

ORIGINAL

BUREAU OF MILITARY HISTORY 1913-21

BURO STAIRÉ MILEATA 1913-21

No. W.S. 489

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BUREAU OF MILITARY HISTORY, 1913-21

STATEMENT BY WITNESS

DOCUMENT NO. W.S. 489

Witness

Commandant Michael Gray,
118 Gracepark Road,
Drumcondra, Dublin.

Identity

Member of Irish Volunteers
and of I.R.B., Maryborough (Portlaoighise) 1914-16;
Officer in National Army at present.

Subject

National Organisations, Maryborough:
(Portlaoighise) 1914-1916.

Conditions, if any, stipulated by Witness

Nil

File No. S.1628

Form B S M 2

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STATEMENT BY COMMANDANT MICHAEL GRAY

118, Gracepark Road, Drumcondra, Dublin.

About the end of 1914 I became a member of a small group of men who had for their purpose the establishment of the Irish Volunteers in Maryborough district. We were about ten strong, but this number was slightly increased within a year. We called ourselves the Portlaoighise Company. A man named Ramsbottom was in charge of us.

A delegate was appointed to represent our Company at the Volunteer Convention held in the Abbey Theatre, Dublin, on Sunday, 20th October, 1914.

In the spring of 1915 regular rifle practice was carried out each Sunday outside the town.

About this time a Circle of the I.R.B. was formed and I became a member. Ramsbottom was the Centre. The Circle, the proper designation of which I cannot recall, covered the entire County. I attended I.R.B. meetings regularly, but I cannot recall if decisions regarding future policy were discussed at those meetings. For all practical purposes the I.R.B. controlled the Volunteers in that area at the time, because practically all members of the local Volunteer Company were members of the I.R.B. organisation.

To get back to Volunteer activities, weekly parades and drills were held, and we received instruction and practice in the rifle. Our armament was very limited, I believe we had only two or three rifles, but later on we procured sufficient shotguns to arm the Company.

I had a .25 automatic.

There was a Volunteer review near Pat Fleming's place at Swan, Wolfhill, in the summer of 1915. The parade was reviewed by Liam Mellows and Seán McDermott.

From the time I joined the I.R.B. I was given to understand that the Volunteers would take definite action to strike for freedom before the Great War ended. With this object in view, the local Company was always kept in trim.

Some time in 1915 an Aeridheacht was organised in Maryborough for the purpose of raising funds to equip the local Company. Tom McCarthy and Dan Hannigan attended. A small amount of money was raised. This money was used mainly to buy shotguns.

The district was next visited by Liam Mellows, general organiser of the Volunteers, who gave a lecture on demolition work.

In August, 1915, some members of the Company came to Dublin for O'Donovan Rossa's funeral. They brought with them gelignite which G.H.Q. were very much in need of at the time.

In January, 1916, we were visited by Piaras Beaslaoi and Éamon O'Kelly. On this occasion they addressed the Volunteers and impressed upon them the urgency of organising and training, in view of the imminence of the Rising. I believe that was the first definite information I got that the Rising could not be far off.

Shortly afterwards Eamon Fleming came to the area. He had been sent down by the Volunteer Executive so as to be ready when the word would come to rise.

On 16th April, 1916, Fleming again came and told us

that the Rising was about to take place, and told us that he would come again and notify us of the date and hour. I believe it was on that occasion that he informed us that our Company was to cut the railway at Maryborough, and to cut telephone communications at Athy.

On the following Thursday Fleming again came to the area and gave us the date and hour of the Rising. It was timed for 7 p.m. on Sunday, 23rd April.

Our job was to cut the railway line, in order to prevent troops coming from Rosslare or Waterford to Dublin. After that was done we were to link up with the other forces at Scollop Gap, near Borris in County Carlow.

Ned Fleming was sent down by Pearse in the same way as Liam Mellows was sent to Galway and Mulcahy was sent to County Dublin. I understood that we were to operate under de Loughrey in Kilkenny, and that they were to join us there.

On the Thursday night the equipment for the demolition of the railway was collected, cross-cuts, hatchets, and all that sort of stuff. It was then we bought shotguns in the local hardware shop, the foreman of which was in the Volunteers. We bought as many shotguns as we could use, as well as shotgun ammunition. I remember that pikes were being seriously talked about. I believe that the only thing that prevented some of the Volunteers being armed with pikes was that we had no blacksmith in our confidence.

On Thursday night the stuff was shifted out to Lalor's Mills, the home of Lar and Tom Brady, two members of the organisation. They had a mill and a farm not far from the railway line and all the stuff was brought out

there. I believe that stuff was shifted to a place called Colt Wood which was on the line, on Easter Saturday evening.

On that Saturday night we met in St. Patrick's Hall, in the town, to have a final check-up, and I believe we formally elected Eamon Fleming as the leader. Final arrangements for the following morning, Easter Sunday, were decided on. Briefly these were that a party of six Volunteers under the leadership of Paddy Ramsbottom were to cut the line at Colt Wood at 7 p.m. on Sunday. Another small party, consisting of myself, a man named Walsh, Commandant Fleming and a stranger from Dublin, were to meet south of Athy in order to destroy telephone communications at the same time on Sunday evening.

As arranged, we met at the appointed time and place outside Athy. There was some slight disappointment about the tools and the number of personnel who were to take part in the operation. In any case we cut the wires to the best of our ability until Fleming was satisfied. I have an idea that time was considered important. Fleming ultimately called the thing off, I think, and we proceeded to join the other party outside Maryborough.

We slept in a school-house that night, and it was some time early on Monday morning before we joined up with Paddy Ramsbottom's party. His party had by this time cut the railway as instructed. The Coltwood party had started the work of demolition punctually at 7 p.m. on Easter Sunday. People who came along the railway line during the course of this operation were held as prisoners, escorted to their homes and warned that they were not to go out again that night or to give any information. Heavy rain had set in while the operations

were in progress. They had been told to guard the cut on the line for some time. The party remained on guard at the spot and took shelter in the wood beside the railway. A man came along carrying a lamp. Presumably he was a railway employee making an inspection of the line in consequence of the failure of the block signal system between Portlaoighise and Abbeyleix stations. One of the Volunteers on the job was actually a linesman, and the whole thing was done under his direction. The idea of breaking the signal system was to prevent the entry of any train on the section of the line that was put out of action. Telegraph wires were also cut there. The railway employee was called on to halt. According to our men he did not halt and they fired over his head. According to them he extinguished his lamp and escaped in the darkness.

The demolition party stayed guarding the cut for some hours. I know they were ordered to stay there for a certain length of time but I do not know for how long. They were drenched to the skin that night and they retired to Bradys' place, Lalors Mills, which was not far away. We arrived there the next morning. They were expecting word to join up with Scollop Gap, but nothing happened and we remained together under arms. A sister of the Bradys was sent to Maryborough to find out news about the Rising elsewhere, but there was no news. She brought home a copy of Monday's "Independent". I have a very vivid recollection of the railway man who was with us, and who was an anti-capitalist, burning the "Independent" and cursing Martin Murphy who was responsible, he thought, for hiding the fact that the Rebellion had taken place on the Sunday. He seemed convinced that the Volunteers in Dublin had actually gone out.

I had not read the "Sunday Independent" before mobilising on Easter Sunday, and was unaware of MacNeill's orders cancelling the mobilisations for that day. My distinct recollection is that at an I.R.B. meeting on Easter Saturday night, it was suggested that there might be a cancellation of the mobilisation order in the following morning's press, but if there was that we were not to take any notice of it.

I believe it was from Monday's "Independent" that we first learned of the capture of Casement and his arms ship off the Kerry coast. On Monday evening, however, we learned about the Rising in Dublin. No word had come from Kilkenny as to what further action we were to take. We were located in an unoccupied barn near Bradys' house and it was decided that the Bradys would appear openly in order to avert suspicion from them. The rest of us had left our places of employment and our homes and there was no use worrying about us. Two of us had been employed in the Post Office, another was a local newspaper reporter. We remained together and got the Bradys to appear openly which helped to keep us informed of what was happening outside. The Bradys were well known to be associates of ours, and on Tuesday morning the police came out to their place - which was three or four miles out the country - and interviewed them. One came out on Tuesday, I think, and another came out the following day, but I think it was really to see were the Bradys there or had they gone away with us.

Pat Fleming was not one of our party up to this time, but he was Eamon Fleming's brother, and Eamon gave him some information about where to pick us up. Pat Fleming came along and joined us and brought three others with him. They were already known to us and

belonged to the organisation. I do not know why they were not called out with us on the Sunday night; I believe one of them was left on account of his wife who was living alone. Pat Fleming was not a member of the organisation, I believe this was his first connection with the movement and he was brought into it by his brother Eamon.

There had been no communication, so it was decided to try and get in touch with Kilkenny and Carlow. Eamon Fleming and Walsh - who had gone with me to Athy originally - started off on bicycles to Borris, County Carlow, but they were not able to contact anybody who could give them information.

Some of us were more or less confined to Bradys' place because it was known we were missing from Maryboro' and if we were spotted by the police or their agents we would have been arrested.

Jim Ramsbottom was sent to Kilkenny to interview a Mr. Kiely, who was the contact there at the time. Unfortunately Kiely had been arrested that morning and had died suddenly in the local barracks the same day, and Ramsbottom had to come back without any information.

We remained together for the week believing that Dublin had come out, although over twelve hours late, and believing that although the Rising had been delayed it would carry on. We considered that we should remain in a state of mobilisation until we got definite orders where we were to go. However, on the following Monday morning it was decided that Fleming would go to Dublin and find out as far as he could what was happening there. When Fleming arrived in Dublin he saw a Mr. McEvoy, an old I.R.B. man from the Fenian organisation, but all Mr. McEvoy could tell him was that all the leaders had

been arrested and that the Rising was over.

We did not accept the view that the Rising was finished even at that stage and we decided to hold together for a couple of weeks longer. We thought there was a possibility that the Rising was not over and we wanted to hold on until we were sure. We held on for about two weeks longer although it was fairly hopeless. We had tried Carlow, Kilkenny and Dublin and we could not make contact with anybody, and all we could do was to hold on in the hope that something would turn up.

Fleming again went to Dublin at the end of this time, but the plain truth was that the Rebellion was over and done with. One of the local clergy made contact with the Bradys to try and get us to surrender to the police, but we refused. We decided that we would dump our arms and go on the run in preference, which we did. We thought that the clergyman had been approached by the police, we did not know how he could have got his information otherwise. We felt that we could hold on to our arms for one thing, which we could not expect to do if we surrendered, and another thing was that the civil charge, which we thought was held over our heads, of destroying railway property would be proceeded with and we would be regarded as ordinary criminals. We went on the run and I remained on the run for about ten months. The authorities took no action when I went home again. At this time all the Frongoch prisoners had been released.

When we first started off we had no experience of being on the run, and three of us, myself, the stranger from Dublin and another man, took refuge in a wood near the Heath in Maryboro'. The wood is on a bit of a hill. We lived in the wood and got food from people around for some days. Whether our fires were seen or we were seen

by somebody, it apparently became known to the authorities that we were there because one morning when we woke up we heard a crashing sound on all sides. One of us climbed a tree and saw a large number of soldiers on horseback coming through the scrub from every direction. We climbed away from our little camp and got up on top of a large rock which was surrounded by brushwood. The soldiers found our camp, but although they searched the wood, and we could hear them talking, they did not get any of us.

The soldiers camped in a field beside us, but we got away during darkness without any trouble, even though they had sentries out. This further broke us up. We knew we could not live that life any longer, so Walsh decided to go off to some friends of his in Cork. I decided to go to Dublin because somebody had suggested to me that as the Rebellion had been quashed there and everybody in the city had surrendered it was the safest place to go to. Maguire being a Dublin man came along with me.

I do not know whether it was before or after we broke up, but I had an introduction to a priest in Michael's and John's Church. He is dead since, and I do not remember his name. This priest was sympathetic to the movement, I think, and he put me in touch with some old members of the Fenian organisation or some sympathisers who helped us out.

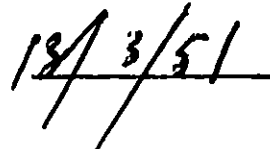
I should have mentioned that a pilot engine was derailed on Easter Sunday night at the point where the line had been cut. I believe a railway man from Abbeyleix and another from Maryboro' were sent out to meet each other on the railway. The Maryboro' man reported back to the station-master that the line had been cut, and the police were sent for. A pilot engine

and a small carriage attached, containing five railway men and four police, were sent along the line. When they came to the cut they were derailed, but none of the individuals concerned were injured.

The following is a list of my associates during 1916:-
Ned Fleming, P.J. Ramsbottom, P. Muldowney, M. Walsh, Tom Brady, Colm Houlahan, Lar Brady, Mick Sheridan and J. Muldowney. All except Fleming were from Maryborough vicinity.

Later we were joined by James Ramsbottom of Fossey, Timahoe, Terence Byrne of Knocklaide, Timahoe, and Pat Fleming, brother of Ned Fleming, of The Swan, Wolfhill.

Signed; 

Date: 

Witness: William Ivory Lomder

