

ORIGINAL

BUREAU OF MILITARY HISTORY 1913-21

BURO STAIRS MILITARY 1913-21

No. W/S. 180

Statement by :

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I joined the Cumann na mBan at the time the organisation was started in Belfast. Amongst those who were prominent in the organisation were : Winnie Carney, Nora Connolly, Ina Connolly, Ellis Corr, Nell Corr, Mary McNabb, Miss Teresa McDavitt.

There was only one Branch formed. Our meeting places were held in various parts of the city where the availability of premises to meet in were convenient and practical. Vacant premises were used and when the premises were again being occupied we had to move on to some other vacant house. It was impossible for us to obtain any central premises to rent as our organisation was not popular nor considered respectable in Belfast.

When the Cumann na mBan was started we had a small number of members. After the Volunteer organisation began to attract large numbers of recruits, the girls in Belfast started to take more interest in our organisation and our membership increased. As I am rather vague as to the numbers we had in our Branch and our officer personnel, any attempt to give further particulars after a lapse of 32 years would be purely guess work now. However, I would say we had 30 active girls in our Branch in 1916.

The activities of our girls can be summarised under the following headings : organising functions, such as dances, concerts, etc. for raising funds for the Volunteers; making house to house collections. These activities were intensively carried out from the formation of the Branch up to the eve of the Rising. In addition to above activities we attended lectures in First Aid. We took lessons in rifle and revolver

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shooting. The training in musketry was carried out at the Willowbank huts where the Volunteers also trained.

On Good Friday of 1916 we were told that a mobilisation was ordered for Easter Sunday, that the Cumann na mBan were to accompany the Volunteers in the mobilisation. We were not told at first where we were going. I think it was Nora Connolly who gave us our orders at a meeting of our Branch which she called for mobilisation purposes.

Nora Connolly at the meeting selected five girls to accompany her and we were ordered to meet her at the G.N.R. Station, Belfast, at 2.30 p.m. on Holy Saturday. Those girls were : Ina Connolly, Ellis Corr, Nell Corr, Ellis Allen and myself. We all arrived on time at the station and were handed railway tickets for Dungannon, Co. Tyrone. We met a contingent of Belfast Volunteers at the station who travelled to Dungannon on the same train with us. On arrival at Dungannon we procured a horse car to convey us to Coalisland. The Volunteers marched from Dungannon station to Coalisland. On our arrival in Coalisland we were allotted billets in a house near the top of the town and when we were shown our quarters for the night we went out and visited various centres of mobilisation, including some schools which the Volunteers had taken over. In one school we found a Céilí in progress. We returned to our billets with the intention of getting to bed.

After we arrived back to the billets we were informed, I think by Nora Connolly, that information had come through to the effect that Eoin MacNeill contemplated issuing orders countermanding the mobilisation. Nora Connolly informed us that she was travelling to Dublin on the midnight train from Dungannon and that I and the other girls should go with her. Her purpose in going to Dublin was to contact her father, James Connolly. We reached Dungannon by horse and car and got on the train. We arrived in Dublin about 5 a.m. on Sunday morning and proceeded direct to Liberty Hall.

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On our arrival at Liberty Hall we found an armed guard posted at the door of the hall. The guard refused us permission to enter the building. Miss Connolly told the guard who she was and that she had an important and urgent message for her father. She demanded an immediate entrance. After much trouble and argument with the guard Nora was taken by two Citizen Army soldiers to her father's bedroom. After a short time Mr. Connolly with Nora came to us. Nora told him of the preparedness of the men up North and their willingness to fight. She gave him a vivid description of what she had seen of the mobilisation in Tyrone on Saturday night.

Mr. Connolly told us that the leaders had a long meeting on Saturday night, that the meeting had only just ended, that the leaders had gone for some sleep in nearby hotels within easy call of Liberty Hall. He told us that what we told him of the preparations in Tyrone was so important that he was then deciding to call an immediate meeting of the leaders. He gave orders to each of us girls to go to a particular leader and tell each leader he was sending us to describe what the position was in Tyrone and the preparations for the Rising which we had seen there.

I was sent to Joseph Plunkett at an hotel which I now think is the Metropole. I am not sure of the exact location of the hotel but I believe it was near the Post Office on the same side of the street. A Citizen Army soldier was sent with me. When we arrived at the hotel door a man, probably the porter, came to us and when I asked to see Mr. Plunkett he refused to let me see him. He told me that Mr. Plunkett was a very sick man and could not be seen then. The Citizen Army soldier produced a gun and demanded that I should see Mr. Plunkett as a matter of urgent military importance. I then gained admission and was taken to Mr. Plunkett's bedroom. Mr. Plunkett had an overcoat on him over his night attire. His neck was bandaged. I understood he was only a short time after an operation on his neck.

I gave him all the information at my disposal concerning the

Tyrone area. I told him that Mr. Connolly had sent me to him to convey this information and that other Belfast girls had been sent on similar missions to other leaders. I cannot now remember if Mr. Connolly told me to ask Mr. Plunkett to come along to Liberty Hall. If I was asked by Mr. Connolly to do so, I, of course, did it. I know that all the leaders were summoned to Liberty Hall on Sunday morning.

On leaving Mr. Plunkett's hotel we returned to Liberty Hall and I immediately started to give a hand at preparing breakfast. The preparation of this meal was carried out under difficult conditions - an open fire, inadequate utensils and primitive equipment generally. Our work of preparing the meal started about 7.30 a.m. and was not finished until about 10 a.m.

At about 11 a.m. the leaders met again. I was speaking to Thomas McDonagh and Seán McDermott after they arrived for the meeting.

Later on during Sunday Mr. Connolly called all the Belfast girls together and said: "You will be delighted to know that we have all decided to strike a blow for Ireland". Shortly after this I heard that Mr. Connolly had issued mobilisation orders to the Citizen Army. In the evening the Citizen Army started to arrive at Liberty Hall.

At Liberty Hall we met Countess Markievicz who was in uniform. I got her fur coat and lay down on the floor with the coat over me and fell sound asleep. When I awoke I found that the Citizen Army were fully mobilised and were drawn up in military formation on the street opposite Liberty Hall. They were preparing to leave on a route march. Countess Markievicz was parading with them. She had her dog with her. I asked permission to take a photograph of the parade and got permission. Mr. Connolly then asked me to take a photograph of himself, the Countess and her dog. He told me he required a photograph such as this for attachment to a poem he had written which he intended

sending to America. I took both photographs and took the reel they were on home with me to Belfast. I sent them out to be printed. I got all the snaps on the reel back from the Chemist with whom I left them for printing except the two snaps I took at Liberty Hall.

We slept on Sunday night in Countess Markievicz' house. The house was filled by all sorts, Fianna boys, Girl Guides, Cumann na mBan, Scotch Volunteers. Beds were used in relays and were warm from previous use when I got into my bed.

On Monday morning we returned to Liberty Hall and whilst there James Connolly called us - six Belfast girls - to a window and showed us the 1916 Proclamation which had only then come off the printing press. He told us that he was sending a copy of it to Dungannon. He told us that we were the first to see it except the leaders. He suggested that as I was the tallest of the girls, I would be the person to carry it concealed under my blouse. He said that the carrying of the Proclamation was a matter of extreme danger if found by the British and might possibly mean death. I folded the Proclamation and fitted it under my blouse. I can't now recollect what happened the Proclamation. I was speaking to Mr. Connolly again before we left Liberty Hall. Perhaps Mr. Connolly may have taken the Proclamation from me as the carrying of it would mean so much danger. My mind is a blank on what happened to the Proclamation.

We travelled north to Dungannon on the 9 a.m. train on Monday. We proceeded to Coalisland and were provided with billets in McGrath's house, Derrytrask, and the other girls now accommodated in neighbouring houses. We arrived in our billets in late afternoon or night.

After our arrival we found to our disappointment that the Belfast Volunteers had returned home on Sunday and that the Tyrone Volunteers had also demobilised. Nora Connolly, after our arrival in Coalisland, saw some of the Tyrone leaders.

I don't know what passed between them.

We remained in Derrytrask area up to Friday of Easter Week when we returned to Belfast.

Kathleen O'Kelly
15/10/48

Witness John Mc Coy.

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