

kept well off, the other circled the anchored steamer at a distance of about a mile. This destroyer was signalling. After a while the destroyer standing off steamed west, the other one slowly followed but the anchored steamer did not move. Then I heard a report and saw a big splash of water near the arms ship. I saw steam coming from the bow, and thought at first she was on fire. In fact, he was picking up his anchor and he then steamed away west after the two destroyers.

On Saturday I came ashore. I met Pat Ashe, who was Lieutenant in Castlegregory Company I.V. and sounded him to find if he knew anything about the expected arms ship. He did not. I then told him we were expecting something tomorrow. He told me two or three men were arrested the previous day after coming ashore from a submarine, but we did not then know who they were.

With the expectation of a small boat in mind I did not still connect the events in the bay with the expected arms ship. I went to Tadg Brosnan to get final instructions for Sunday. In discussing the matter with him he expressed the view that the steamer I had seen might have been our ship, because he had learned since he was speaking to me on Thursday that the first instructions that were sent to John Devoy to be transmitted to Germany were to the effect that the ship was to cruise off Innistooskert on some day of the week before Easter Sunday until he got a pilot. He said that a second order was sent that the ship was not to come to Innistooskert until Sunday. He mentioned Pearse's name in reference to this, but I am not sure in what connection exactly. I do not know how Tadg Brosnan learned of this between Thursday and Saturday. He did not, at any time, either on Thursday or Saturday, say anything to me about green lights for signals, or any other kind of signals. I doubt if he knew anything about them then. He instructed me to remain on Leary's Island on Sunday in case the arms ship should come, and to be ready to pilot her into Fenit Pier. I did so, and selected the following to accompany me :-

Pat Ashe, Kilshannig.
Jerry Flynn, do
James Hussey, who was with me on the Island.

On Easter Sunday about 10 a.m. Sergeant Regan, R.I.C., Castlegregory, and two constables came to Leary's Island. I kept out of the way and they did not find me. They interrogated my father, who denied that he saw any ship on Good Friday. The Sergeant insisted that he must have seen it, as a number of other people did, but my father would not give him any information. Other people on the island did give the police information. The result was that two of them were arrested and taken to Dublin the following week. This was, I think, because one of them had said they saw 12 ft. boats on the ship, and the police believed no one could have seen them unless they had been on board. There was also a rumour that a boat had been seen going out to the ship and this is probably the origin of the mistaken idea that a pilot went out to her. I did not go out to her, and I am quite certain no other boat did.

Of course, if she had hoisted her jack for a pilot any pilot would have taken her into Fenit Pier without question. So far as the pilot was concerned, no question as to the kind of cargo she was carrying would arise. Friday night was a fine moonlight night and I could have taken her into Fenit without the least difficulty. She was in the bay almost exactly twenty-four hours.

At that time there was a British Coast-watching Station at Ballyheigue and another at Brandon. My recollection is that it was a small party of British soldiers were at Fenit. The Coast Watching men at Ballyheigue used to patrol to Kerry Head. It was the Brandon post that reported the presence of the arms ship in the Bay. The ship did not at any time go inside Mucklaghmore. It would have been possible for her Captain to take a steamer of that size into Fenit, but, in my opinion, without a pilot he would have been unable to turn and come out again.

SIGNED: Wortimer Leary

DATE: 13-3-48

WITNESS: Florence Dowling

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