

ORIGINAL

BUREAU OF MILITARY HISTORY 1913-21

BURO STAIRE MILEATA 1913-21

No. W.S. 251

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BUREAU OF MILITARY HISTORY, 1913-21.

STATEMENT BY WITNESS

DOCUMENT NO. W.S. ....251.....

**Witness**

Mr. Richard Balfe,  
40, The Crean Road,  
Blackrock, Co. Dublin.

**Identity**

Member of Fianna and I.R.B. 1911-16;

Captain 'D' Company 1st Battalion  
I.V's. 1916.

**Subject**

- (a) National activities from 1911;
- (b) Howth Gun Running;
- (c) Mendicity Institution Easter Week 1916.

**Conditions, if any, stipulated by Witness**

Nil

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STATEMENT BY Mr. RICHARD BALFE,

Captain, Irish Volunteers, 1916.

40, The Green Road, Blackrock, County Dublin.

In 1911 along with Mick Malone, Jim Grace and others I was a member of the Meirleaca Oga Club. This was a revolutionary club in Ringsend. We were attached to the Gaelic League there - Naomh Padraigh. Afterwards when the Fianna were established there under Father O'Flanagan, Father Costello and Colm O'Loughlin I joined them.

In 1911 just previous to the King's visit when the "Irish Freedom" Office was surrounded, I and a number of the Fianna got into the Freedom Offices and removed all the machinery and all the copy of the "Irish Freedom" that had been printed across the roof to Tom Clarke's yard in Parnell Street. These issues of the "Freedom" were afterwards on sale in the streets bound in green ribbon.

Some time in 1913 or 1914 I was sworn into the I.R.B. I joined the Fintan Lawlor Circle of which the Centre was Seamus O'Connor who is at present the City Sheriff.

In 1913 I joined the Volunteers in Sandymount Castle Company, 5th Company of the 3rd Battalion. I took part in the Howth gun running in July 1914.

After the "Split" out of a Battalion of 800 there were only about 11 left and they formed the "D" Company of the 3rd Battalion and they drilled at the sea-front, Sandymount, under police protection. They moved afterwards to Ringsend. About this time "D" Company of the 1st Battalion <sup>were transferred to it. R.B.</sup> was formed from a surplus of "A" Company. About 80% of this Company were members of the I.R.B. That Company was

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used a good deal for the obtaining of arms and also for the dumping of them. Frank Fahy's place at Islandbridge was at the time used as a dump. My home at Irishtown was also used as a dump for the receipt of Mauser rifles and other stuff which used to be left at buoys, I don't know by whom, near the 'bar' of the river and which we used to retrieve by going out on boats and bringing in. Of "D" Company the first O.C. was Sean Heuston. Liam Murnane and a man named Finucane were the first officers as far as I know. Finucane was not there previous to the week of 1916 and did not turn out in 1916. I took Finucane's place and afterwards Murnane's place and finally Sean Heuston's when he was appointed Commandant.

We furnished an armed guard to the Offices in Dawson Street on numerous occasions. Our Company also took part in the Flying Column to Rathdrum at Easter 1915. Our Company was regarded as the scouts of the 1st Battalion and always headed the Battalion when on route marches.

In 1915 I remember an excursion to Limerick in which my Company were ordered to fix bayonets to clear the streets after we had been attacked by a hostile crowd.

In the competitions held in St. Enda's some time in 1915 "D" Company obtained third place. "A" Company of the 4th Battalion got first and the Citizen Army got second with only a half mark between each. As a half mark was given for each uniform in my Company we lost a number of marks thereby. I was responsible for the training of my Company.

We staged a display of Company and Section ordinary drill and extended movements. We gave a bayonet charge that was very realistic and had arranged for one man with a French bayonet to cover himself with sheep's blood. We had to prevent Doctors from interfering, it was so realistic,

in order to allow our men to carry out First Aid. Tents were erected within a minute and communication was opened up by ordinary telegraphy, visual and audible, and by semaphore and morse.

We took a special interest in an association that was known as the "G.Rs." in Dublin. We also gave a display in Trinity College of which very few people knew. Through our intelligence system we heard that they were to hold a display before Lord Wimbourne at Trinity College. "D" Company, with the assistance of the members of the Fianna, equipped ourselves with caps and armlets marked "G.R." We went to Beggars Bush Barracks and said we were sent there and were equipped. There were about 20 of us in it. We were equipped with the best Lee Enfields together with haversacks and belts. We marched from Beggars Bush Barracks to Trinity College and took part in a display before the Lord Lieutenant. I was Section Commander. We were complimented by the Lord Lieutenant on our efficiency and display which consisted of ordinary foot and arms drill. When it was over we left Trinity College and took a wrong turning. We marched straight up Dame Street instead of going direct to Beggars Bush despite the frantic appeals from other members of this "G.R" organisation. Arriving in Parliament Street I gave the order "Scatter" which they promptly did.

"D" Company was present when the 1st Battalion had Manoeuvres in Finglas and Cloghran areas. Our Company captured the whole 3rd Battalion staff. In the Manoeuvres the 1st Battalion and 2nd Battalion were opposed to the 3rd and 4th Battalions.

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On the Good Friday previous to the Rising I was sent for. I proceeded to St. Enda's College armed with small arms as instructed. We were used to escort a load of bombs from St. Enda's to Church Street. On the Good Friday night we had all preparations in Blackhall Street and we expected to be going out on Sunday morning. We were 'standing to' all day Sunday and we got the mobilisation order on Monday morning at 10 o'clock that the Manoeuvres were on. We were mobilised at George's Church, off Dorset Street. About 12 turned up out of about 40 in the Company. Then we proceeded via Gardiner Street to Liberty Hall where the Company were left "standing at ease" under the arches. I went into Liberty Hall with Heuston. It was about 11.15 or 11.20 a.m. when I arrived in Liberty Hall. When we entered we saw the Citizen Army 'standing to' under Sean Connolly. Then I was talking to Sean MacDermott and Mick Staines. They were all very business-like and slow-moving as they had been up all night. Madame Markievicz was going around with drinks; she was also moving slowly as she was tired like the others. I got my orders about 11.25 a.m. on a type-written paper without envelope. It was headed "The Army of the Irish Republic". I got orders to take the General Post Office in O'Connell Street, to enter by the side-door in Henry Street, to overcome all guards and to take possession of the building. These orders were brought out to me from Sean Heuston and were signed by Connolly. I asked Heuston how I could manage with so small a Company and he said I would take all the Kimmage and Larkfield men. At 20 minutes to 12 I was called inside before Connolly and I was asked did I know where the Mendicity Institution was and how long it would take me with my men to get there. He told me that the

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person who was assigned to take this place had failed. He was O.C. of "G" Company, 1st Battalion. I was told to proceed there immediately, to take the building and hold it at all costs and to prevent all troops from passing to the City from the Royal Barracks. I was told to try to do this for two hours to enable the positions to be taken up in the City area. Although Sean Heuston had been appointed Commandant in charge of the G.P.O. and O'Connell Street area he elected to come with us. When we reached the Mendicity Institution we broke one small door and entered. As far as I recollect we found the place empty. We did not attempt to barricade it thoroughly as it would have been impossible, and we had not the material to do so. We occupied it. It was a two-storey stone building and in a recess from the main road (about 50 feet in). We occupied both storeys facing the Quays. On the stroke of 12 o'clock a small party of Sappers came along unarmed. We allowed these to pass knowing what was coming along. In a few minutes the main body of troops in column of route came into view. We had 16 men altogether including officers. All had Lee Enfield rifles. Every man had at least 100 rounds of ammunition. Myself and some others had 500 rounds each. Two shots were fired rapidly and the Commanding Officer dropped. I heard afterwards that he was shot between the eyes and in the heart. The column halted right opposite to us after the two shots and it was a case of fire and one could not miss. The column were 4 deep. There were from 200 to 250 at least in the column. At the time we had been putting out a Tri-colour Flag and we saw the officer in front drawing his sword and pointing towards it. This was the officer who was immediately shot dead. The firing became continuous and rapid and it eased off. Some of the British soldiers tried to protect themselves against the Quay wall and eventually ran up side streets and in through houses. The casualties  
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were numerous and the ambulance was a considerable time removing the wounded. At 4 o'clock p.m. they came down 8 deep. They must not have known where the first attack had come from as the officer who first saw us was immediately shot dead. We altered our tactics then and we concentrated firing on the rear of the column. As they were nearly at Queen Street Bridge we suddenly concentrated the firing on the head of the column. The column stopped. It was just a matter of firing as rapidly as possible into a solid body. This column also broke up and ran in all directions. No man got past Queen Street Bridge. About this time we sent out a dispatch to the G.P.O. by two men, Paddy Stephenson and Sean McLoughlin, asking for information as to what we should do. The couriers returned next day and brought a message from Connolly congratulating us on the stand we were making and that everybody in the G.P.O. thought we would have been wiped out by that time. We received no message to evacuate.

On Monday night the British posted sentries right under us and shouted out "One o'clock; Two o'clock, all well!" and so on. These were withdrawn at daybreak.

On Tuesday they took position in houses opposite to us and rifled the place with machine guns and machine grenades. They also took up position from Benburb Lane. On the Tuesday one of the famous British Bayonet Charges came down from the Royal Barracks with all regimental flags, fixed bayonets and swords. We used the same tactics as we had used on Monday concentrating on the rear first and then the head of the column. We believe that two of these men got across the bridge. The remainder went up Queen Street but returned as they were attacked

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by our troops from that end. There was a lull for a time and it opened out then into individual sniping and the few that escaped took cover. They used machine guns on us but did very little damage.

On the Wednesday morning it opened up with machine gun fire and we were completely surrounded. There was a laneway of escape. We sent out word by Stephenson and McLoughlin to know if we could retreat but no reply came back. Our ammunition and supplies were now exhausted. We came then under severe grenade and machine gun fire. During this attack Willie Staines and myself were wounded by a bomb. Heuston bandaged Staines who was wounded in the head. I had lost complete use of my arms and legs but was fully conscious. Heuston ordered the surrender and put out a white sheet as a flag but we were immediately attacked again. Eventually the British accepted the surrender but shot one of the men in the process, namely Peter Wilson of Swords. Being injured at this time I was left behind when the Company surrendered as I was thought to be dead. I am not familiar with what subsequently happened outside the Institute. Some time late in the evening I heard the British breaking in and then after an interval a British Officer appeared armed with two automatics; also a Dublin Fusilier arrived with fixed bayonet. I was at this time able to sit up but had no use of my legs. While they were deciding whether to use a bayonet or a bullet on me an Officer of the R.A.M.C. came in and claimed me as his prisoner saying that there had been enough of this dirty work. I was removed to King George V. Hospital (now St. Brigid's) where I received rough handling by Army Orderlies until rescued. Although not recovered I was removed in an armed ambulance to Richmond Barracks. I was removed afterwards to Wakefield and later to Frongoch. I was released at end of July, 1916.

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Every man in the Mendicity Garrison was tried by Military Court and sentenced to death. A great number of casualties had been inflicted on the British by them.

As far as I remember the following constituted the Garrison of the Mendicity: - Sean Heuston, Richard Balfe, Liam Staines, Frank (John) Cullen, John J. Derrington, Liam Derrington, Thomas Kelly, James Brennan, Joe Byrne, Sean McLoughlin, Patrick J. Stephenson, Edward Roche, William O'Dea, Fred Brookes, J. Levins. On Tuesday evening we were reinforced by Dick Coleman, Joe Norton, John Clarke, \_\_\_ Meehan, \_\_\_ Peppard, \_\_\_ Marks, \_\_\_ Crinnigan, four men named Wilson, and two men named Kelly all of the Swords Company.

In July or August 1916 any available officers in Dublin were called by Cathal Brugha to his house in Rathmines. It was under discussion then whether we would go underground or come out in the open again. I think Dermot O'Hegarty was there. Leo Henderson was there, also Liam Carroll. I distinctly remember when the meeting was over Joe McGrath came in and was annoyed that he had not been notified of the meeting. I would not say that there were more than a dozen officers present. That was the very first reorganisation meeting. It was decided at that meeting to go ahead and recruit likely men and to carry on with the present training.

Signed: Richard C. Balfe  
Date: 19. May 1949

Witness: R. J. Feely, Comdt.

Date: 19th May 1949.

