

ORIGINAL

BUREAU OF MILITARY HISTORY 1913-21

BURO STAIRE MILEATA 1913-21

No. W.S. 296

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BUREAU OF MILITARY HISTORY, 1913-21.

STATEMENT BY WITNESS

DOCUMENT NO. W.S. 296

Witness

Mr. Harry Nicholls,
94 St. Stephen's Green,
Dublin.

Identity

Member of I.R.B. 1912 -
Captain 'A' Coy. 4th Batt'n.
Dublin Bgde. I.V's. 1916.

Subject

National activities 1912-1916;
Howth Gun-Running 1914;
Easter Week 1916 - Stephen's Green and
College of Surgeons.

Conditions, if any, stipulated by Witness

Nil

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STATEMENT BY HARRY NICHOLLS, B.A.I., M.I.C.E.I.

94 ST. STEPHEN'S GREEN, DUBLIN.

I started learning Irish about 1910 and joined the Five Provinces Branch of the Gaelic League which met at 5 St. Stephen's Green. A year or two later I was asked to join the I.R.B. by Sean Óg Kavanagh, who swore me in. I joined the Teeling Circle of which Bulmer Hobson was Centre. Seumas Brennan was Secretary. They met in Gardiner St. at the Typographical Society. We were known as the Teeling Literary Society.

I remember Pearse's name coming up for membership and being opposed by some members. The reasons for the opposition were Pearse's articles in "An Cliadheamh Soluis" advocating the acceptance of the Home Rule Bill and his attendance on a Home Rule platform in O'Connell St.

I remember at the time drilling in the Forester's Hall, 41 Parnell Square, and being instructed by members of the Fianna, including Con Colbert and Michael Lonergan.

About this time I attended a general meeting of the I.R.B. held in 41 Parnell Sqr. addressed by Denis McCullough, Diarmuid Lynch and Bulmer Hobson, at which Hobson pointed out that there would be a war in ten years and that would be our opportunity to rise. I was sitting next Pearse at that meeting and he drove me home afterwards in his trap and he referred to Hobson's speech and appeared to be doubtful as to whether Hobson was right that a war was coming and whether the opportunity would be favourable or not. That meeting must have been after December 1913.

The North Dublin Rifle Club arose out of a discussion at a meeting of the Freedom Club which was in 41 Parnell Square. I remember Joe Murray, Drumcondra, stated that if a Rifle Club started he would give five pounds and there and then handed a cheque. I was Secretary, and for a long time we had trouble in finding a range. We had negotiations with L. Kettle who was Secretary of the

Banba Rifle Club, for the use of a range they had at the Greenmount Oil Company, Harolds Cross, to see could we come to some arrangement with them. We were not able to fix it. The Club started at the end of 1913, but was not properly organised for supplies until the summer of 1914.

We succeeded in getting Father Mathew Park for a range and for the purpose of getting supplies I applied for affiliation to the Society of Miniature Rifle Clubs, London. The Club was affiliated and I promptly ordered ten converted Martini rifles and about twenty thousand rounds of .22 ammunition. After a couple of visits from detectives I was given the necessary permit to import these goods. The Club continued up to 1916.

As I was laid up when the Rotunda meeting was held I did not join the Volunteers until about a month after, when I enrolled at Larkfield, Kimmage. I was in A/Coy. 4th Battalion. Seumas Murphy was Company Commander. I think T.D. O'Brien was Company Officer. Harry Murray was also a member. After some months Comdt. Ceannt appointed me as Lieutenant of battalion engineering and subsequently I was promoted Captain. Sean McGlynn was my Lieutenant.

Engineering lectures were held weekly at the Volunteer Headquarters at No. 2 Dawson St. These lectures were chiefly centred round explosives and street fighting. Following these lectures I took out a small squad selected from each company and gave them practical demonstrations in erecting barricades, digging trenches and boring through brick walls. These lectures were mainly given by Mr. Slattery who was later wounded in Easter Week, 1916. Practically all this activity took place after the split; before that there was not such intensive training. The split did not affect my appointment in any way. This work continued up to the Rising.

During this time I was very friendly with Sean McDermott, and a week prior to the Howth gun-running he told me he had

a job for me to do on the next Saturday. I asked would I be out over the weekend and he said probably. He instructed me to report to St. Andrew's Catholic Club, Gt. Brunswick St. (now Pearse St.) on the Saturday afternoon, where I would meet people who would tell me what I had to do. I went there and went out by charabanc to the Rocky Valley and there we were informed that the job contemplated "was off". After spending an hour or so there we returned to the city. The purpose of our journey was to take off the arms from the yacht. This was the eve of the Howth gun-running, 26th July 1914.

That night I remained with Tom Hunter at his place in Dollymount and early on Sunday morning he told me to take the first tram to Howth as guns were to be landed there from a yacht and that I would see people on the pier who would give me my instructions as to what I was required to do. I reached Howth about 10.30 and met Volunteers whose names I cannot recall at the moment. I was not long there when the yacht pulled in to the jetty. I with others rushed down and helped to moor her. I then boarded her and helped to unload the rifles which were passed out to the waiting Volunteers who had marched down the pier. When the yacht was unloaded I fell-in with my battalion and marched back to Malahide Road.

The Scottish Borderers were drawn up at the end of Howth Road and we swung across into Malahide Road only to find that they had drawn a cordon across there as well. Some Volunteers scattered and others shouted "stand your ground" and the word was passed round to get away in threes and fours and get away with your arms. A lot of arms were got into Croydon Park House which belonged to the Transport Workers. I went into town to see if I could get hold of a taxi to bring arms away, but failed. I went back to Croydon Park and contacted Tom Clarke, among others, who provided us with transport for getting away arms. We worked until 11 p.m. that night. The next couple of days were also occupied in getting arms away and making sure

that they were placed in safe hands.

The following Saturday, on instructions from Sean McDermott, again we met at the same place as the previous Saturday and drove off and after a long stop at the Rocky Valley, where we had to fill in time until after dark, we reached Kilcoole where the rendezvous was the Convent Grounds. Other contingents had also reached there and we had to wait an hour or more till we got word to go down to the beach. From the beach we unloaded bundles of rifles and boxes of ammunition from a rowing boat and carried them up and loaded the charabanc. I believe there were other vehicles loaded also.

A party of us started to march back towards the city and just near Kilmacanogue we were picked up by a lorry sent out to collect us. Passing through Little Bray we found the charabanc broken down and the whole population of Bray were out to cheer us. These rifles were delivered and distributed safely.

In September 1914, I was in the Dingle peninsula on holidays. It came to my notice that McGillicuddy of the Reeks had held a recruiting meeting at Annascaul. I had a chat with Blythe, who was living in Lispole, and also with Desmond Fitzgerald and Sean O'Kavanagh, suggesting that we might stage an anti-recruiting meeting, taking advantage of a sports meeting to be held the following Sunday. I took the Dingle Volunteers, Blythe - the Lispole Volunteers, and Fitzgerald - those from Ventry, and Sean O'Kavanagh those from Ballyferriter, and we marched out and held an anti-recruiting meeting at which the four of us spoke. This was about the time that the split occurred in the Volunteers and I got the Dingle Volunteers to wire support to MacNeill and the original Committee of the Volunteers. The majority of them agreed to remain loyal to the Irish Volunteers.

From that time on I made purchases of small arms from various sources. My principal source at that time was Lawler's of Fownes Street.

through his assistant, Grant, and strange to say I purchased three or four rifles through an advertisement that appeared in the daily papers.

During 1915 when The O'Rahilly was away he handed me over his lists of dumps and I had occasionally to move stuff from one place to another or clear some place when word would come that it was either under observation or they were doubtful of the householder.

During the same time I had to do with the purchase of arms and shotguns in fairly large quantities and I used get the money by calling out to Eoin MacNeill and asking him for £100 or £200 at a time. Generally I was advised through I.R.B. or Volunteer sources as to where these shotguns could be purchased.

During 1915 a lot of arms came through Belfast. It was one of my responsibilities to ensure the safe transport of these arms from the station to places of safety and I often helped Liam Mellows in transferring cases of small arms that would have come in by boat from across the water. Mellows also gave me a key and brought me to a dump where there was a supply of gelignite, fuses and detonators at a garage at Marlboro Road.

The Keating Branch of the Gaelic League in North Frederick St. was a further meeting place for us when arranging for the collection of arms. An excuse was always provided in the shape of some entertainment when it was necessary for us to remain out late in our collecting expedition. This eliminated any grounds for suspicion. A céilí was always the excuse for us remaining out late.

Early in 1916 Commandant Ceannt asked me to prepare drawings and get some prints of a map of the South Dublin Union. He did not say what it was for and I did not ask him.

I remember a meeting at Oldbawn in the Spring of 1916 for

the officers of the 4th Battalion. I am sure Cathal Brugha was there. I remember Willie Cosgrave, French Mullen, Seumas Murphy, Tom McCarthy and, I think, Con Colbert. Ceannt was there of course; Willie Byrne (deceased), Seumas Kenny, T.D. O'Brien (deceased), Sean McGlynn, George Irvine. As far as I can recollect the meeting was of a semi-social nature. No definite information was given to us. I cannot say if it was at that meeting or some time shortly following it that Ceannt told the members of his immediate staff that they were to arrange to be away from home for three or four days just before Easter Sunday.

While I had almost a certainty that the Rising was to take place over the Easter period I had not been informed officially.

I, like all others of the Battalion, were under orders for a full mobilisation on Easter Sunday and also had instructions to bring all arms and ammunition with us to our parade ground at Kimmage.

On Easter Sunday morning before I had seen the Sunday papers with the Countermanding Order in it, Desmond Fitzgerald called to tell me the order was authentic, meaning that I was to obey the order in the "Sunday Independent" not to parade and to await further orders. That evening I went round to see T.D. O'Brien who had been on the staff to find out if he could give me any information. I found him in a bad state of nerves and it was extremely difficult to get any information out of him.

Next morning I expected my mobilisation orders and, as they had not arrived by about 11 o'clock, I rode up to Cathal Brugha's place to find out for myself, and his wife told me he had left for Kimmage for mobilisation at 10 o'clock. I then went home, got my automatic and filled my pockets with ammunition and rode up to Kimmage to see if I could contact anyone. Nearing Kimmage I met a Volunteer named Barney McCormack of the 4th Battalion whose mobilisation orders had also gone astray. He said he had heard that the 4th Battalion had marched off a couple of hours before.

He suggested we go back to his place to see if his brother, who was in the 3rd Battalion, had got any information or orders. His brother was there and said that the canal bridges were already being held by the British. After a short consultation I decided, as I was the only one not in uniform, to ride into the city and see what was to be done. It was arranged that if I could get back with word to them I would, but if they got no word, they would have to shift for themselves. Incidentally, I knew afterwards that they did join up. They lived in Ranelagh.

I wheeled down by Ranelagh Road and, crossing Charlemont Bridge, I saw some excitement on Portobello Bridge and assumed that the British were moved up to take up possession. So I turned round by Harcourt Terrace and Earlsfort Terrace and there met Liam O'Brien who told me he had been down in the country conveying the countermanding order on the previous day. He told me that the Citizen Army had seized the Green. As he belonged to one of the north side battalions, he was in doubt as to what was the best thing to do. I said we better go along to the Green and join in and we could afterwards move over to join our own battalions if it were possible, and if we were not specially wanted there.

We walked down to the Green, found the gates locked. A Citizen Army man came up with a gun in his hand. We told him we were Volunteers, had missed our battalions, and thought of joining in there. So he said "Right Oh" and we climbed over the railings and got in.

We were brought up to the Commander, Commandant Mallin, and I told him what I was in the Volunteers and that I was at his disposal if he wanted me, and Liam did the same. This would have been about 2 o'clock p.m. He detailed me to take up position facing Cuffe St. in the garden of the Greenkeeper's Lodge.

Things were quiet during the afternoon. I saw some people whom I knew. I saw there Crawford Neill, the Poet, who was shot either that day or the next when helping Skeffington to put up posters against looting. Some others came along towards the night.

On Easter Monday Commandant Mallin and Madam Markievicz were going on patrol and called me out to accompany them and we went up Harcourt St., across into Camden St., down Camden St. past Jacob's and there halted. I heard afterwards that we were under the observation of the members of the garrison there. In the course of our patrol along there we met about half a dozen Volunteers going on to join in. Gerald Crofts, the singer, was one; Paidin O'Keefe was another. We came back by York St. and into the Green again. This was probably somewhere about 1.30 or 2.0 in the morning.

About 6 or 7 in the morning we got orders to evacuate, and four or five of us went in through Kapp & Peterson's Factory and got up on the roof there, where, by the way, we got our breakfast, the first meal I had since I joined.

A couple of hours later we got word to move into the College of Surgeons, probably about 10 in the morning, and came down the lane and crossed York St. into the side door of the College of Surgeons. The main body were just moving in at the same time and we helped to barricade windows, etc. Posts were taken up in one of the big rooms. Lee Enfield rifles were found belonging to the College of Surgeons Officers' Training Corps and distributed among those who most wanted them. The garrison was about sixty at this time.

On Tuesday afternoon an attempt was made to remove cars from the front of the building near the corner of Grafton St. and we fired a shot to prevent them from doing so - otherwise nothing of importance happened.

That evening I went to Commandant Mallin and told him that if he wanted me I had officer's experience - as he might be short of officers - and he gave me charge of all the sentry posts for the north wing of the building. I stationed men who had been detailed to me at various points there and spent all night visiting the posts. I remember the late Councillor Partridge on duty there.

On Wednesday morning Commandant Mallin sent for me and told me to take over the Turkish Baths which stood on what is now the Green Cinema and detailed some men, including a few Volunteers who had been sent over from Jacob's, to reinforce the garrison. I had about sixteen men and I had Jack Twomey as second in command. Beyond me towards Grafton St. was a detachment of the Citizen Army under, I think, Bob McCormack. The first thing I did was to divide my men up and put half of them that were most tired lying down immediately and got a rota of reliefs in four hour periods and no man except those on duty was allowed to be on his feet. We had the front ~~two~~ windows guarded and partly barricaded with mattresses and also a window in the back.

There was no heavy attack by the British on these posts, only occasional sniping from the Shelbourne direction and an odd shot from the back which seemed to come from the top of Mercer's Hospital. I remember one window where the men from the Citizen Army were firing from the next house and I climbed in and took a shot at a sniper and presumably had effect, as no further sniping came from that direction.

Our orders were to hold the buildings we had occupied and report enemy activity. Regular reports were sent into the Commandant. In the College of Surgeons nothing of importance happened on Thursday or Friday.

On Saturday evening there was a strange feeling about. Sunday morning I was summoned to a conference presided over by Commandant Mallin and attended by all the officers of the

garrison - Bob McCormack, Madam Markievicz and, I think, Partridge. Mallin announced to us that Pearse had surrendered and that as Connolly was his Commander he had asked for confirmation from him and had got it, and he read it out to us. Some two or three said we should fight on, but I with the majority said that we were military and that we must obey the orders of our superior officers. Commandant Mallin told us to collect our men and bring them back into the large hall of the College of Surgeons. He said: "Some of the leaders like myself will very probably be shot, but I can't say what will happen to the rank and file". He was quite calm when he said that, though before reading the surrender order he had practically broken down.

I went back and told my men; marched them in and stood out in front of them as we paraded. Commandant Mallin came along and ordered all officers to get back to the ^{ranks} ~~back~~ saying that ^{Mr.} the British knew himself and Countess Markievicz, but there was no use in any of the others, as he put it, sacrificing themselves. Arms were then piled in the centre of the room and shortly word came to march out by the side door in threes where we found a contingent of British military waiting to receive us. We were then marched with the military on either side, first to Dublin Castle where we were halted for about an hour. We were then marched up to Richmond Barracks and into the gymnasium and here there were some others from other posts.

The room was divided in two. We were kept on one side of the room; those who were already there on the other side. Sean McDermott was the only one of the signatories of the proclamation whom I saw there.

After some time there we were marched out, one by one; our names and addresses taken and some G. men standing by held back anyone they happened to know. Luckily for me the G. men who knew me were not there and we were brought into another room

Before we had come into the gymnasium we had been drawn up and searched and luckily I was able to destroy a few personal and similar documents. After leaving the gymnasium we were confined in a barrack room where there were about thirty or forty with us and two R.I.C. men came round again to search, when my fountain pen which had escaped was pinched out of my pocket.

About 7 o'clock we were given a tin of bully beef and two biscuits each and marched out on to the square where we were paraded and counted. One British officer recognised me. "My God, Harry, are you here?" "Where else do you expect me to be" I asked him. "Where are they sending us?" He said "I think across the water".

We were then marched along the quays in twos along the centre of the road and a file of military, one man for every man, along the edge, right down to the North Wall. This was about 8.30. We were put on board a boat where I lay down on the boards and slept until we reached Holyhead.

On arrival there we paraded on the cold platform where we were counted and re-counted and were then entrained for Knutsford, which we reached about 8 o'clock in the morning. We remained there for two months. Towards the end of June I was shifted to Frongoch and I remained there until December, 1916.

Signed: Michael

Date: 27. Sept. 1949.

Witness: William Jony Bennett.

