

ORIGINAL

BUREAU OF MILITARY HISTORY 1913-21

BURO STAIRÉ MILITÁIRÉ 1913-21

No. W.S. 152

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BUREAU OF MILITARY HISTORY, 1913-21.

STATEMENT BY WITNESS

DOCUMENT NO. W.S. 152

Witness

Arthur P. Agnew

Identity

Member of I.R.B. and I.V. Liverpool and
F/Coy. Dublin Brigade.

Subject

- (a) I.R.B. and I.V. Liverpool pre 1916.
- (b) 1916 Rising - Dublin.

Conditions, if any, stipulated by Witness

Nil

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BUREAU OF MILITARY HISTORY 1913-1921.

Statement by Arthur P. Agnew

North Street, Swords, Co. Dublin.

My Grandfather, who was Centre for the North of England, fought with the Fenians. I joined the I.R.B. in Liverpool in March or April 1910. I joined the Bootle (Nicholl) Branch. John Fitzpatrick was Centre. Neil Kerr, Pat Lively, Leonard Gibbons, Joe Duffy, Mick Horan, John Sullivan, John Hennessy, Mick McGarvey and Bernard Boyle were members of that Branch. We held our meetings in the Gaelic League Rooms in Bootle. On joining we took an oath to obey all orders of our superior officers. We paid a small sum towards a general Fund and also a subscription for the purchase of arms. There were no drills but we were taught how to shoot. On Wednesday afternoons we went to the Sand Hills for revolver practice. We used a short .45 for practice. We also had some other .45, .38, .32 revolvers. Miniature Rifle Clubs were popular in England at that time and we were ordered to join these Clubs and make full use of them. Activities of this nature continued up to and including 1913.

At the beginning of 1914 a Company of the Irish Volunteers was formed in Bootle. All I.R.B. men were instructed to join and get hold of the key positions. The Volunteers were really started by the I.R.B. We held our drills at the Seaforth Foresters' Hall and occasionally we had drills and practices outside the city. Our instructors were ex-British Army men - Irish lads who had served in the British Army. Our strength was approximately 50. There was no oath administered on joining the Volunteers. We received a membership card and paid a subscription - whatever we could afford - towards the purchase of arms. For drill purposes we had dummy rifles.

We concentrated on the purchase of revolvers, as rifles were not considered suitable armament, it being understood that our work in the case of a rising would be sabotage of transport, communications, docks, etc. etc.

Recruiting for the I.R.B. took place amongst the Irish Volunteers and the various Irish Societies existing in Liverpool at the time. We succeeded in getting a good supply of revolvers and ammunition, principally from America, by the boats coming into the docks ~~times~~. I was in Dublin from April 1914 to September 1914, ^{during} which time I was a member of F/Coy. 2nd Battalion, Dublin Brigade. Captain McGee and Lieut. Henderson were the principal officers. At the time of the split in the Volunteers in Ireland we were not affected very much in Liverpool as most of the members were belonging to the I.R.B. and about 80% remained loyal.

In the end of 1915 the conscription Act was passed in England and our members were being called up for service in the British Army. Arrangements were made to send these men to Dublin as soon as they got their calling up notices. A number of the men had home addresses in Ireland. A camp was opened at Kimmage, Dublin, to receive these men (afterwards known as the Kimmage Garrison). I got my calling up notice in March 1916. I left Liverpool and came to Dublin with a note to Volunteer Headquarters in Dawson St. from our Secretary. On reporting at Headquarters I met there The O'Rahilly and Sean McDermott. The O'Rahilly sent me to Kimmage. George Plunkett was in command of the Camp there and John King was the Quartermaster. There were 40 or 50 men there increasing to 54 by Easter. This place was principally a munitions manufacturing depot. We did drill and arms instruction as well. Cooking was done in turns by pairs. The food was good and sufficient. A guard and two sentries on the front and back were maintained. We made buckshot and refilled cartridges with this shot on a large scale. We had

some Howth rifles and also some Lee Enfields. We also made a large number of pikes. Some of our men went to work in the De Selby Quarries and thus got experience in the use of explosives. They also succeeded in getting some gelignite out of the quarries.

We had lectures from Pearse on street fighting and barricading of streets, lanes, etc. We were told not to man the barricades physically, but to cover them from the nearby houses. We also got instructions in boring, in a zig zag manner, from house to house. We knew there was going to be a fight but we did not know when or what it was going to be like. When Holy Week arrived all our stores were cleared out of Kimmage. It was then apparent that something was going to happen and all preparations were made for closing down. On Holy Thursday this was verified by the departure of Denis Daly and Con Keating for Kerry. On Saturday we had an extra special breakfast, everyone got two rashers and two eggs. We were told that this was the last we would have in Kimmage. Everyone was confined to camp on that day and night. On Easter Sunday morning we were allowed to go to Mass at Mount Argus. We were getting ready for parade on Sunday when the countermanding order arrived. The Officer Commanding ordered us to be still confined to camp. We were standing to all day Sunday and nothing further happened. Food was scarce as no rations had been issued.

On Easter Monday morning we marched out of camp at 10.30 hrs. under Plunkett, carrying all arms, rifles, shotguns, pikes and small arms. We also carried some crowbars and pickaxes. Nearly everyone had a pike the shafts of which were of various lengths, some of them 6 feet. We were organised in two platoons or half companies. Sean Brennan was in charge of the right half company and Peadar Bracken the left half. We marched to Harolds Cross where we boarded a tram. Plunkett insisted on paying the conductor for our tickets. We got off at O'Connell Bridge and formed up and marched to Liberty Hall. We were now organised into four sections. The O'Rahilly arrived in his car from Waterford

and went to the G.P.O. with us. We had a lorry load of ammunition and supplies and a cab. I understood it was Clarke and McDermott were in the cab.

We marched up Abbey St. and swung up O'Connell St. When the head of the Company reached Princes St. No. 4 section got the order "About turn, double march" and doubled down the Street to O'Connell Bridge. Peadar Bracken came with us and posted 5 men across the Bridge on the north end from Hopkins corner to Kelly's corner. I was one of those and our orders were to stop all British troops from crossing the bridge. Bracken took two men with him and broke into Kelly's, and Robinson with two others went into Hopkins the Jewellers. When Robinson was breaking into Hopkins a D.M.P. man approached him. He was held up at the bayonet point by Vol. Turner Cormack. He exclaimed "Don't do that. I will go back to barracks. Those are my instructions if anything happens". He was allowed to go away. We stayed on the bridge until Hopkins and Kelly's were opened. I went into Kelly's with Volunteer Joe Good. We proceeded to barricade Kelly's with furniture, sewing machines, etc. - in fact, anything we could lay our hands on. We bored into the next house, Chancellor's the Photographers - and from there we kept boring until we finally arrived at Elvery's. Our garrison was only five all told until Tuesday evening when we were reinforced by five men of the Fingal Brigade. They were Ned Lawless, Dan Brophy, Jack Kelly, Jack Hynes and Peter Caddel.

On Tuesday we were fired on from Trinity College area by rifles and machine guns. We got some sandwiches from the G.P.O. that day and in the evening some girls from the G.P.O. brought us more sandwiches and cakes. From a chemist's shop we collected a large quantity of first aid material and some tea tablets. All trams and traffic had stopped on our occupation of the buildings. Looting started by the mob on Monday evening. Our orders were that the looters were to be stopped and made drop their loot on

the street. If they failed to do this they were to be shot.

On Tuesday night after the Fingal men arrived we got some sleep. A sniper in McBirney's gave us a lot of trouble. On that day also the Helga came up the river to the railway bridge and shelled Liberty Hall. By Wednesday we had bored right through to Abbey St. We were under very heavy fire that day and the D.B.C. was on fire. Bracken asked the G.P.O. (H/qrs.) for instructions and we were ordered to withdraw to the G.P.O. Abbey St. was under heavy enemy fire and we had to cross this to get to the G.P.O. We succeeded in doing so without suffering any casualties. This was on Wednesday night. We were given a sleep but after about an hour in bed we had to get up again to build a barricade in the main hall of the G.P.O. This was made of coal from the cellars filled into mail bags.

Plunkett went on a reconnaissance and on his return he said that Kelly's should be reoccupied. We got instructions to reoccupy Kelly's. This was on Thursday. Kelly's had been shelled but not badly damaged, the explosion of the shells having burst the floors, but the outer walls were intact. We got to Easons' sidedoor which was barricaded with newspapers. As we were pulling down the barricade to get through Connolly came on the scene. He was told our mission. He said that would be impossible and instructed us to remain where we were. We stayed in the Metropole Hotel until Friday. The Metropole was under fire from D'Olier St. and the Irish Independent office.

On Friday we got instructions that the G.P.O. was being evacuated and the Metropole was to be evacuated also. To do this we had to go back into the G.P.O. At this time the G.P.O. was under very heavy fire and was burning. We crossed Henry St. and into Moore Lane. This lane bends and then runs parallel with Moore St. to join Parnell St. A white house at the bend was under very heavy machine gun fire from Parnell St. Under a misapprehension it was thought that fire was coming from this

house and that it was in enemy hands. An attempt was made to "storm" the house but it was discovered in the nick of time that it was not occupied and that it was the ricochets off the walls gave the impression that fire was coming from there. We crossed the lane by rushes - three at a time - between bursts of enemy fire. John King was wounded by one of these bursts, another man got wounded in the knee also. The whole garrison got across here with, I think, only a few casualties.

Friday night was spent boring through the houses along the eastern side of Moore St. to another lane near the top of Moore St. This lane was about 20 yards from the junction of Moore St. and Parnell St. We got into a yard of what appeared to be a Mineral Water Factory or Depot by Saturday morning. It was the intention, I believe, to get across Parnell St. to Williams & Woods Factory and through there, and link up with the Four Courts garrison outposts. The enemy had a strong barricade at the top of Moore St. which controlled that street and prevented access to Parnell St. Plunkett volunteered, I think, to clear this barricade. He took his own Company. We were to rush the barricade on a given signal under the fire of our comrades from the upstairs windows of the houses in Moore St. He said he would attack in an hour; in the meantime, we could get anything we could to eat and say our prayers. During that hour the final negotiations for surrender had taken place. Just as we were opening the gate to launch our attack McDermott came down from one of the houses and told us that a "Cease Fire" had been ordered and that arrangements had been made for a surrender. The men kicked against surrendering but McDermott said he looked to the men to accept it in the proper spirit. He said he was sure that the men would be treated as prisoners of war, but as for Pearse and himself and the other men who had signed the Proclamation, they knew what to expect. "We are" he said "accepting it on behalf of the people to save further bloodshed"

and finally he said "We have now surrendered". All the men who were capable of thought and not dazed from want of sleep and fatigue were very downhearted now.

The wounded were left out in Moore St. for ambulances to pick up. We marched out under arms to O'Connell St. and lined up on the western side. We got an order from British officers to lay down our arms and equipment and take 10 paces to the rear which we did, British officers examined the arms and we were then turned about and marched to the other side of the street. Soldiers then took post behind us about one to each volunteer. The British officers took our particulars, names and addresses, etc. From there we were marched to the lawn in front of the Rotunda Hospital and parked in there for the night under guard. We could lie down but were so closely packed that we could not sleep. No conveniences were provided and we got no food or water. The thirst was terrific. We were kept there until about 9 a.m. on Sunday morning, when we were lined up and marched to Richmond Barracks under very heavy escort. Troops were posted at all street junctions along the route. We got a bad reception from the civilians as we passed along the Thomas St. area. On reaching the barracks we were lined up on the square. We were taken in batches of four and searched and even our personal belongings including cigarettes were taken from us in some instances. We were next taken to the gymnasium where weeding-out took place. G-men and military officers were picking out wanted men. Sean McDermott and Tom Clarke were there. We were kept there until they had selected all the men they wanted and we were then taken to a Barrack Room and issued with a tin of bully beef to each two and a hard biscuit each. No tea or water was supplied. That evening we were paraded on the square in files of fours and here for the first time we got water to drink.

We were marched via the Royal Hospital to Kingsbridge and via the Four Courts and North Quays and on to a cattle boat at

the North Wall where we were stowed down in the holds like cattle. We were issued with two dog biscuits in the Richmond prior to starting. We crossed that night to Holyhead. On the boat we were given sterilized sea water to drink. At Holyhead we were entrained for Stafford. On arrival at Stafford we were marched to Stafford Gaol. There was some booing and jeering by the Stafford people on our way from the station to the Gaol, but mostly curiosity was evinced. On arrival at the Gaol we were lined up and the roll called. It was then discovered that the wrong rolls had been forwarded. We were all put in single cells. That evening we received a mug of very thin porridge known as "skilly" and a mug of half cold tea. There was no bedding - just lie on the bare floor. Next day we were issued with a mattress and a couple of blankets. We were under military guard all this time.

We were allowed one hour's exercise walking around a ring. No talking or communication was allowed. After about three weeks of solitary confinement we were allowed to smoke ^{in 90s} and the cells and later the cell doors were left open and we could talk and intermingle. Food was still bad, but you could buy groceries of a man who was allowed to come in for that purpose. The 'National Aid' which had now got going, sent us parcels of food which were very welcome.

In July we were moved to Frongoch. In this camp conditions were good. We did our own cooking and were issued with ordinary soldiers' rations or prisoners of war rations. The 'National Aid' continued to send parcels and we had a canteen where you could buy extras. We were allowed a share in the profit of the canteen with which we bought extra food. The camp was organised by huts each hut appointing a Hut leader. Amongst the prisoners were some professors from the universities and many secondary and other teachers. Under these, classes in languages and various subjects were conducted.

Attempts were made at times by the authorities to pick out men who were wanted for service in the British Army, but such attempts met with little success. There were meetings of the I.R.B. centres in the Camp and we had drills, etc. using hurley stocks for arms. We had our own Camp Commandant and did all our own administration and in this way we learned a lot about military routine and administration which afterwards proved useful to many.

We were brought in batches to Wandsworth Gaol and from there by bus to London and before the Sankey Commission and thence back to Frongoch. At Christmas we were all released and returned to Dublin. I arrived in Dublin on Christmas Eve morning. It was very noticeable the change of outlook in the people. They were now sympathetic towards us and lauded us as heroes and gave us free gifts.

Signed: Arthur P. AgnewDate: 7. Oct. 1948.Witnessed: Matthew BarryDate: 7. 10 - 48