

ORIGINAL

BUREAU OF MILITARY HISTORY 1913-21

BURO STAIRE MILEATA 1913-21

No. W.S. 433

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BUREAU OF MILITARY HISTORY, 1913-21.

STATEMENT BY WITNESS

DOCUMENT NO. W.S. 433

Witness

Simon Donnelly,
16 Arnott Street,
South Circular Road,
Dublin.

Identity

Capt. 'C' Coy. 3rd Batt'n. Dublin Bgde.
Easter Week 1916.

Vice/Comd't. 3rd Batt'n. Dublin Brigade
1917 - February 1921.

Subject

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Dublin Brigade Irish Volunteers
November 1913- Holy Week 1916.

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Nil

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STATEMENT BY SIMON DONNELLY.

16 Arnott Street, South Circular Road, Dublin.

I joined the Volunteers in the Rotunda Gardens in November, 1913. I was detailed to "C" Company of the 3rd Battalion, which met at 41 York Street on Thursday nights. The other Companies of the Battalion were "A" Company and "B" Company. The Chairmen of the Companies were - Eoin MacNeill, "A" Company; The O'Rahilly, "B" Company; Seán Fitzgibbon, "C" Company. Other units subsequently organised were, "D" and "E" Companies, and units at Blackrock and Dún Laoghaire. Military titles were not known in those days, and we had Chairmen instead of Captains.

We received our instructions from ex-British soldiers and members of the Fianna Éireann organisation who had received previous military training were attached to other units as instructors. The military training consisted of close order drill and rifle drill with dummy rifles. Outdoor parades took place every Wednesday and Saturday at Larkfield, Kimmage, where the training was mostly of a ceremonial nature. Later, a rifle range was erected at Larkfield, at which continuous practice was carried out by all units.

The first arrest of men of my unit that I remember was the arrest of three men who were sent to Croke Park to distribute anti-British recruiting pamphlets. Jimmy Doyle was one of these men. They were brought to the local police station, but were subsequently bailed out by the O'Rahilly and did not appear at any trial.

I joined the I.R.B. about April, 1914. The meetings of the I.R.B. at that time mainly consisted of recruiting for the organisation. The Chairman of my Circle was the late Martin Murphy. The method of recruiting for the I.R.B. was for active members to propose the name of prospective recruits. Any name so proposed was sent throughout all the Circles in Ireland and put before the members to see if there was any objection to either the man himself or his family associates. If he was passed as being satisfactory, word would come back to the original Circle where he had been proposed, and he was accepted. The individual himself had then to be approached and asked to join. This was the first intimation the man got, and it had to be done in a careful manner because we were not supposed to reveal the existence of the organisation until we were satisfied that the man concerned was willing to join. He was then brought to the meeting, and the Oath of Allegiance was administered to him by the Chairman of the Circle.

At that time the first function of the I.R.B. to my mind was to instruct its members to get control in as many groups and organisations as possible. It was a policy of peaceful penetration in order to wield the widest possible authority in all groups, Trade Unions being concentrated on, as well as sports and athletic organisations and the Gaelic League.

From the beginning of the Volunteers, all members paid a weekly subscription. They also subscribed anything they could afford to the arms fund and the equipment fund. At that time several shops in Dublin

openly sold military equipment but not arms. I obtained my first Martini rifle some time late in 1914 - it was a single British weapon, 40 or 50 years old.

The training all along consisted of routine close order drill, marches and field days on Sundays. By this time the 3rd Battalion had secured an outdoor training ground at Camden Row. We also instituted a miniature rifle range on this ground.

We paraded at Camden Row on the Sunday morning of the Howth gun-running, and marched from there to Croydon Park, later known as Father Mathew Park, Fairview. When the Battalions were on parade at Croydon Park, word was sent round that all ex-British soldiers were to be dismissed from the parade. This was a precaution taken in their interests against future victimisation.

The march from Croydon Park to Howth was uneventful until we entered Howth village, where we got the order to double to the pier, the vessel carrying the arms having been sighted.

When the arms had been distributed we started on the return march to Dublin. At the bottom of Howth Road we were confronted by a large force of D.M.P., and our column was halted. Some of the D.M.P. when told to disarm the Volunteers refused to do so. In the meantime a party of military with fixed bayonets appeared lower down the road. Some of the leaders started parleying with the Commissioner of Police.

This was intended as a ruse to allow the main body of men to get away with their arms. A small scuffle took place, and one or two minor casualties occurred. J.J. Burke and Judge were supposed to have been hurt there.

I got away with about seven rifles and hid them round what is now Marino. No ammunition had been distributed with the rifles. I came into town and procured a taxi, returned and collected my rifles, which were subsequently used by some men of my unit during Easter Week.

The military who had been sent to the scene, on returning to barracks were in conflict with some groups of people at Bachelor's Walk. They opened fire and killed a number of people. During the week, the first public funerals of the victims took place in Dublin, to which the entire Dublin Battalions of the Volunteers turned out.

The following Sunday all units of the Dublin Battalions paraded. This parade followed so closely on the Howth gun-running that most of the men believed it was a second gun-running coup, and several thousand men paraded. The occasion, however, was the carrying out of big manoeuvres in the Dublin mountains.

The declaration of war on 4th August, 1914, created a new spirit throughout the Volunteer Movement. The enthusiasm engendered at the time, however, was subsequently minimised by what is known

as the Redmondite split. This split was brought about by a speech made by the late John Redmond at a meeting at Woodenbridge, County Wicklow, on 19th September, 1914, when he promised the support of the Volunteers for home defence in the event of some measure of home rule being granted.

A special parade of all units was called, at which the new situation was presented to them. In my own unit the majority of the members agreed with Redmond and his promise. The result was a split, the large Redmondite party leaving and my Company being left with a small number of men. The men who remained, however, were clear in their minds as to the real purpose for which they were in the Irish Volunteers, namely, to fight for Ireland and Ireland alone, and to rid her of her ancient enemy.

We started to recruit again and subsequently built up our unit to a strength of 70 or 80 men.

It was about this time that the election of officers took place. Eddie Byrne was elected Captain; myself, 1st Lieutenant, and the late Lieutenant Michael Malone, 2nd Lieutenant.

In September, 1914, shortly after Redmond's speech at Woodenbridge which had caused the split in the Irish Volunteers, Mr. Asquith came to Dublin to address a meeting in the Mansion House, at which the leaders of the Irish Party also spoke. Prior to the meeting some of our people decided to take over the Mansion House and hold it with armed men in order to

prevent Asquith's meeting being held. This proposal was subsequently cancelled, for reasons with which I am not conversant. It would appear, however, that the British authorities had made elaborate arrangements to deal with any opposition, as, besides military, very large forces of armed R.I.C. were drafted into the city.

We had now got to the position where we realised that things were assuming a more serious aspect, and intensive training and lectures on street fighting were continually being given, also as much practice as possible in the use of miniature arms on the rifle range. During our practice on the rifle range, only miniature ammunition was used, as we were not allowed to use anything in the nature of ball ammunition. A few officers, however, were given the privilege of firing a few rounds out of revolvers, which they had been lucky enough to get possession of. One Sunday morning a few of us had fired a few rounds, The O'Rahilly being present. Having seen the results of our very bad marksmanship, The O'Rahilly exclaimed jokingly that the British were perfectly safe from us.

All during that time the procuring of arms was our main job, and we succeeded in adding slowly but surely to our armament, which was a very mixed collection and consisted of every conceivable kind of firearms, antiquated and otherwise. At no time did we possess machine guns, grenades or land mines.

It is well to record here that the men who went into action in Easter Week did so without having fired

one round of ball ammunition. This would appear to have been a very great risk to take with volunteer soldiers, but it was found necessary as ammunition was too scarce and it could not possibly be wasted on practice.

At this time headquarters were at No.2 Dawson Street, Dublin, where all junior officers had to attend regularly for lectures, I being amongst the group. Different senior officers used to lecture us, generally on street fighting, former Irish battles, previous Risings and so forth. The question of street fighting was always very prominent in those lectures, and units concentrated on that type of training.

The scheme of organisation to which we were working laid it down that all sections of a company were to be so organised as to be self-contained fighting units, that is to say that if they got isolated they would look after themselves in every way. A few engineers, signallers, scouts and first-aid men were all part of the organisation of a section.

All units in the Dublin City area were also instructed to carry out a complete survey of their respective areas and keep a complete record of all the supplies in the area, motor cars, tools, food, and anything that was likely to be required by military forces going into action. The tabulating of the owners of motor cars and lorries at this time was all-important, as cars were not very plentiful then. As far as possible, units were instructed to procure supplies of all the essential commodities referred to;

this was done by purchasing, removal or commandeering.

On Easter Sunday night, 1915, all the Dublin units of the Irish Volunteers were ordered to parade at six o'clock to carry out big manoeuvres in the North County Dublin district. The idea of this parade was, in the main, to keep our men off the streets when the National Volunteers or the Redmondite Volunteers as they were then known, had moved into the city from a big review they had held that day in the Phoenix Park. The manoeuvres lasted until about three o'clock in the morning. Éamon de Valera, as usual, was in command of the 3rd Battalion forces.

The next big manoeuvre in Dublin was in the vicinity of the mountains in South County Dublin. The 2nd Battalion was holding the village of Stepside at the foot of the mountains. The other two Battalions, the 3rd and 4th Battalions, attacked the position from the direction of the mountains. I remember seeing Pádraig Fearse that day with a contented and happy smile on his face as he saw the lines of armed men descending the mountains.

The coming of the remains of O'Donovan Rossa to Dublin at the end of July, 1915, was an opportunity for the Volunteers to show themselves both in strength and efficiency, in the carrying out of all the arrangements. After arriving in Dublin, the remains were first brought to Corrigans, the Undertakers, in Camden Street, to be prepared for the lying-in-state in the City Hall. During the lying-in-state which lasted three or four days, tens of

thousands of people paid tribute to the late leader, and it was the duty of the Volunteers to regulate the queues and supply a continuous Guard of Honour over the remains. I was in charge of almost the last Guard of Honour in the City Hall on Saturday night prior to the funeral which took place on 1st August, and my unit was detailed as rearguard of the funeral cortege.

As the weeks advanced, feeling was growing more tense, and for the first time grants of money were made to each unit to speed up the purchase of arms and other equipment. We were also instructed to collect old tin cans, which were intended to be used for the manufacture of bombs. These bombs were eventually distributed during Easter Week. They proved in the main useless and I would say dangerous to our own men, inasmuch as they had a fuse protruding from them which had to be lighted with a match, held for a few seconds and then thrown. The use of this type of bomb would have required the services of highly trained men to have been effective, as the tendency was to throw the bomb before the fuse was properly ignited. On the other hand, delay would have meant serious danger to the man igniting the bomb.

The next important event that I can remember was the St. Patrick's Day Parade in 1916. The 3rd Battalion first attended Mass in SS. Michael and John's Church, Exchange Street. They were then sent to patrol the surrounding districts while the remainder of the Battalions attended a second Mass.

When my own unit was passing the gates of Dublin Castle, the British Army guard was turned out. This caused us some concern for the moment as we certainly had received no definite orders to deal with a situation of this kind. However, nothing happened and we passed on our way. Eventually all the Dublin Battalions paraded in College Green and were inspected by members of G.H.Q. staff. I think Eoin MacNeill reviewed the parade.

Lieutenant Malone of my own unit had been dispatched with a party of cyclists to act as guard at St. Enda's, Rathfarnham, the home of the late brothers Pearse, where they also conducted a Gaelic College. Nothing unusual happened on that day, but for the next few weeks we were instructed to carry out a series of recruiting marches throughout the city. I do not think that the marches were really intended to obtain recruits so much as to create an atmosphere favourable to the Volunteers.

For a week or two prior to 1916 there were continuous lectures being given to junior officers at headquarters in No.2 Dawson Street. I attended there on Good Friday night and received orders to carry out certain work on the following Saturday, namely, the removal of arms from a dump in Exchange Street to be distributed throughout the area we were to occupy during the contemplated Rising.

My last recollection of the few hours spent in No.2 Dawson Street was of a few junior officers, of whom I was one, having a sort of discussion and friendly chat

with the late Tomás MacDonagh, who produced a large map of Dublin on which he had outlined the original plan of Emmet for the defence of Dublin. I have no recollection of MacDonagh referring at any time to the positions which we were to occupy.

On Saturday night I spent most of my time in Sinn Féin Headquarters, No.6 Harcourt Street, putting the finishing touches to company equipment and attending to other details. The last thing I remember leaving Volunteer Headquarters/^{2 Dawson Street} was an inscribed tablet which was on the floor in the hallway. This was a stone tablet which was to have been inserted in the pathway at Bachelor's Walk in memory of the victims shot by the British soldiers on their return from Howth on the day of the gun-running. What became of the tablet I do not know, but it was never inserted in the pathway.

My recollections of the fighting in "C" Company area, of which I was O.C. during Easter Week, which included posts at 25 Northumberland Road and Clanwilliam House have already been recorded. I was appointed O.C. of the Company by the Commandant on Easter Monday when we went into action, as the Captain had told Lieutenant Malone and myself on the previous Sunday that he would comply with MacNeill's countermanding order and not parade.

It is my opinion that the 3rd Battalion went into action on Easter Monday with a maximum strength of 110 to 120 men, as against the 400 who would have paraded on Easter Sunday. All the Companies were heavily depleted on Easter Monday, due to MacNeill's countermanding order.

I have already referred to the fact that the vast majority of men went into action during Easter Week without having fired one round of ball ammunition. The arms they possessed were mostly of an obsolete pattern, such as .22 revolvers, single-barrelled shotguns, a few double-barrelled shotguns, single-loading British Martini rifles and German Mauser rifles (the type landed at Howth), a number of long and short British Lee Enfields, all calibres and makes of British, American and some German revolvers and automatic pistols. The late Lieutenant Malone was armed with a German Mauser pistol, Peter the Painter type. This was an automatic pistol, which fitted on a wooden stock and converted it into what might be termed a miniature magazine rifle. We did not possess a machine gun of any description, and the bombs we had, as already described, were useless. I do not think we used any of the bombs in the 3rd Battalion area. I did try one myself as an experiment, but it failed to explode. Ammunition for all weapons was scarce, and had to be used with the greatest economy.

A large number of the garrison were very young, ranging from seventeen years of age upwards, and had never been under fire before. Yet, in spite of all the difficulties, they acquitted themselves as senior veterans, and helped to record one of the noblest chapters in a long and glorious history.

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SIGNED

J. J. Donnelly
DATE 11th October 1950.

WITNESS

Seán Brennan Comdt.