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BUREAU OF MILITARY HISTORY, 1913-21.

STATEMENT BY WITNESS

DOCUMENT NO. W.S. 361.....

Witness

Mr. Peadar Bracken,
Cormac Road,
Tullamore,
Offaly.

Identity

Member of I.R.B. Tullamore 1904;
Captain Irish Volunteers Tullamore
1914-1916.

Subject

- (a) Plans of Midland Volunteers for Rising 1916;
- (b) Occupation of Kelly's and Hopkins and Hopkins
O'Connell St. Easter Week, 1916;
- (c) Evacuation of G.P.J.

Conditions, if any, stipulated by Witness

Nil

File No. S. 257.....

Form B.S.M. 2.

Statement by Peadar Bracken,

Cormac Road, Tullamore.

None of my predecessors, either on my father's or mother's side, had ever anything to do with the British Army. It was a study of the history of my country and the stories told to me by the old people that gave me a national outlook. I was attending school when the Gaelic League started locally, and, although still a school-boy, I joined. I later joined the local branch of the Cumann na nGael. This was known as the William Rooney Branch. This organisation was really a cover for the I.R.B. I was sworn into the I.R.B. by William Kennedy who was a '67 man. Kennedy was a native of Edenderry and carried on a monumental business in Tullamore. This was, I think, about 1904. I was then barely eighteen years old.

William Kennedy was the centre of our circle and amongst the members were Joseph Dunne, James Finlay, Patrick McLoughlin, Thomas Graham, Patrick O'Brien, Edward Conroy, John Dunne, James Morrissey, Michael Slattery, Joseph Wrafter and Patrick Cleary. I took the oath of the I.R.B. on joining and paid a subscription of one shilling, I think, per month towards the purchase of arms. Meetings of the circle were held periodically in members' houses. There was no military training done and we had no arms.

In 1906, I moved to Stradbally and there we established a branch of Sinn Fein. We did not start an I.R.B. circle there. In 1910 I went to Australia. I had no connection with any Irish movement out there except that we formed a Young Ireland Social Class. When the Irish Volunteers was /started

started in Ireland I collected twenty-two or twenty-three pounds which I brought home with me and handed over to Seamus O'Connor.

I returned from Australia, I think, in late September 1914 and after a week in Dublin I returned to Tullamore. The split in the Volunteers had not taken place as yet but was in the air. I joined the Volunteers on arrival in Tullamore. The following Sunday on parade a vote was taken to decide whether the Volunteers should follow Redmond or stand by the old Executive. The committee, by a small majority, decided to stand by the old Executive but the greater portion of the Volunteers followed Redmond. We succeeded in retaining the arms. Our strength would be about half Company, say about fifty. As far as I can remember we had two Lee Enfield Rifles, service pattern, Mark 1. There were about 600 rounds for these rifles. We also had nine or ten revolvers of different types, mostly .32 There were about 200 rounds for the revolvers. Later we obtained two Mauser Rifles with about 200 rounds. There were seven Martini Henry Rifles and about ten shot guns of the bolt action type and about 100 rounds for each.

Immediately after the vote referred to above, we set about reorganising our force. I was appointed Company Captain. (By this time the I.R.B. circle had practically dwindled out of existence). Seamus Brennan was appointed First Lieutenant. We continued our training and parades. We had a drill instructor,

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an ex-British Marine. The National or Redmond Volunteers may be said to be non-existent from this time. I attended lectures in Dublin given by James Connolly on street fighting and by McDonagh for other tactics. About August 1915, Seamus Brennan and I attended the Training Camp at the Galtees under "Ginger O'Connell". This was for one week.

The strength of the Irish Volunteers in Tullamore had now increased. We had a strong section in Tyrells-Pass and a strong party in Athlone. Prior to 1916, we had organised into a Brigade Area. The organisation of the Brigade area was never, of course, completed prior to the Rebellion. We succeeded in buying a couple of Mark III. Lee Enfield Rifles of soldiers of the British Army and also secured some explosives - gelignite with detonators and fuzes. This was about October 1915.

In the fall of 1915 I was called to Dublin by Pearse to St. Enda's. It was then I was made aware that it was intended to have a Rising soon. Pearse arranged a signal or code with me. As I was a sculptor, it was arranged that he would put an advertisement in the papers for a monument. On receipt of this signal I was to mobilise the Volunteers in the area and to hold the line of the Shannon occupying Shannon Bridge and Shannon Harbour, and to connect with the Galway Volunteers under Mellows. I estimated the strength of the enemy in the area to be about 150 R.I.C. and a Battery of Artillery stationed in Athlone Barracks. At this meeting with Pearse I was appointed Officer Commanding the Area.

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On Monday, March 20th., 1916, the Sinn Rooms in Tullamore were attacked by a mob of civilians supported by the R.I.C. The civilians were mostly wives and hangers-on of the British Army. The rooms at the time were occupied by only five or six Volunteers who were engaged on checking a collection made by the Cumann na mBan at a G.A.A. match on the previous day. Volunteer Joe Wrafter and I left the Rooms after some little time and escorted home the members of the Cumann na mBan who were present. While doing so and on our way back we were subjected to the attacks of the hostile crowd. No attempt was made by the R.I.C. to afford us the least protection. The rooms were stoned and the glass smashed in the windows.

I fired a shot through the window over the heads of the mob and later on when an attempt was made to rush the stairway I fired a second shot which had the effect of quietening the crowd for a while. A stampede from the stairs to the street took place and we managed to close and secure the door. I instructed the Volunteers present to make a fight for it, as I expected the R.I.C. took a hand.

I had scarcely finished when a loud knocking at the door took place and on opening it, there came in District Inspector Fitzgerald and Head Constable Stuart of the R.I.C. When a lull in the attack came we were ordered by the District Inspector to "fall in". I informed him that Volunteers would "fall in" only when their own officers so ordered them. County Inspector Crane and Sergeant Aherne now came on the scene, and the County Inspector asked if a search for
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arms had been made. I informed him there would be no such search. The District Inspector moved across to the County Inspector (who was standing a yard from me) and whispered to him. I understood the whisper to be that I was the man who had the revolvers at the Geashill cattle drive in 1914. Immediately the County Inspector made a jump for me. I drew a revolver and fired. The revolver was knocked low and the shot passed between the County Inspector's legs. As I stepped back I was tripped by a form and fell. Before I could get on my feet Sergeant Aherne and the County Inspector held me down. I fired three shots at them. The County Inspector was not hit, the three bullets going into Aherne's arm. I managed to get from under the scuffle and as I tried to rise the Head Constable, who was standing over me, aimed a blow at my head with a stick. I warded off the blow with my left arm and aimed at his body with the revolver. The weapon proved to be empty. His blow glanced off my head and partially stunned me. As he raised the stick to strike again I struck him on the face with the empty gun.

Looking round to see if the Volunteers had got clear I saw nobody except Sergeant Humphries and Constable Lancaster with drawn batons on guard at the door. As I had no cartridge left for the gun I seized a stick to clear myself a passage out of the rooms, but it proved to be only a light one. I made for the door with the revolver in my hand and was going down the staircase when Constable Lancaster struck me on the back of the head with his baton. I fell on the landing. Recovering my gun, which had fallen from my grasp, I escaped to the street where I was again knocked down and kicked by the mob.

I managed to get clear and in Chapel Street I met Volunteer Sean Barry and gave him my gun as I expected to be taken by the R.I.C. and did not wish to lose the gun. Leaving Barry, I went to the house of Volunteer Roddy Molloy, in Emmet Terrace, from whom I got a hat and had my head attended to as I was bleeding profusely.

From Molloy's I went to John Coonan's house at Arden and after a day I went on to Owen Wynne's at Ballykeenaghan, Rahan. This man got me driven by his workman in a horse and trap to McCormack's at Drumraney, County Westmeath. During the weeks following I paid a few visits to Tullamore about arms, etc.

About two weeks before the Rising - I was still at McCormack's - I received a dispatch from Pearse which was carried by William Staines. This simply stated that I was to expect a further despatch later. On Holy Thursday Joe McGuinness arrived with a further despatch from Pearse. This stated that the Rising would take place at 7 p.m. on Easter Sunday and I was to carry out my instructions.

That night I held a meeting of the officers of the Athlone Brigade area at McCormack's, Drumraney, and made arrangements for the Rising which was to take place on Easter Sunday, April 23rd., 1916, at 7 p.m. I remained in Drumraney until Good Friday morning. From there Seamus Brennan and I set out for Tullamore to mobilize the Volunteers for the Rising.

The strength of the Volunteers in the area on the eve of the Rising was as follows -

/Athlone

Athlone Company, about 100 men including officers, among whom were the late Sean Hurley and the late Peadar Malinn. Tullamore Company - about 100 men and officers. The officers were myself as acting O.C., Seamus Brennan (First Lieutenant) and the late Joseph Wrafter (Second Lieutenant). Tyrrellspass Section - eighteen men with Thomas Malone as Officer Commanding.

The strength of the enemy forces in the area I estimated as 150 R.I.C. and a battery of Artillery in Athlone.

The Rising was called off on Easter Sunday about 2.15 p.m. when I received the countermanding order at Tullamore from Eoin MacNeill per Liam O'Brien. I travelled to Dublin with O'Brien on Easter Sunday night to ascertain what the situation was. I stayed with the Kimmage garrison that night. On Easter Monday morning I went with the Kimmage garrison to Liberty Hall, arriving there about 10.30 a.m. George Plunkett was in charge of the Kimmage party. He was subsequently transferred to the G.H.Q. staff.

I had an interview with Pearse relevant to getting back to Offaly to call out the Volunteers in that area for the Rising. Pearse said he wanted me here and sent me over to James Connolly, who handed me my commission as Captain, with instructions to take over half of the Kimmage Garrison, and typed orders to occupy Kelly's gunpowder shop and Hopkins and Hopkins, commanding O'Connell Bridge area. I arrived at my allotted posts about 11.50 a.m. with my half Company. Seamus Robinson

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was my second in command. At 11.55 a.m. the Lancers came along the Quay from the North Wall direction. Prior to this I had a Volunteer posted on the Bridge with orders to allow no one to pass from either side of the Bridge. As the Lancers came towards us, I ordered my men to take advantage of any cover that could be availed of in case any incident happened to cause firing. (See my letter to the Editor, "Sunday Independent" in "Sunday Independent" dated May 29th., 1949).

At 12 noon I sent Seamus Robinson to occupy Hopkins & Hopkins with his section which was half of our force. I occupied Kelly's gunpowder shop with the other half. After I inspected the position, we barricaded the ground floor and occupied the first storey. From there I got each house linked up by boring through the walls (with crowbars got on the south side of the Bridge from a Corporation man), zigzagging in each room to save us from an enfilade fire if any house was occupied by the enemy. I ordered all vessels to be filled with water in each room from Kelly's to Middle Abbey Street in case water was cut off. Looting was going on during the evening, and I held up several looters from the windows, and compelled them to abandon what they were taking.

On Tuesday I got a supply of .32 ammunition for my revolver which I badly needed. We also got some gunpowder which we utilised in making hand-grenades. This day we also got a supply of grenades from G.H.Q. We continued the work of linking up the houses by boring through the walls. There was an interchange of sniping during the day with Trinity College. At about 11.50 a.m.

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our garrison was reinforced by the arrival of five men from the Fingal Battalion; all arrived wearing uniform. Some time in the evening a man, coming from the direction of Liberty Hall towards Butt Bridge, was shot dead by the enemy. The sniping of Trinity College continued.

On Wednesday, the gunboat, "Helga", came up the Liffey and opened fire on Liberty Hall by shelling the building. I opened fire on members of the crew who were exposing themselves on her decks, which had the effect of making them take cover. Later on, the "Helga" pulled in at the Custom House and some men dashed out of her for the building. They also came under my fire which scattered them. A blind man was shot dead by the enemy at the foot of the O'Connell Monument (south side) while crossing the street. Some enemy occupied the Irish Independent Office, D'Olier Street. One exposed himself a little at a side door whom I pointed out to my comrades. I told them not to move a trigger until he came outside and to leave him to me. He came out on the path and I dropped him. Another showed up and I allowed him to pull in the casualty. In a few seconds he reached out with his rifle to fish in the one on the path. While doing so, he exposed his arm and side, and I let him have one which caused his cap to bound out to the street.

From then on we came under machine gun fire from "Independent House", (This was about 11.30 a.m.) from which we had narrow escapes. Some time about 2.30 p.m. or thereabouts a big gun was in place outside Trinity College and it started sending shells into us beginning

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with the top storey. This fire cleared our cook from the third storey and enveloped him in dust, but he was nothing the worse otherwise. Shells were bursting all round us. I tried to pick off some of the gunners, with what effect I could not tell, as they kept well behind the shield. I sent a dispatch to G.H.Q. reporting the shelling of our post, and we were ordered to evacuate and fall back on the G.P.O. I reported to Headquarters and while there I got my men something to eat. Later on we were ordered to reinforce the men occupying the block from Middle Abbey Street to Princes Street. Oscar Traynor, T.D., was in charge here.

I reported to Headquarters that I would try and re-occupy Kelly's, but failed, owing to Middle Abbey Street being under continual machine gun fire. A man was shot dead opposite the G.P.O. He had been moving about the front of the building for some time. The enemy was firing at him for about twenty minutes before they got him from the direction of Trinity College.

On Thursday we still occupied the block of buildings from Middle Abbey Street to Princes Street. The opposite side of the street was on fire caused by incendiary shells. The men in our block were kept busy with hose keeping the windows from bursting in from the intense heat. Some horses were running wild through the street. Fires were raging from O'Connell Bridge to Clery's. Chemicals were exploding and ascending into the air from Hoytes' Chemical and Drug Stores.

Friday still found us occupying the same block of

/buildings

buildings in Abbey Street. We were ordered to retire to the G.P.O. This was a false alarm and we returned to our positions again. There was continual firing and sniping now and the roof of the G.P.O. was on fire. We were ordered to retire to the G.P.O. On arrival there we found the garrison had "fallen in" and were ready to evacuate. As we fell in behind them one of our men got shot in front of me by a sniper. We retired from the G.P.O. Outside in a side street "The O'Rahilly" called for Volunteers with fixed bayonets to clear a barricade of the enemy. (In the interval all the prisoners were set free and allowed out in front before this incident). The late Tom Clarke tried to shoot a lock, so as to open a door to get through a building and save the men from exposing themselves passing a lane. I don't know the name of this lane but it runs into Moore Lane. The lock failed to give way and we had to rush by a white-washed wall directly opposite this lane. All our men got through, under heavy fire from the enemy, to the corner of Moore Lane where it joins Moore Street where we were again held up until a Volunteer, whom I do not know, wrenched an iron frame out of its socket. This gave us an entrance to the Freeman printing works and admitted a number of men who remained there for the night. During the night I could hear the cries of wounded men in Moore Street.

Saturday morning early we evacuated the Printing Works and crossed Moore Lane to houses in Moore Street from which we worked our way to within a few hundred yards of Parnell Street where the enemy had a barricade. We were now in a yard at the end of the buildings which were the limit of our advance so far. Harry Boland,
/J.J.Walsh

J.J. Walsh and I organised men with rifles and bayonets for an attack on the enemy at the head of Moore Street joining Parnell Street. The men who had magazine rifles were to occupy windows covering the advance. This was about 2 p.m. When everyone was ready a dispatch was sent to Headquarters for approval and word came back that there was a "truce" on. This upset everyone as it was our intention to work our way to the Four Courts and then all for the Dublin mountains. Hearing that there was a "truce" on, the men dismissed and scattered about the buildings for a bit to eat and have a sleep.

Later on, at about 3 p.m., we fell in again and marched out carrying our arms with a flag of truce in front. As we passed Price's shop in Moore Street, I saw The O'Rahilly dead on the footpath with his tunic torn and his boots shattered from bullets. Not far away from him was a British soldier also dead. I recognised him as one of our prisoners who had been released from the G.P.O. on Friday. He, apparently, had been shot by his comrades as he tried to make his way back to their lines. We marched out to O'Connell Street where our surrender was taken. Afterwards we marched to the Rotunda Green where we were kept all night lying on the grass. During this time I saw Tom Clarke taken out from us by some officers and searched. We remained there until Sunday morning when we were marched under escort to the Richmond Barracks.

Back in Tullamore there was no mobilisation of the Volunteers. The men were left without leaders and instructions and they did not know what to do. The R.I.C. during the week surrounded Malone's house. My brother

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was in the house at the time. They fired on the police who scattered and ran. Seamus Malone and my brother, Paddy, tried to blow up the Railway Bridge on the west side of the town with the explosives I had procured prior to the Rebellion. They failed to blow the bridge. They then tried to get to Galway but failed as the Shannon crossing was held by the enemy. The Malone brothers were arrested after the Rebellion.

As we marched to the Richmond Barracks, the crowd on the streets were hostile to us. They were mostly wives of British soldiers. On arrival in the Richmond, we were put in a Barrack room. In this room were Michael Mallon and Joe Connolly. The following day we were taken to the Gymnasium for identification. We stayed there for the night lying on the floor. Joe Plunkett and McDermott were there. As we were being marched out, I was identified and picked out, the Detectives remarking: "We are a long time looking for you". Joe Plunkett, McDermott, Mallon and Seamus Brennan were also picked out. The identified men were put in a separate Barrack room. After a few days a preliminary investigation into the charges being preferred against us was held. Shortly after we were courtmartialled. I never heard what sentence I got. We were next moved to Kilmainham gaol and placed in cells there. I remained in Kilmainham until I was released from custody. This was about the 29th of June. I returned to Tullamore and at once started to reorganise the area again.

Signed: P. J. BrennanWitness: Michael MallonDate: 2nd March 19522nd March 1950

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