

ORIGINAL

BUREAU OF MILITARY HISTORY 1913-21

BURO STAIRÉ MILEATA 1913-21

No. W.S. 369

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BUREAU OF MILITARY HISTORY, 1913-21.

STATEMENT BY WITNESS

DOCUMENT NO. W.S. 369.....

Witness

Mr. William Whelan,
3 Grosvenor Villa,
Putland Road,
Bray, Co. Wicklow.

Identity

Member of "D" Company
2nd Battalion Dublin Brigade I.V's. 1916.

Subject

- (a) National activities 1914-1921;
- (b) G.P.O. and Imperial Hotel, Dublin,
Easter 1916;
- (c) Volunteer activities England - 1921;
- (d) Plot to execute British Cabinet Ministers.

Conditions, if any, stipulated by Witness

Nil.

File No. S.1444.....

Form B.S.M. 2.

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Statement of William Whelan,

3 Grosvenor Villa, Putland Road, Bray,
Co. Wicklow.

I joined the Volunteers following the Redmondite split and I was attached to "D" Company of the 2nd Battalion. Oscar Traynor was in charge at the time and Paddy Moran was the Company Officer.

On Easter Monday, 1916, I mobilised at Fairview and our group was composed of Citizen Army men and Volunteers. I cannot say whether Harry Boland or Vincent Poole was in command on that day. All through Monday we held a post at Gouldings Manure Works, Fairview Bridge. Harry Boland had received word that Frank Henderson had a post down at Ballybough and we left Vincent Poole and attached ourselves to Frank Henderson's party. He was in Gilbey's, the Wine Merchant's Stores, at the corner of Richmond Avenue. We remained there on the Tuesday and there were three prisoners taken - I remember they were instructors at the Bull Wall. Harry Boland detailed his brother and I, and he came along himself to take in these prisoners to the G.P.O. We brought them into the G.P.O. where we surrendered them. Then we went back to Ballybough to Captain Henderson. Word came through that the British were enclosing the area and it was decided that we retire to the Post Office, so we marched in on the Wednesday to the Post Office.

From the Post Office, Ned Boland and I were sent across to the Imperial Hotel where Frank Thornton was in charge (he was called 'Drennan'), and we remained there until the order came through for the evacuation. We received an order to escape to the country. We worked our way into Marlboro' Street and eventually reached Cathedral Street. Boland left me there and he went into the Church. It was in the evening. I went up along the lane and I was captured by a party of British soldiers at Brittain Street at the back of some houses. They thought I was a German spy. The officer questioned me in German but all the German I knew was "Yah", which I did not say. He then put me against the wall to shoot me. The shooting party was actually formed up. My hair, which was very fair, had grown long and had fallen over my forehead and nose, so I asked the officer if I might brush it back. "You go over there", he said, "and I will brush it for you". He countermanded the order to shoot me and he put me into an armoured car (an old boiler converted into an armoured car). The next morning he opened the door of the armoured car and asked, "Did you get your hair brushed yet?". I think it was that request saved my life. I remained in the armoured car then until the surrender, and we were marched to Richmond Barracks. Tom Clarke was in the file in front of me when we halted in Richmond Barracks and he gave me a large sum of money. He said, "Bill, you take this, I wont need it any more". I don't know the amount of money but I am sure it could have been about £50. I did not keep it as the soldiers took it from me. Clarke knew he was finished then.

During Easter Week one day while in the Imperial

Hotel there was a call for Volunteers to go on reconnaissance and I was sent out on it. I went all around the town and I saw the Helga fire. When I saw the Helga fire I was on the north side of the Quays down towards Butt Bridge. To the best of my recollection there was only one shot from the Helga while I was there. I didn't stay there too long. The Helga was well back - at least 500 yards from the Loop Line. That would be on the Wednesday. Why I have such a clear recollection of this event is, when I got back off the reconnaissance I reported to the Post Office. I did not report back to the Imperial for the moment, and in the Post Office I saw James Connolly lying wounded. There was an officer there whom I did not know, and I said to him that I had been on reconnaissance and he sent me to Joe Plunkett and why I remember this incident so well was because I gave my report to Plunkett - it was a verbal one. I told him about the troops in Trinity College and about the Helga, etc. All he said was, "Why didn't you put it in writing?".

While on reconnaissance I went out by College Green. There were crowds of people on the street. When I came out of the Imperial I raced across to the Post Office and then I went down Prince's Lane and got out in Abbey Street, got on to the Quays and up to O'Connell Bridge. I crossed O'Connell Bridge though they were firing. There must have been at least 100 people standing on the fork of the road, D'Olier Street. I crossed O'Connell Bridge and went up Westmoreland Street, saw the British troops in Trinity College and then made my way down Pearse Street (Great Brunswick Street then), and down Hawkins Street down to Butt Bridge - just near Butt Bridge - but I did not cross it. I finished my reconnaissance there and I came back the same way practically and got

into the Post Office.

I returned to the Imperial and told Boland about Joe Plunkett's remark about putting my message in writing. We had a good laugh over it.

I remember a panic when we arrived at the Post Office from Fairview. Crowds of people were looting the shops and I can't say what caused the panic, but a lot of us dropped on our knees with our rifles "at the ready" - some fired, at what, I do not know. The panic was spreading and Connolly came out of the Post Office and marched up and down the road in front of it. He said, "Steady, we are going to have a good fight". He quelled the panic. He detailed us off and that was when we were sent to the Imperial Hotel. On the Wednesday shelling commenced and when we left the Imperial, the roof was blazing. The waiting was the worst; you could not leave until you were told to do so.

I was deported to Stafford Gaol. From there I was sent to Frongoch from where I was released with the general body of prisoners, Christmas 1916.

Within twelve months following my return home, my Battalion was reorganised and I again found myself with my old Company.

Up to the passing of the Conscription Bill my activities were mainly confined to Company drilling and drilling which was purely routine.

It was Harry Boland who intimated to me that I was required to do a job, but he didn't state what it was, hence he sent me off to Parnell Square: I forget what

number in Parnell Square. Arriving there I saw Dick Malcahy, Dick McKee and Cathal Brugha. I am almost certain Michael Collins was there too, amongst others whose names I cannot recall at the moment. I was informed by Cathal Brugha that there was very dangerous work to be done and he asked would I volunteer for it. At the time he did not state what the work was. I answered that I would volunteer. He then arranged a meeting which I was to attend in Parnell Square on a particular date - I think about three days later. I remember going to Parnell Square for this meeting and when I got there, there was no meeting, so I was a bit vexed about it and wondered what I was going to do. I knew where Cathal Brugha lived or at least where his offices were on the Quay, so I went directly there, but he had left and on inquiries I learned he had gone to Ely Place. I think it was No. 3, Ely Place, but I am not quite sure of the number.

He was in this place and I was in a very bad temper when I met him. I burst into the room and I am afraid I used some bad language. Dick Malcahy was present and said to me, "It is all my fault, Whelan. I am sorry I didn't send word to you". There were about ten Volunteers present whose names I cannot remember now, but they included Joe Good, Mat Furlong, Sam Reilly and MacNamara. We were all assembled there and Cathal Brugha said, "Now, before I tell you anything about this, it is a very dangerous job, and I have not much hope of you getting back from it and any man who wants to get out had better leave now and we wont hold it against him. He had better leave now if he thinks he is going to have any qualms". One man left. I admired him because he said he was a married man and he said he might break.

I was detailed to go to London. I forget whether it was Mulcahy or Cathal Brugha who first spoke giving orders that we were to go to England and kill the members of the British Government. That was all we were told for the moment. We got our orders when to go. We went in relays. I went with Joe Good. The only way I can place the date of our arrival there is that we got there on the Saturday and the last German air raid of the War occurred on that Sunday night. Joe Good and I stayed with Mr. and Mrs. Nunan, the parents of the present Assistant Secretary, Department of External Affairs. We stayed there for three months during which period we were mostly following the movements of the various Ministers of the Government, finding out where they lived and all that. The editors and owners of newspapers were also in that category that we were following up.

Cathal Brugha was in charge of the party and was in London all this time. Cathal Brugha was the most cold-blooded man I ever met in my life. He brought his children over there to stay with him as a kind of disguise or camouflage or as a cover for his activities. We were never summoned to a conference in a party: he took us one by one to where he lived and there he detailed our work to us. He provided us with photographs of these men - Cabinet Ministers, Editors and Newspaper Owners. For example, one was Northcliffe, and I used to know Carson pretty well. The latter was one of our 'boys'. We knew all along that the main object was the execution of the British Ministers, but this was not to take place until the Conscription Bill for Ireland became law. In relation to this, Cathal Brugha evolved a plan which I remember well, because I happened to be the one detailed to go with him.

I was having a game of cards in Johnnie O'Connor's house. These were very good people living in the East End and he was known as 'Elimie O'Connor'. On this occasion I got word from Cathal Brugha to go to him immediately to his headquarters which was the house he lived in and where he had offices. He took me into the House of Commons and we sat in the gallery. He then told me what he wanted me to do. He said, "When the time comes I will do all the shooting here at the Ministers; you keep the people back from me". He added, "If you can, shoot your way out. That is all I want you to do to keep the people away until I have finished the firing". We were not armed that day. There was the usual routine work in between. We went again to the House of Commons. Cathal Brugha had a peter-the-painter down the leg of his trousers. I was unarmed. I asked him if he were going to start. He said, "No, I am not going to start. I only want to get the feel of this thing here in the gallery".

During my stay in London, on one occasion Mat Furlong was with me and we met Cathal Brugha in Hyde Park by arrangement. The only thing I remember about that was that he inquired how we were getting on and if we had anything special to report. While we were walking along a British soldier in uniform brushed against Cathal who was wheeling his bicycle at the time. Cathal turned round and brushed his clothes after the impact. To my amazement, he bought me a bottle of stout in a pub.

After three months of that type of work I was sent back home with Joe Good. We arrived at the North Wall and joined up again. When we came home we were very short of money. We were allowed £5 a week while in England. That was really 'pin' money because the Munans wouldn't

take any money from us for our keep, and we had a similar experience with any of the other people we stayed with. At home it was difficult to get money so we had to contact Michael Collins then. I cannot remember his address but it was somewhere in Rathmines or Ranelagh. Collins told us to go on the following day down to the Insurance Office at O'Connell Bridge. We did so and saw Mick Staines who gave us some money.

After my return home I became more intimate with Michael Collins through Harry Boland and he detailed me for the job of taking a man out of Mountjoy. I believe his name was Mick Lynch. He was a Cork man, wearing a beard. At that time Mick Collins was staying in the Distillery at Jones' Road. I never met this Lynch man before but those who were with me knew him. He was due for release and Collins was afraid he would be arrested when he got outside the gate. One of the men with me was lame. The British did not re-arrest Lynch and we escorted him down to the Distillery where we all had breakfast with Collins.

There was the usual routine work, running around, getting ammunition.

I went back to England again in 1919. I formed a Company then in Middlesbore', Yorkshire - The Tyneside Battalion. The strength of this Company was 80 men. We carried out the usual work there of burning farms and taking explosives from the Ironworks and sending them over to Ireland. Instructions came through the Headquarters at Newcastle. I understand that Joe Wize was the man in charge of that operation at this end. There was a man named Fitzgerald there who used to

transmit orders to us. Judging by his accent I think he was a Newcastle man. We used to transfer explosives to him. It was my job to procure explosives and pass it on to this man. I had no further concern with it after this. I got the stuff mainly from explosive stores in the Ironworks and Steel Works in Middlesboro', Yorkshire. They used explosives in these Works for blasting operations as they discovered they could make a by-product, basic slag, from the residue of the iron ore, and for this purpose they had to blast the slag heaps. I should think we got about 2,000 explosives and fuse and detonators. We got all this in the one little place. We bought revolvers from the seamen there, but not in quantity and these were mostly to arm our own fellows. It would have been better if they had not been armed because it was due to being armed I got arrested.

On a cycling tour near Stockton one Sunday, I discovered a watermain crossing a small viaduct and I thought if we had a big fire in Stockton that it would be a good idea to have the watermain blown up. Three of us arranged it. There was Kelly, my second-in-command, who is the present Mayor of Stockton, and McCann, the Company Officer, and of course, myself. Between the three of us we worked out the plan for the blowing of the main. McCann was to detail two men with himself and blow the watermain at 9 p.m. We had to leave it pretty late, as, although it was not quite summer, the evenings were pretty long. Myself, Kelly and a man named Hegarty were to set fire to this timberworks, also timed for 9 p.m. approximately. This was a Joinery Works - a timber yard - and we knew there would be plenty of inflammable matter there. We had a little sketch of the place. The fire went off well and the watermain was

blown and there was a terrible shortage of water. The fire burned all through that night and there was terrific activity by the police all over the whole district. I went to Kelly's house to sleep because we thought there would be cordons around the town and that we could not get through. The police came to Kelly's house that night when we were in bed, and Mrs. Kelly assured them we were not in and they left. We were upstairs. She had hidden our guns outside in a dry-lavatory. At that time there were no proper sanitary arrangements there. No one was arrested for that job at that time.

When I arrived home from Stockton I found that two of my men had been arrested in setting fires to farm buildings in a place called Haverton Hill. I only remember one of their names - Morley, who was from Mayo. There was great police activity then. A week after that, word came through that there was a big consignment of explosives coming to the Linthorpe Ironworks. I detailed four men to raid the place for me for explosives. They did not report back to me and the next day I heard one of them had been arrested, a man named McCann. He was my Lieutenant of the Company. Four days after that I was arrested one morning at 4 o'clock in my house. The police raided it. We were brought to trial and remanded to the York Assizes. There were 13 charges but I cannot remember all of them. The chief charge was conspiracy. There was a man named O'Donnell who was our solicitor. He was employed on all these cases throughout England. He hired some English Lawyer and we had a preliminary trial when the officer asked permission for us to retire. After we pleaded guilty to conspiracy, they dropped other charges - shooting of a policeman and wounding him, etc.

We were found guilty, of course, then, and sentenced to five years penal servitude. McCann was sent to the Isle of Wight and I was sent up to Dartmoor. That was in 1921 - about July. We got out at the Amnesty after the Truce.

While in Dartmoor we were treated as criminals being captured in England. We were put into the criminal part of the prison but there were 300 Irishmen in another wing of the prison, and I met Frank Thunder there. One means of communication we used in prison - Frank Thunder was a good singer and used to play the harmonium and he was selected by the prison authorities to play it at Mass. Seeing me there, he asked for me to join his choir. This request was granted. We used to sing the Soldier's Song as well as hymns. We were in Dartmoor for about six months. Paddy Donoghue was the senior officer there and we decided that we should be treated as political prisoners and not as criminals.

One Sunday on orders from Donoghue we all fell out of the usual exercises, marched and formed up on the square. There were a lot of Englishmen there - there must have been up to 50 who were caught in England. There was terrific consternation amongst the warders who, after a while, all rushed in for rifles. We were very quiet and they marched us into prison and put us down in the dark cells where they kept us for three nights. Lord French's nephew was acting as Deputy Governor and he brought us up in front of him singly and he told us that he would tame us. He sentenced us to solitary confinement and after another three days we were brought up, put in balls and chains and in this manner marched to the station. We took the train to Exeter and we were

marched through the town of Exeter with all these chains on us. We spent the night there and from there we were sent to the different prisons.

When I was released I came across to Ireland and took a commission in the Army. McCann was the only one caught and he told me afterwards about it. The four of them went to this Ironworks with the suitcases and they got as much stuff as they could carry and came back down the Linthorpe road about 12 o'clock at night. I had instructed them to do the job in the daytime and that there was only one man there whom they were to approach, tie him and leave him there. As I had predicted, there was one policeman there; but McCann drew his gun and wounded him in the ear. The policeman fell on the road and they ran away and left the bag there. One of the bags was my own travelling bag and they traced it back to Birmingham, back to Ireland and further, to help to convict me. The other three men who were engaged in the escapade all escaped. When they ran down the road the policeman blew his whistle and McCann ran into the arms of six other policemen. If they had only followed my instructions this would not have happened.

One thing I should like to mention - the Self-Determination League was very strong in that area and was a great cover for our activities. This does not mean that the officers of the League knew what we were doing. It was all over England at that time. It provided funds for dependent relations. A very prominent man in it was a Mr. McPartlin, a schoolteacher from Middlesboro', and there was a man named Fox from Southbank, an old Fenian. There were dozens of them.

They were born and reared in England and it was great to get them to do what they did.

I was in 13 Gaols that time in England from the time I was arrested.

I should like to place on record a man named Neil Kerr who did great work on the boats.

SIGNED

William Whelan.

DATE

15th April 1950.

WITNESS

Wm. Jimmy Bondt.

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