

ORIGINAL

BUREAU OF MILITARY HISTORY 1913-21

BURO STAIRÉ MILEATA 1913-21

No. W.S. 351

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BUREAU OF MILITARY HISTORY, 1913-21.

STATEMENT BY WITNESS

DOCUMENT NO. W.S. 351.....

Witness

Mr. Fergus O'Kelly,
26 Castle Avenue,
Clontarf,
Dublin.

Identity

Member of Irish Vol's.
2nd Batt'n. Dublin Brigade 1913-16.

Subject

- (a) Erection of Wireless Apparatus,
Reis's O'Connell St. Easter 1916;
- (b) G.P.O. - Easter Week, 1916.

Conditions, if any, stipulated by Witness

Nil

File No. S.1295.....

Form B.S.M. 2.

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STATEMENT BY MR. FERGUS O'KELLY,
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I joined the Irish Volunteers in November 1913 at the Rotunda meeting. At that meeting I remember that Eoin MacNeill spoke and Larry Kettle tried to speak, but the Trade Union members present raised a row and would not allow him to speak.

As I lived in Howth I was allotted to 2nd Battalion, Dublin Brigade with headquarters at Fairview (Croydon Park). I was attached to the Signalling Company and received instructions in Morse, semaphore, etc. Dick Mulcahy (now General), who lived at Sutton, was also in the Signalling Coy.

When the Howth gun-running took place I was camping in Connemara with J. and G. Plunkett, but my company was ^{at the place -} there.

P.P.O'K. running.

In March and April 1916, I was closely in touch with Joseph and Jack Plunkett and was frequently at their house at Larkfield. Some wireless apparatus was assembled by the Plunketts and two others named Con Keating and David Bourke. These two were qualified Marconi operators. I had a working knowledge from the instruction I received in the Signalling Coy. and from home study of wireless. The manufacture of a transmitting set was out of the question, but a receiving apparatus was assembled, the principal items being a magnetic detector formed of a number of soft iron wires formed into an endless belt and passing around two pulleys rotated by a gramophone motor. Attempts were also made with crystals as valves, but crystal reception was rather new at the time.

It was hoped to receive wireless messages from the submarine which had Casement on board or from the "Aud". It had evidently been arranged that if a message was to be sent, the call-word would be "Bran". At this time the refugees from England were in the old mill building at Larkfield under the control of George Plunkett. Mick Collins was constantly at the

house with Joseph Plunkett and up to the time of the Rising acted as one of his personal staff.

On Holy Thursday 1916, Joseph Plunkett discussed who would go away immediately and sent Con Keating and David Burke to Kerry. Their mission was to obtain wireless apparatus from the wireless station at Valencia, Kerry, and there were rumours of arms to be landed and distributed up the west to counties Galway and Mayo. As is now well-known, the car in which Con Keating was travelling took a wrong road and was driven into the sea at Caherciveen, three occupants being drowned. I was told by Colm O'Lochlainn that he was also in Kerry on the Good Friday, probably in connection with the arms landing, but on hearing of Casement's arrest, he and his party returned to Dublin.

I have no personal knowledge of the doings of Easter Saturday and Easter Sunday.

At noon on Easter Monday George Plunkett's "Kimmage Garrison" was mobilised at Liberty Hall and I was then with Jack Plunkett. We each had a motor cycle. The Company was marched off in fours by Geo. Plunkett, up Abbey St. to O'Connell St. and then towards Nelson's Pillar along the Post Office side of O'Connell St. close to the footpath. As the Company drew abreast of the Post Office, Geo. Plunkett gave the orders "Halt, Left Turn, Charge". The Company having turned left, formed two lines, looked a little blank at the order "Charge" and immediately Geo. Plunkett shouted "Take the Post Office". At that, the men broke ranks and rushed forward in through the main entrance to the Post Office. Shortly afterwards the public who were in the office and the staff came running out in great excitement; windows were broken out and barricaded, and the Rising was on.

Jack Plunkett and myself entered the yard by the side door and left our motor cycles in the yard where they remained. A

little later I was called aside by Joseph Plunkett and instructed to take a few men and take possession of the Wireless School and Reis's shop and do everything possible to get the transmitting plant and receiving apparatus into working order. I took about six men. One was Sean O'Connor, an electrician and a member of the Kimmage Garrison from London. Another was Arthur Shields, the well-known Abbey actor, and I also had David Burke as operator. I entered Reis's building through the Abbey St. door and went up the stairs to the top flat where the caretaker lived - an elderly woman named Brown. I advised her to leave and she did so. The wireless room was sealed by the British military. I broke the seals and David Burke and I entered. The apparatus was disconnected and had been out of use since the start of the war. Quite a lot of work had to be done to put it into working order. We went out on the roof and found that the aerial had been taken down, but the poles had been left lying in the valley of the roof. We immediately set about making a new aerial and setting the poles upright to carry it. Sean McGarry obtained the necessary wire from the General Electric Coy. in Trinity St.

On seeing that the roof of the Wireless School was dominated by the dome of the D.B.C. building and would be under fire from across the river, I sent word to the Post Office that the D.B.C. and adjacent buildings would have to be occupied, or else we would have no security for the wireless school. Captain Weafer, 2nd Battn. was then sent over with a Company and they occupied the block from Abbey St. to the river. These were of great help in keeping up constant sniping against these enemy positions which were firing at us while we erected the aerial and made the necessary connections. Unfortunately, soon after his arrival, Captain Weafer was fatally shot while on the roof. Tom Ennis (later Major General Ennis) was one of the party occupying the D.B.C. building. The heavy sniping eventually forced us to stop work on the roof until dark. The

aerial was completed during the dark hours of Monday night. Sean O'Connor was of the greatest value in carrying out this work.

Meanwhile, David Burke had tackled the connecting up of the transmitting plant and putting it into commission. The apparatus was a standard $1\frac{1}{2}$ K.W. ship's set and so was familiar to Burke as a Marconi operator. It was found that the electric power from the Pigeon House Station was still on, and so the motor convertor supplying the power for operating the set was available. On reporting to H.Q. that the transmitting apparatus was operating, a message was sent over by James Connolly, commanding the Dublin area, for broadcast transmission. As the receiving apparatus could not be got to operate correctly it was not possible to get in direct touch with any station or ship but the message was sent out on the normal commercial wavelength in the hope that some ship would receive it and relay it as interesting news. As far as I can remember, the first message announced the proclaiming of the Irish Republic and the taking over of Dublin city by the Republican Army. A later message stated that the British troops had attacked and had been repulsed and that the positions were still held by the Republican forces.

On the Wednesday, shell-fire from the "Helga" began to affect the position. A message was brought to me from the Post Office signed "Capt. Breen" instructing us to evacuate the position. I could not understand this message, but was assured by the bearer that it was authentic and we should evacuate the premises and retire to the Post Office. I called the Volunteers in the D.B.C. and other buildings down to Reis's and explained that we were going to the Post Office, but would probably be back. There was serious disinclination to leave, but eventually we all went across to the Post Office, taking the course through Marlboro' St. to the Pro-Cathedral and then into O'Connell St. and across to the G.P.O. There was heavy fire down the street

from O'Connell Bridge as each man ran across. When all were safely across, I crossed over & reported to James Connolly stating that I had received an order to come back to the G.P.O. He said "I know; now you can go back to Reis's". I saw Joseph Plunkett to inform him of the progress of events and then assembled the men for a return to Reis's building. The firing was much heavier when going back and two men were missing when we got to Reis's. In view of the general deterioration of the position and the heavy fire from the "Helga", it was decided to attempt to remove the apparatus to the Post Office. Some parts of it were extremely heavy and bringing them down the narrow stairs was very difficult. However, parts of the apparatus were loaded on to a horse-dray and it started on its journey to the Post Office. Before all the parts could be removed, however, the position became quite untenable and we had to abandon it finally. This, I believe, was ^{on} Wednesday evening. The journey back to the Post Office was very difficult, as both Abbey St. and Marlboro' St. were under fire, and two men were seriously wounded at the corner of Abbey St. and Marlboro' St. They were removed on stretchers by our Red Cross unit.

In the Post Office we endeavoured to erect an aerial across the yard. I had some assistance from J.J. Walsh who was there and had evidently some knowledge of telephone work.

On the Thursday the fires began and incendiary bombs began to drop on the roof. The fires took a good grip and I abandoned wireless work and was operating a fire-hose instead. The water had evidently been turned partly off, because only a very weak stream could be got from the hydrants. A general evacuation was ordered and the whole garrison assembled on the ground floor towards the back of the building. Patrick Pearse addressed us, said we were to make an attempt to take over Williams and Woods factory in Parnell St. by way of Moore St.

Each Volunteer was to try and bring some food with him. An advance party left headed by The O'Rahilly, who was killed in a lane just outside the Post Office on the Henry St. side. The whole garrison, however, passed through this lane and took up positions in the houses along Moore St.

Signed: James P. O'Kelly

Date: 8th Feb. 1950

Witness: William Jerry Bennett

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