

ORIGINAL

BUREAU OF MILITARY HISTORY 1913-21
BURO STAIRÉ MILEATA 1913-21
No. W.S. 229

ROINN  COSANTA.

BUREAU OF MILITARY HISTORY, 1913-21.

STATEMENT BY WITNESS

DOCUMENT NO. W.S.229.....

Witness

Mr. Frank Booth,
10 Alexandra St. West,
Belfast.

Identity

Member of Irish Volunteers Belfast 1914-16;
Centre I.R.B. Circle 1914-16.

Subject

History of Irish Volunteers and I.R.B.
Belfast 1914-16.

Conditions, if any, stipulated by Witness

Nil

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Statement by Frank Booth

10 Alexandra Street, West, Belfast.

I am now 76 years of age. I joined the Volunteers on the 17th March, 1914. Some time afterwards I joined the I.R.B. Denis McCullough was Centre of the Circle when I joined the I.R.B. I was introduced in the I.R.B. by Tom Wilson, and Denis McCullough initiated me.

As far as I know when I joined the I.R.B. there were only the following members in Belfast:- Denis McCullough, Tom Wilson, Cathal O'Shannon, Herbert Moore Pim, Sean Cusack. About a month after I joined I was made Head of my Circle. Denis McCullough was at this time on the Supreme Council of the I.R.B. and I was given the work of building up my Circle. I had little difficulty in increasing the number in the Circle as I knew a number of men who were sympathetic. Those men were mostly fairly mature in years, but I took in some younger men. I had increased the numbers in the Circle to about 17 members in 1916. Amongst the new members I recruited were: Peter McMahon, - Nolan, Cathal McDowell, two brothers named Quinn, Henry Harte and Frank Crummy. I cannot remember the names of the others. In 1916 there were other Circles working in Belfast. Bulmer Hobson organised a Circle. I think Ernest Blythe was a member of the I.R.B. He had at least close connection with the I.R.B. through Hobson.

All I.R.B. men were members of the Volunteers at the start of the Volunteer organisation. The members of my Circle were scattered over different Companies of the Volunteers. I would not say that the I.R.B. were mainly responsible for getting the Volunteer organisation going. All the Volunteer Officers in Belfast were not members of the

I.R.B. There were a number of Volunteer Officers very active in building up the Volunteer organisation who were not members of the I.R.B.

At the start of the organisation of the Volunteers all Nationalist organisations were solicited for recruits. The Gaelic League, the G.A.A., the A.O.H., the I.N.F., etc., were approached. Those organisations all provided recruits who continued drilling and training up to the split in September, 1914.

At the formation of the Volunteers an Executive Committee was appointed in Belfast to take control of the Volunteers and be in supreme command in directing the policy and activities of the organisation. This committee was divided into two committees - one, the Civil Committee, whose principal duties were the control and direction of the policy of the Volunteers providing funds for the organisation and the provision of Halls and training facilities, the purchase of arms and equipment. The other Committee was called the Military Committee; its duties were looking after the training of the men, providing efficient instructors, selecting and training Officers, and other matters of a purely technical military nature. Denis McCullough was Chairman of the Civil Committee, and was placed in supreme command of the Volunteers. With him on the Civil Committee were Joe Connolly, Dan Dempsey, Cathal O'Shannon, Tim Smith, Tom Clear, Tom Wilson, Sean O'Kelly, a man named O'Callaghan, and myself.

On the Military Committee were Sean Cusack, Rory Haskins, Peter Burns and Joe Burns.

Of the Civil Committee only D. McCullough, C. O'Shannon and T. Wilson were members of the I.R.B. Of the Military Committee Sean Cusack and Peter Burns were in the I.R.B.

Before the split in the Volunteers the I.R.B. did not interfere much in directing the policy of the Volunteers, but after the split the I.R.B. more or less took control, as all officers in the Volunteers were approached to join the I.R.B. and most of them did join the organisation. When the split in the Volunteers took place the supporters of the Irish Parliamentary party had a big majority in the Volunteers, and it looked as if it was the I.V. Section that got expelled from the original existing organisation.

The Redmondite supporters formed themselves into the National Volunteers, procured uniforms and became most active. They did a lot of parading in Belfast and on one occasion went to Dublin for a demonstration there.

When the split took place the Irish Volunteers had to start from scratch and reorganise the remnants of the men remaining loyal to them. Our numbers immediately following the split would be around 40 men. The funds of the Volunteers at the time of the split - about £400 - was lodged in a bank under the authority of 4 trustees; Denis McCullough and Daniel Dempsey representing the Republican elements, and 2 other trustees from the Redmondite section - I think Martin Burke was one of those. I don't remember the other man's name. The withdrawal of this money required the signature of at least 3 trustees. We failed to get possession of the funds.

The Irish Volunteers lost little serviceable arms by the split. The National Volunteers had possession of about 100 Italian rifles. Those rifles could not be used and there was no ammunition available for them. They had been condemned by the Geneva Convention as inhumane for military use and no ammunition was being manufactured for them in 1914.

Sean T. O'Kelly came to Belfast in August 1915, organising for O'Donovan Rossa's funeral in Dublin. Between 40 and 50 Volunteers travelled from Belfast and took part in the funeral.

At Easter Week 1916 we had about 300 men in the Irish Vols. The organisation of the Volunteers was very good. The training of the men generally was not so good. About 150 men had good elementary training in the use of arms and some tactical exercises in the country. There was a small number of men efficient in the use of arms. We had a number of ex-Servicemen enrolled and they brought a small number of others up to their own stage of efficiency. For first aid we had some medical students including Dr. McEntee, Dr. McAuley and Dr. McNabb. The Cumann na mBan were working on first aid equipment and medical supplies. I don't remember any preparations being made for supplies of rations or tents or other equipment of a like nature.

I was not an officer in the Volunteers and I would not know what was being done in the matter of commissariat and supplies.

About mid Holy Week 1916, Denis McCullough told me that the Belfast Volunteers were moving to Dungannon on Easter Saturday for manoeuvres. He did not tell me directly that a rising was contemplated. I knew, however, that the rising was taking place as our preparations all shortly before Easter Week pointed to taking military action against the British. From my position in the I.R.B. and remarks I heard I expected military action soon. The whole atmosphere of the times pointed that way. I cannot remember now who made the remarks that gave me the definite impression that moving on Tyrone was to be the starting point for the Belfast contingent. I think, however, it was Peter Burns. On Good Friday I got instructions to collect rifles and revolvers from the Volunteers' houses and convey them to Peter Burns premises. Peter Burns was engaged that day in preparing and packing the rifles etc. for transport to Co. Tyrone. I spent most of Holy Friday at this work. I was working as a bread delivery man at the time and I was able to collect some of those arms during my business rounds and finished the collecting after I left off my work. On Saturday I was at work.

On Friday night - I think it was Friday night as the most of the Belfast Volunteers had left for Tyrone before Saturday night - I got orders to remain in Belfast on Saturday night, and on Sunday morning, to proceed to the Scottish boat and contact a party of Glasgow Volunteers expected that morning, and to guide those men to Coalisland, Co. Tyrone, by train on Sunday morning.

I think it was also on Friday evening that Sean Cusack came to my house and showed me a note signed by Sean McDermott. This note mentioned names of 2 men Cusack should contact. Cusack told me of his plans for leaving for Co. Cavan. It was after 8 p.m. on Saturday night when I finished my work as a bread server. All the Belfast Volunteers who were travelling to Tyrone had left Belfast by then. On Sunday morning at 6 a.m. I proceeded to the docks to make contact with the Glasgow contingent as per instructions. No Volunteers arrived by the Glasgow boat. I got no instructions as to how I was to introduce myself to the Glasgow crowd had they travelled to Belfast. On thinking back of this mission of mine to the boat I feel that had the Glasgow Volunteers arrived in Belfast on Easter Sunday morning I and they might have found ourselves in a pretty difficult position as I had not procured any cash for railway tickets to Tyrone. I might have had finance sufficient for a few men and myself, but the others would have had to provide for themselves.

In the afternoon of Sunday I and Harry Osborne travelled to the Northern Counties Railway to get a train for Coalisland. When we were waiting at the station for our train, a train arrived from Cookstown with all the Belfast men returning from Coalisland. I had not heard of the countermanding order by Eoin MacNeill of the mobilisation on Easter Sunday when I met the Belfast men at the railway station. It was from them I heard of it. All returned to their homes on Sunday morning.

There was little activity in Belfast after Sunday. We were meeting and standing-to on each night of Easter Week. I cannot say now if we were expecting to get orders to mobilise again for active service. On the 3rd May 1916, there was a big round-up of the Belfast Volunteers. I was amongst 36 or 37 men arrested. We were taken to Belfast prison. We were taken to Dublin on Saturday, 4th May, to Richmond Barracks. We were deported about 3rd June 1916, to England and interned in Knutsford Prison. From Knutsford we were sent to Frongoch and I was released about August 1916.

After the 1916 men came home from internment the R.I.C. carried out a series of raids on prominent volunteers' houses. On one raid on Tom Wilson's premises, where he carried on a butchering business, they captured an old type of machine gun. This weapon was constructed of steel and a lot of brass mountings. It was a most complicated piece of mechanism. When the R.I.C. took it to the barracks some of the police officers, after examination, said it was ^{not} a machine gun but a sausage machine and told the men who took it to leave it back at Wilson's place again. I called shortly after its return and took possession of it.

Signed: Frank Booth

Date: 14-10-48

Witnessed: Jim Boy

Date: 14/10/48

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