

ORIGINAL

BUREAU OF MILITARY HISTORY 1913-21

BURO STAIRÉ MILEATA 1913-21

No. W.S. 390

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BUREAU OF MILITARY HISTORY, 1913-21.

STATEMENT BY WITNESS

DOCUMENT NO. W.S. 390.....

Witness

Mr. Joseph Gilhooly,
"Clonallen",
Kimmage Road,
Dublin.

Identity

Member of "C" Company, 2nd Battalion,
Dublin Brigade 1918- .

Member of A.S.U. 1920-1921.

Subject

- (a) National activities 1918-1921;
- (b) A.S.U. 1920 - 1921;
- (c) Burning of Custom House 25/5/1921.

Conditions, if any, stipulated by Witness

Nil

File No. S.1521.....

Form B.S.M. 2.

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Statement of Joseph Gilhoolly,"Clonallen", Kimmage Road, Dublin.

I joined the Irish Volunteers ("C" Company, 2nd Battalion, Dublin Brigade) in the early part of 1918. At that time Sean Colbert was Captain of the Company with Sean Meldon and Charlie Goulding 1st and 2nd Lieutenants respectively. Mattie McDonnell was Company Adjutant and either Paddy Kelly or Jimmie Brennan was Company Quartermaster. The Section Commanders, as far as I remember, were Mick Fleming, Sean Lemass, Joe Cripps, George Murphy and Jimmie Brennan. There were at first four Sections in the Company but afterwards this was increased to five. There were several changes of Section Commanders due to different reasons and Tom O'Rourke and Mick Keogh were Section Commanders at different times. I don't know the number of men on the roll of the Company but between 40 and 50 was regarded as a good parade in 1918, 1919 and 1920. I would say that of this number about 50% were 1916 men.

The Company met once per week for drill in Tara Hall, Gloucester Street, and occasionally went out in the direction of Whitehall, Cabra or Artane, for manoeuvres. On only one occasion that I remember did we have rifle target practice - it was either with a service rifle fitted with a tube for firing miniature ammunition or with a miniature rifle.

Apart from weekly drill and some special classes for signallers, one of the few incidents I recall in those early days was an occasion on which Commandant Frank Henderson picked four men of the Company, Jimmie Brennan, Dan Ryan, *another whose name I don't recollect* and myself to watch Detective

/Smyth,

Smyth, who, he said, was suspected of doing political work, with a view to giving him a beating up. After watching Smyth's house for a few evenings and finding out the times at which he arrived and left the house we were called off the job. The only reason I was picked for this job was because I was taller than the average man in the Company. (Frank Henderson stated that he wanted big men for the job).

Although we subscribed to an arms fund I, in common with the majority of the rank and file of the Company, had not a gun up to late 1919. I was issued with a service rifle in November 1919 which I had to hand back some months afterwards when all the rifles in Dublin were being sent to Cork.

During 1919 and 1920 there were several changes of officers in the Company. Sean Colbert resigned and was succeeded by Sean Meldon; Sean Meldon's vacancy was filled by the election of Sean Lemass; Charlie Goulding afterwards left or resigned. M. O'Reilly was Captain of the Company for a short period, and after him Tom Burke.

During the latter part of 1920, parties of about twelve men armed with revolvers patrolled the streets (O'Connell Street, Dorset Street and vicinity) with a view to engaging Black and Tans travelling by lorry, but no engagement took place on any occasion on which I was one of the members of the patrol.

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In December 1920, just some days before Christmas, I think, the A.S.U. was formed. I was one of four men who were chosen from "C" Company. The other three were Tom McGrath, Jim Heery and Billy Doyle. Tom McGrath and Jim Heery were both 1916 men and Jim Heery especially was looked on as a reliable man in the Company. As I had not done anything to distinguish myself in "C" Company, the only reason I can account for my being chosen for the A.S.U. was that I had been a Civil Servant and on the introduction by the British Government of the order that all Civil Servants must take an oath of allegiance to the King, I had left the Civil Service. (An order had been issued by the Volunteers at the time that any Civil Servants who took the oath of allegiance must leave the Volunteers).

The initial meeting of the A.S.U. was held in a hallway in the North Strand. I think it was 100 Seville Place. The reason for the formation of the Unit - intensive warfare against the British - and the conditions under which we were to serve, were explained and all were given an opportunity to withdraw if they so wished. The unit was to consist of 50 men, actually there were some few less than 50 present at the first meeting and as far as I know about 45 was the greatest number of men serving at any one time. We were placed under the command of Captain Paddy Flanagan who about a week later assembled us in a hallway in 34 Camden Street when we were divided into four sections corresponding to the four battalions from which we were recruited. Frank Flood was appointed

/Lieutenant

Lieutenant in charge of Nos. 1 and 2 Sections and Tom McGrath was appointed Section Commander of No. 2 Section. Number 2 Section consisted of Tom McGrath, George Gray, Jim Heery, Jim Cahill, John Muldowney, Paddy Evers, Christy Fitzsimons, Billy Doyle and myself. Billy Doyle, who lived in the south side of the city, transferred some days afterwards to either No. 3 or No. 4 Section. Each man was supplied by his former Company with a .45 revolver and 12 rounds of ammunition.

The first engagement of the A.S.U. early in January 1921 was a combined attack by the Nos. 1 and 2 Sections on either one or two lorry loads of Auxiliaries in Bachelor's Walk. This ambush was planned by Captain Flanagan who informed us beforehand that the lorries would be attacked with grenades only and that this attack was in the nature of a test to see the reaction of the Auxiliaries. About five or six men with grenades stood at short intervals along the footpath outside or near Scannell's auction rooms. These men were to attack the first suitable patrol of Auxiliaries (i.e. either one or two lorries) which passed, availing themselves of whatever cover might be afforded by any vehicles or furniture outside or near the auction rooms. The men, having thrown the grenades, were to retire by way of the auction rooms through a doorway (which was guarded by one of our men) which led into a laneway (North Lotts) at the back. Some men were stationed in the laneway to ensure its being free for the retirement of the men who

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had thrown the grenades while four men were posted at the public-house (O'Neill's or Cahill's was the name over the door at that time) ^{at the corner of Liffey Street and North Wall} in case the Auxiliaries attempted to turn into Liffey Street. The ambush took place exactly as planned; the Auxiliaries made no attempt to stop or dismount when attacked but increased speed while some of them stood up in the lorries and fired shots in every direction. Either the Auxiliaries were firing wildly or they did not know where the attack came from as some of the bullets fired by them struck houses on the opposite side of the river. All our men got safely away; what damage, if any, was done to the Auxiliaries I never heard.

After this, No. 1 and No. 2 Sections operated independently for some weeks. No. 2 Section made several attempts to ambush either one or two lorries of Black and Tans or Auxiliaries but owing to the difficulty of remaining in position for even a short time we were not immediately successful. We were in positions in Summerhill to carry out an ambush on the morning on which No. 1 Section was destroyed at Clonturk Park. Being already in our positions for some time when we heard the explosions of the grenades thrown by the No. 1 Section and not knowing exactly where the ambush had taken place we broke up and did not know of the disaster to No. 1 Section until that afternoon.

The next ambush carried out by No. 2 Section was at Beresford Place. This was on one lorry load of

/Black

Black and Tans. Our men were divided into two groups, one consisting of George Gray, Jim Cahill, Paddy Evers and Christy Fitzsimons stationed near Brooks Thomas at the corner of Abbey Street, and the other group consisting of Tom McGrath, Jim Heery, John Muldowney and myself near some pillars of arches of the loopline bridge at the Quays. There was no opportunity to do more than throw some grenades when the lorry turned into Abbey Street and out of sight of the men stationed on the Quays. The four men stationed on the Quays crossed Butt Bridge to get away from the scene when some shots were fired. I was some yards behind Tom McGrath and noticed that he was bleeding from a wound in the back of his leg. The other two were in front and did not know anything of this. Tom and I, after crossing the bridge, turned to our left towards City Quay and Tom then got on to a horse-drawn dray and sat on the opposite side to the driver. He asked me to leave him as two of us on the dray as well as the driver would have been noticeable. Afterwards we read in the newspaper that the military who came on the scene after the ambush had arrested a man with a revolver but had afterwards released him.

As Tom McGrath was in hospital after this, we agreed that George Gray should command the Section. I think it was around this period that we captured and burned the lorry used by some of the barracks for dumping refuse in the sloblands at Fairview. The few British soldiers in charge of the lorry, whom we took prisoners and released again, helped us to burn the lorry. After this the British always sent an escort with the lorry dumping the refuse.

/Some

Some time after the Clonturk ambush more men were transferred from the 1st Battalion to the No. 1 Section. From then onwards the No. 1 and No. 2 Sections always acted together. Tom Flood became Lieutenant in place of his brother Frank; Mick Dunne, who had escaped on the day of the Clonturk ambush, was Section Commander. The new men into No. 1 Section were Ned Breslin, Paddy O'Connor, Jack Foy, Sean Quinn and Johnny Sliney. Very shortly after Tom Flood became Lieutenant he and some others made an attack on some military despatch riders in Henry Street.

On the second attempt a successful attack was made at Ormond Quay on three private cars carrying military officers in mufti which for some days had left Dublin Castle at 3 p.m. and went to British Headquarters in Parkgate Street. I do not know what damage was done but six grenades were dropped either into or alongside the open cars. The six men engaged got safely away, the only damage being some splinters which Sean Quinn got in his ear.

Some time in April 1921 a large lorry-load of armed military were attacked with grenades in North Frederick Street. The British in their report of this ambush admitted casualties.

Our unit formed part of the force which made the first of the unsuccessful attempts to ambush a troop train at Killester, and we also took part in the unsuccessful raid for arms (directed I think by Captain Tom Kilcoyne of "B" Company, 2nd Battalion) in Trinity College.

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The four Sections of the A.S.U. took part in the burning of the Custom House - Nos. 1, 2 and 3 inside and No. 4 outside - on 25th May 1921. Nos. 1 and 2 Sections received their instructions from either the Brigadier or Paddy Daly in (as far as I remember) the Typographical Society's premises in Gardiner Street. Our instructions were to enter the Custom House at Beresford Place at 12.55 p.m. and go to the part of the building facing the Quays. The staff of the Custom House were to be sent to that part of the building where we were to ensure that they remained. Our main job was to ensure that the gateways which gave access to the Quays were kept closed until the Custom House was on fire and then to ensure that they were free for the retreat of the men engaged in the burning. We were told that we were to leave the Custom House only when all the men engaged in the burning were gone. It was this latter instruction which was mainly responsible for our being taken prisoners that day. Even as much as an hour after the appearance of the British forces on the scene the gateways leading on to the Quays were still free and Captain Flanagan, who was not in command of the A.S.U. on that date and Mick Stephenson, a member of No. 3 Section, A.S.U., left by these gates. The men engaged in the burning must have been prevented by fire or by some other reason from reaching the gates where we were stationed. When the noise of grenades and firing had continued for some time in the front of the building and when it was fairly obvious to us that all the fighting was taking place in the front of the building we could still, I believe, have got away by the Quays. Tom Flood, however, ^{who} was in command, apparently considered /himself

himself bound by his instructions that we were to be the last to leave the building. I have reason to believe also that he considered that in no circumstances should we surrender as prisoners. The Black and Tans eventually appeared at the windows or openings on the Quay side of the Custom House. . Owing to the height above ground level of these openings from the inside they were in a position to fire on us without exposing themselves while we were in a very poor position from inside to do anything effective. The staff of the Custom House were at this time as much exposed to the Black and Tan's fire as we were and when the latter had fired some rounds of ammunition some member of the staff shouted "We are staff". The Black and Tans then ceased fire and some of them shouted in that the staff could come out with their hands up. At least one member of the staff had been badly wounded by the Black and Tan's fire from the windows. Others (Black and Tans) shouted that all who wished to surrender could come out with their hands up. We left our revolvers and holsters behind us under papers and rubbish and came out with the staff. Staff and A.S.U. were then, we hoped, hopelessly mixed. However, an Auxiliary called for Mr. Hogan; he, I discovered afterwards, was the Departmental Assessor of Income Tax and on this account his name was known to the Auxiliaries. When Mr. Hogan appeared he and an Auxiliary formed a gateway through which all the staff were asked to pass through, Mr. Hogan identifying them as they passed. When this was going on for some time a young

/member

member of the staff approached me and said that he would be able to get me through. I, however, was afraid to trust him or to chance getting through in this way as if it failed I would have irretrievably committed myself. Two of our men, Mick Dunne - Section Commander of No. 1 Section and Sean Burke did bluff their way out. Incidentally they were two out of, I think, only three who escaped from the Clonturk ambush. When all the staff had been identified the remainder of us, about a dozen as far as I remember, were searched and questioned by an Auxiliary. Our explanations as to how we found ourselves in the Custom House were not believed and we were retained as prisoners. Ned Breslin who, on being searched, was found to have one round of ammunition in his waistcoat pocket, was separated from the remainder. Of No. 2 Section, six were taken prisoners, that is the whole Section with the exception of Tom McGrath who was still in hospital and Jim Cahill who was absent in Cavan on that day owing to his mother's illness. Tom Flood was taken prisoner, under what circumstances, I don't know and brought to Mountjoy Jail. Of No. 1 Section, Ned Breslin and Johnny Sliney were also taken and brought to Mountjoy, while Jack Foy was brought to Arbour Hill. Other A.S.U. men taken prisoners that day were Jimmy Gibbons, Jimmy Doyle, Paddy Brunton and Peter Ratcliffe of No. 3 Section and Jimmy Harpur and Billy Doyle of No. 4 Section. The A.S.U. men who were taken prisoners on the Quays side of the Custom House were brought to Eden Quay and there with the men taken

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at the front of the buildings handed over to a military escort who loaded all the prisoners on to military lorries and brought ^{them} us to Arbour Hill.

There is one incident which I would like to recount here. While waiting for the lorries to move off, I found I had no cigarettes and not knowing when I might get an opportunity again of getting some asked a British soldier if he would get me some, giving him a two-shilling piece. He tried to get them and failed (the shops in the vicinity were closed) and when he returned he insisted on my taking the few cigarettes he had of his own and refused to take any payment for them.

Altogether about eighty I.R.A. men were taken prisoner at the Custom House and brought to Arbour Hill where we were detained about three weeks. Several identification parades were held there and also in Kilmainham Jail to which we were transferred some time in June. After the Truce came into operation on 11th July, considerable latitude was allowed to all the prisoners and following the signing of the Treaty all the Kilmainham prisoners were released on the morning of 8th December, 1921.

Signed: *J. Gilhooly*

Date: 30th April 1950

Witness:

Sheila Gilhooly

Joseph Kearns Comdt.

