

ORIGINAL

BUREAU OF MILITARY HISTORY 1913-21

BURO STAIRÉ MILEATA 1913-21

No. W.S. 124

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BUREAU OF MILITARY HISTORY, 1913-21.

STATEMENT BY WITNESS

DOCUMENT NO. W.S. 124

Witness

Joseph Connolly

Identity

Member of Belfast I.V.

Subject

Formation of I.V. Belfast.
Meeting held at Dr. O'Kelly's home on
Holy Saturday 1916.
Conveying of MacNeill's countermanding
order.

Conditions, if any, stipulated by Witness

File No. S. 212.

Form B.S.M. 2.

ORIGINAL

Joseph Conolly MELFORD

BUREAU OF MILITARY HISTORY 1913-21

BURO STAIRE MILEATA 1913-21

NO. W.S. 124

Westfield Road

DUBLIN.

9. APRIL 1948

I was not at any time a member of the I.R.B.

Sometime (I think in 1911 or 1912) I was "sounded" by Seán Lester (later Secretary to the League of Nations). I explained my position quite frankly to him which was as follows:-

1. I had personal conscientious objections to becoming a member bound by oath to commit myself to unknown obligations.
2. I believed that my word was my bond and that my promise as a man was sufficient warrant for trust. If not then there was nothing I was prepared to do about it.

The Irish Volunteers in Belfast were formed following a meeting in St. Mary's Minor Hall under the following circumstances:

For some years a small group of us had been running the "Freedom Club". This was the No.1. Freedom Club of quite a large number that were subsequently formed throughout the country. It was fundamentally Sinn Féin in its outlook, supported the policy of that paper and of "Irish Freedom". Its immediate purpose was educational from the Sinn Féin and Separatist point of view and aimed particularly at 'roping in' the young people in the Fianna and helping the latter in all its activities.

Frequent meetings, Lectures, visits to the graves of 1798 men &c., were held and the members were always available to co-operate in Gaelic and Irish Ireland activities as well as anti-recruiting propaganda and all separatist movements.

At one of these meetings in 1913 when the Ulster Volunteer Movement was at its height, I read a paper entitled 'The Need of the North' which argued the case for starting a division of the Irish Volunteers in Belfast. I may say that at this time the attitude of some of the leaders of the Irish Volunteers at Headquarters was against starting in Belfast and the North and that view was held by Eóin MacNeill and Roger Casement.

Following the lecture (or paper) I posted the script on to Arthur Griffith with whom I was in reasonably constant contact and communication at the time and to whose paper (Sinn Féin) I was a frequent contributor. I did not send my paper to him for publication but rather to give him my viewpoint in the belief that he might sound a note of policy in his Editorial Notes. He published the lecture as an article and commented approvingly on it in the following week's issue and favoured the suggestion that we should start the Irish Volunteers in the North. It was as a result of this that the meeting was held and at which it was decided to start. This despite the fact that a few representatives of the National Club (Berry St.) and the A.O.H. opposed the decision and made it clear that Mr. Devlin did not approve. At this meeting a Committee was formed, Mr. McCullough was elected Chairman and I, myself, vice-Chairman with the late Mickey Carolan, Secretary, and Seán Neeson as Treasurer.

At the beginning recruitment was slow but due to some sudden change in policy and the word received by the U.I.L. and A.O.H. Branches we were shortly flooded out by members until at the peak point the Belfast regiment must have numbered between four and five thousand.

It is unnecessary to go into all the details of what followed save to say that organising, planning of drilling, accommodation and all the rest fell on a limited number. Ex-British Army men were engaged to carry on the training and drilling and eventually a Military Committee, which was at that time subject to the control of the Administrative

Committee was formed.

Joint meetings of the Military and Administrative Committees were frequent and - up to the 'Split' - quite harmonious though there was the inevitable suspicious watching to try and prevent the politicians (i.e. the Irish Party and A.O.H.) getting control of the Movement.

At one of these joint meetings, the Military Committee brought forward proposals for the promotion in Military rank of a number of us who had been and were active in the work. Amongst them I heard myself being proposed for promotion to the rank of Captain. I objected to any such proposal on the grounds:

- (1) That I had stood no test to show that I was competent to hold such rank.
- (2) that I refused to be anything but a Private in the Military organisation under any circumstances.
- (3) that I objected to anyone being elevated to a military post of responsibility unless as a result of military examination.

These points are of importance in view of what transpired later.

I held to my point of view and a number of my Colleagues did the same but not all of them.

Following that meeting I stressed to a number of my Colleagues the absurdity of them accepting high rank unless they were ready to get down to the serious work of training and preparing themselves. My argument was as follows:-

"This business is going to lead somewhere and what is going to be the position if you find yourself called on to handle anything from a squad to a Regiment. You may find yourself with men's lives in your hands and unless you learn your job you won't know what to do with the men under you".

Accordingly I continued as a "Private" in the Military side of the Volunteers while I continued to hold the position of Vice-Chairman of the organisation. Up to a point we succeeded in keeping the Volunteers entirely free from political control though it became evident early in 1914 that many - but not all - the Devlinite supporters who were members, were working to get control. There was an overwhelming rush of members from the latter end of 1913 and those of us who engaged on the organising end of the work were active practically every night in getting new branches and Companies formed. It was my view that the vast majority of the rank and file had no wish for political interference and the subsequent stampede to Redmond's Volunteers and to the call for recruits for the British Army on the outbreak of War was due to a misplaced loyalty to the Irish Party leaders, ^{and} particularly to the local leader Mr. Joseph Devlin.

At the outbreak of War the acute differences between the politicians and those of us who wished to see the Volunteers maintained for purely Irish activities and who were fundamentally opposed to any service whatever to the British reached a climax. The situation was doubtless the same all over the country but there was, I think, the important difference in Belfast that the political leader was Mr. Devlin who was the head of the A.O.H. and the most active force in the United Irish League at the time. Moreover he had unparalleled personal loyalty from his supporters in Belfast and the North generally. Following a series of district and Company meetings at which we endeavoured to secure the adhesion of the members to the Volunteers and to get a decision against recruitment to

the British Army, a General Meeting of the whole Volunteer Organisation was held in St. Mary's Hall on a Sunday afternoon (? I think in August 1914).

Of that Meeting it will suffice to say that Mr. Devlin took over complete control of the Belfast Regiment and organisation. No hearing was given to any of us. Denis McCullough made a futile effort to state our point of view but it was quite evident that the vast majority had been organised to howl down any person who was opposed to the new departure and the recruitment for the British Army. We were ejected from the Meeting and later when we took stock of the position, we reckoned that only about 200 remained loyal to the original Volunteers, the remainder - the vast majority - lining up behind Devlin.

The Belfast Meeting had for me this significance. It was, I believe, the preliminary large-scale test of the Irish Party strength vis-a-vis the Irish Volunteers and preceded the ultimate "knitting" of the issue which resulted in the split and the nation-wide recruiting campaign for the Irish Brigade of the British Army. I understood at the time that John Redmond was in Belfast during the week-end of Devlin's "achievement" but I could never definitely verify the truth or otherwise of this. Certain subsequent developments convinced me at the time that it was true. The remnant of loyal adherents continued and their subsequent history is being or has been made available by others but I think it necessary to mention the fact that amongst those who remained loyal to us were several ex-British Army men who had given untiring service to the movement from the beginning. Of these, I would specially mention two - Sean Cusack and Sean O'Neill. Both these men continued in loyal service to Ireland and eventually I believe held officer rank in the National Army. Despite all opposition both from the Forces of the Crown and the now Irish Party War Allies, the small group of Volunteers carried on. Their numbers were small but the majority were earnest and keen in their work. I was not at all happy about the leadership but that was a personal point of view dating back to the view that I held about military competence for military leadership.

Early in Holy Week 1916 Colm O'Loughlin visited me at my home where he was an occasional guest.

He informed me of the plans for the Rising which had been arranged for Easter Sunday. I then asked him if he could arrange that I could join up in his Company on that day, explaining that I would be bringing up a certain amount of arms and ammunition, that I would join him on Easter Saturday evening. This was agreed and I then saw one of my Belfast colleagues and told him that I was going to Dublin and had arranged to link up with O'Loughlin. I referred to previous discussions I had had regarding military control and leadership and told him that I believed we would be 'wiped out' and that if such were to be the case, I as a private ranker in the Volunteers preferred to take my chance under reasonably reliable leadership. (Note: I refrain from comment on the activities of the Belfast contingent in Tyrone but I think these justified my contention).

I must perforce introduce here a note of my personal position at the time of the Rising solely because it has a reflex bearing on my own activities and those of my brother, Alec.

I had started business on my own in April 1915 and was succeeding beyond my expectations. I had got married in January 1916, my wife and I having in mind that a National crisis might and was likely to arise. I informed Alec, (my brother) that I proposed to make legal arrangements that

that he and my Wife should take over the business on a 'fifty-fifty' basis if I shouldn't survive and this was agreed.

I then went to Mr. F.J. Bigger who was my Solicitor as well as being a close personal friend and associate in certain National activities. F.J. wouldn't listen to my proposals and pooch-pooched the idea of anything happening to me or indeed of anything happening at all. The next day Alec came to me and informed me that he couldn't go on with my proposal, that he too was a Volunteer and that if I were departing to Dublin then he too could see no reason for staying out. I tried to reason otherwise, pointing out the needs of my Wife and the other members of the family (Mother and Sisters) for whose care he and I had certain responsibilities but I had eventually to accept his decision.

We had a mutual friend Seán O'Sullivan who was in the Labour Exchange in Belfast at the time and is at present (April 1948) a Senior Officer or Head of the Employment Insurance Branch in Lord Edward Street and he (O'Sullivan) willingly agreed to take up with him to Dublin our supplies which consisted of 2 Automatics (with gun stocks) and about 400 rounds for them. The reason for this will be obvious perhaps when I explain that I was suspect by the G. Division of the Police and that I was invariably shadowed all over Dublin when I visited it. Actually, Detective Hoy did shadow me from Amiens Street to Mrs Wyse Power's Restaurant on my arrival.

Arriving in Dublin I went to the Restaurant in Henry Street where I expected that I might meet Griffith or some of the others. I had a short talk with Mrs Wyse-Power but her only news to me was that 'there was bad news from Kerry' but she gave me no particulars.

Having arranged for Sunday with O'Loughlin, I planned to spend the night with my friend Hugh A. MacCartan at Gilford Avenue, Sandymount.

After 11 p.m. when MacCartan and I were undressing to go to bed, O'Loughlin arrived at the house. He told me that MacNeill, learning that I was in Dublin, asked O'Loughlin to bring me along to see him. He was in Dr. Seumas O'Kelly's house, Rathgar, and O'Loughlin and I went there.

Going in to one of the sitting-rooms, I met MacNeill who asked me what I was up in Dublin for. My reply was 'To do anything I am ordered to do'. I do not remember precisely what he said but the general trend was that things were in a very unsatisfactory state, that things had gone all wrong, arrangements had been badly handled and had already broken down. He proposed accordingly to call off the "Mobilisation" that had been arranged for Easter Sunday. While we were talking Tomás MacDonagh arrived and was shown in direct to MacNeill. He did not sit down nor take off his overcoat nor did he, so far as I remember, have any talk with anyone save MacNeill. I was standing beside them - just the three of us, when MacNeill explained that he proposed to call off all 'manoeuvres' and everything that had been arranged for Easter Sunday. MacDonagh was extremely solemn, almost tense as he was told this and said to MacNeill - "You realise of course that you are issuing an order which may not be obeyed". MacNeill's

reply was equally tense "Well the responsibility for disobedience will be on those who disobey". MacDonagh then said 'I will have to consult my friends about it'. He then left and as I recollect it, left without any exchange of conventional civilities. My memory of this important interlude is that it did not take more than a couple of minutes, that MacDonagh did not speak to anyone in the room except MacNeill. He did not sit down but just stood for the couple of minutes necessary to speak to MacNeill.

MacNeill then went on to discuss with me the arrangements for calling off the mobilisation and asked me if I was prepared to bring word to some of the Northern units. We discussed this and eventually it was agreed that I would leave on the Sunday morning train for the North along with O'Loughlin. The latter was to go to Coalisland and make contact with the Belfast crowd while my instructions were to go to Drogheda, see Dr. Bradley, show him the order from MacNeill directing that all operations for Easter Sunday were off and through Dr. Bradley have the instructions conveyed to the Volunteer officers and key men in Drogheda and the surrounding districts.

I should perhaps mention that amongst those present in Dr. O'Kelly's sitting room were Arthur Griffith, Paudeen O'Keefe and Seán Fitzgibbon. James MacNeill and Dr. O'Kelly were sitting at the fire chatting.

I left with O'Loughlin and spent the night with him at his house (Beech Lawn on the Rathgar Road). Next morning (Easter Sunday) we went to early Mass at Rathgar Church and then caught the 10 a.m. Belfast train at Amiens Street.

I left the train at Drogheda and proceeded to Dr. Bradley's house and read over MacNeill's order which he undertook to have conveyed to the local Volunteer leaders. My instructions from MacNeill were that having conveyed his message I was to proceed home - it was apparently the intention to convey to the Authorities that nothing unusual was afoot. There was no train to Belfast until the late afternoon and Dr. Bradley invited me to stay and have lunch with him and his family. I did so and after lunch he took me for a run in his motor along the Boyne Valley. While we were going along we met on the road a group of young men who were obviously Volunteers and were laden with their shoulder packs and were apparently all set for manoeuvres. There would be, so far as I can recollect, about twenty of these. I was somewhat taken aback to see these men on the road and asked Dr. Bradley if he had given MacNeill's order to the Drogheda leaders. I do not remember what his reply was but I wasn't satisfied and asked him to stop. I got out and asked them who was in charge or in command. A young man came forward and I told him of MacNeill's instructions which had appeared in that day's Sunday Independent and that I had come from Dublin with MacNeill's order and that the instructions were that no activities were to take place and that the men were to disperse and return to their homes.

The leader, whom I afterwards came to know well as Phil Monaghan (the present Cork City Manager) was extremely reluctant to accept the order and questioned either the order or MacNeill's authority. However I explained that all I could do was to convey MacNeill's message and leave it to himself to disband his men or otherwise. I pointed out that

similar messages had gone to all parts of the country calling off the mobilisation. I learned later that Phil Monaghan and his men were "all set" for the destruction of one of the main line bridges but no doubt this plan of activities will be recorded by him. I caught the evening train for Belfast and proceeded to my home. My recollection is that the train arrived some time around 6 p.m. I know that I was only a short time home and having tea when my close friend and associate Tadgh Smyth came in. He was anxious to know what had happened in Dublin and I told him briefly and asked him about Tyrone and if they had returned after O'Loughlin had delivered MacNeill's message. To my surprise he told me that they had not seen any sign of O'Loughlin. Shortly afterwards O'Loughlin himself arrived and explained that on reaching Tyrone (I cannot now remember definitely but I think it was Coalisland) he learned that the Belfast men had already returned to Belfast.

(Note: I leave out any further reference to this as I had no personal experience and accurate details will no doubt be available from such as Denis McCullough, Cathal MacDowell, Tom Wilson, Seán Kelly and Tadgh Smyth himself).

What followed is more or less known to the public. I went about Belfast the following week. There was no possibility of leaving the City once the news 'broke' that the Rising was on in Dublin and there was, apart from that, many conflicting discussions about the rights and wrongs of MacNeill's order, the Rising itself and somewhat bitter recriminations about the divided and conflicting lines of the two schools of thought and direction at Headquarters.

I went to business after the Easter holidays as usual and then on the first Friday morning of May I was arrested at my Warehouse in Upper Arthur Street, brought to the Bridewell in Chichester Street and subsequently to the Crumlin Road Jail where I discovered that some twenty-six or twenty-seven of us had been similarly 'rounded up' that morning. On the following (Saturday) morning we were transferred in covered Furniture Removal vans to the G.N.R. Station and on arrival in Dublin were marched to Richmond Barracks.

(Note: It is presumed that the period in Richmond Barracks, Knutsford and later in Reading Jail have been or will be adequately covered and that my personal experiences from the date of arrest until my release in August need hardly be recorded. If they are desired however they can be supplied).

Signed Joseph Connolly
9th April 1948.

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