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BUREAU OF MILITARY HISTORY, 1913-21.

STATEMENT BY WITNESS

DOCUMENT NO. W.S. 494.....

Witness

Peter Kieran,
14 Brook Street,
Dundalk, Co. Louth.

Identity

Member of Sinn Fein, Dundalk, 1906-1921;
Member of Irish Volunteers, Dundalk,
1914-1921.

Subject

- (a) National Organisations, Dundalk, 1906-1921;
- (b) "Split" in the Volunteer Organisation;
- (c) Co. Louth, Easter Week 1916.

Conditions, if any, stipulated by Witness

Nil

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STATEMENT OF Mr. PETER KIERAN,

14 Brook Street, Dundalk, County Louth.

The start of Sinn Fein in Dundalk was in the year 1906. The officers of the Dundalk Club were Bill Darcy, President; James Coburn, Vice-President; Paddy Hughes, Secretary; Joe Magill (deceased), Assistant Secretary. The first meeting was held in the Board Room in the Town Hall. Forty members joined.

In 1907 there was a change of officers. Paddy Hughes became President. John O'Byrne and Joe Berrill were the Secretaries. The Club removed to premises at Bachelor's Walk.

The principal activities of Sinn Fein in Dundalk were and holding ceilis which were largely attended, producing dramas such as Robert Emmet, etc. // Paddy Martin, Mick Toner, Hugh Kearney and Willie Brennan were associated with Hughes in all those activities.

About 1908 an excursion by boat left Dundalk for Dublin in the 'Earl of Erne', and the Union Jack was flown on the boat. Paddy Hughes, who travelled on that boat, informed the excursionists that no Irishman should travel under the British flag in Irish waters and he cut the flag down and it fell into the sea. The Captain of the boat threatened to put Paddy in 'irons' but he did not carry out his threat.

In the year 1909 I was elected Secretary of the Branch and remained Secretary until the dissolution of Sinn Fein in 1914. This dissolution was caused by the formation of the National Volunteers.

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In October, 1911, a concert and lecture were held in the Town Hall, Dundalk, at which Countess Markievicz delivered the lecture on the leaders of 1798, showing lantern slides. The Town Hall was crammed for the lecture. Tom Cuffe of Dublin and Cathal O'Byrne of Belfast sang at this function.

In 1913 another lecture, followed by a concert, was delivered by Major John McBride in the Town Hall. The subject of the lecture was Major McBride's experiences in the Boer War. This lecture was so engrossing to the listeners and the lecturer that some of the officials who ran the concert had to put an end to it after about two hours to permit concert items to be proceeded with. Both these lectures produced such good results that recruiting for the Volunteers was made an easy job.

At the start of the National Volunteers in Dundalk in 1913 Eamonn Ceannt, I=think, came to Dundalk to replace Roger Casement who was unable to attend. The first meeting was held in the Town Hall and attracted an overflow of people. This meeting unanimously decided to form the National Volunteers. Paddy Hughes was the driving force behind the Volunteers and I would say the man in charge. He was assisted by a Mr. McGrory. The Captains were Murphy and McGuirke, and Moroney - probably a Drill Sergeant. A shoemaker from Dublin, Mick Hearty, was also a Drill Sergeant.

There were about 1,100 men in three large Companies enrolled. We had a special parade and review at Castlebellingham/and the numbers travelling there were so great that the special train engaged could not take all who wished to travel. Col. Moore (Meath) on horseback inspected the Volunteers.

The "split" which occurred in August 1914 in Dundalk was due to the action of the Volunteer Bugle Band being used to play the Dundalk detachment of the Royal Field Artillery on their way from the military ~~parades~~^{barracks} to the Station on their departure for France. This occurred about August, 1914.

After this incident Paddy Hughes summoned a meeting of the Volunteers to the Skating Rink in the Athletic Grounds at which a hot dispute took place. After a lot of argument and discussion the majority voted in favour of the Band's action. The result was that Paddy Hughes and his Sinn Fein followers withdrew from the National Volunteers. Some few months after this the National Volunteers ceased to exist.

Before the "split" took place the National Volunteers secured forty rifles of serviceable pattern. These rifles were under the control of the National Volunteers and remained in their possession for some time after the "split". I understand they were later used by the Home Guard to protect Dundalk against the Volunteers in Easter Week 1916.

In or about October, 1915, the Irish Volunteers were formed at a meeting in the Council Rooms, Town Hall, under the chairmanship of Paddy Hughes. The meeting unanimously decided to start the Irish Volunteers. Stormy scenes were witnessed in the precincts of the hall by the opposition crowd to break up this meeting. I arrived late for the meeting and found that it was impossible to get through to the Council Rooms ^{owing to the opposition} and had to return home. I was accompanied on this occasion by John Flynn. Some of the mob who were trying to break up the meeting followed us for some distance. They were armed with short batons, but they didn't interfere with us. /The

The Irish Volunteers held some meetings subsequent to this in a room in Church Street and later on moved to the Boyle-O'Reilly Hall. During our period in the Boyle-O'Reilly Hall lectures were delivered by Seán Mulroy and Sean MacEntee. Paddy Hughes was officer-in-charge and officers serving under him were Sean MacEntee, Seamus Toal, Felix McQuillan, Frank Nocy, Thomas Hearty, Hugh Kearney, Joe Berrill, Peadar Murphy and myself.

In 1915 there were about forty men on the rolls of the Irish Volunteers and the numbers increased in 1916 to between 150 to 200 men. For training purposes we had a small bore rifle. Seamus Toal purchased a German repeating rifle for £4. 10. 0. and it was used for training purposes. Nearly every week a revolver was raffled and went into the Volunteer armoury. Counting rifles, shot guns and revolvers we had about 20 weapons.

Domhnall O'Hannigan came to Dundalk to take charge of the Dundalk Volunteers under Paddy Hughes about the 1st April, 1916. O'Hannigan was the man who had been trained in the use of arms and the tactics of warfare at Volunteer headquarters in Dublin and came to Dundalk to take military charge during the Rising. From his arrival in Dundalk he had us out on training and manoeuvres about five nights a week and this continued up to the eve of the Rising. At this time slugs were being made for use in shot guns in the Boyle-O'Reilly Hall under the instructions of Mr. O'Hannigan.

On Easter Sunday the Company of which I was a member mobilised at Ballybarrack Hall outside Dundalk. We waited there for the men who mobilised at the Boyle-O'Reilly Hall and when they joined us ^{at} Ballybarrack ^{about 100 strong} we all proceeded

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to Ardee. A two-horse brake and a side-car belonging to Thomas Hearty and a horse-trap belonging to Paddy Hughes accompanied us on our march. We arrived in Ardee about 1 p.m. Two R.I.C. Sergeants, Wymes and Connolly, also accompanied us cycling. On our arrival in Ardee we were met by Phil McMahon and a man named Matthews and they handed us at least twenty rifles. After some refreshments in Ardee we proceeded towards Slane via Collon. Shortly after we left Ardee a messenger, Sean MacEntee, came from Dundalk and gave us MacNeill's countermanding orders. We were halted when the messenger arrived and after some discussion amongst the officers Joe Berrill was sent by Paddy Hughes on a motor bike to get in touch with Dublin to find out if MacNeill's orders were considered official there. I don't know who Berrill was told to contact but it would appear that Paddy Hughes was not taking MacNeill's orders as being official.

After Berrill's departure we proceeded on our march and arrived at the Hill of Slane at 6 p.m. The Angelus was ringing. We waited on the Hill of Slane for an hour as men from County Meath were to join us there. They did not turn up as I heard later they had received MacNeill's orders. Our original orders were to proceed to the Hill of Tara. It started to rain heavily about 7 p.m. and Paddy Hughes made arrangements to take over a bakery during the rain. The owner of the bakery was a man named Johnston. The rain continued during the night and I and a number of others including James Toal, second-in-charge under Paddy Hughes, Felix McQuillan and Joe McGuill returned to Dundalk on Monday morning.

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During Monday some stragglers from the Volunteers in Slane arrived in Dundalk in threes and fours. In all about fifty men reported. About 6 p.m. the Volunteers in Dundalk heard that the Rising was on in Dublin. I heard that on Sunday evening Joe Berrill arrived in Navan on his motor bike. He was detained by the R.I.C. in Navan from Sunday evening to Monday.

On Tuesday I got in touch with Seamus Toal who was senior officer then of the Volunteers in Dundalk and we decided to hold a meeting at McGuills, the Bridge House, at 8 p.m. The business of this meeting was to discuss ways and means of getting to Dublin. The meeting decided that the most practical plan of getting to Dublin from Dundalk under the conditions existing was by motor boat. I was asked to interview James Norton who had the control of a motor boat and ask him to take us to Dublin. Norton was not a Volunteer at the time. We could, however, rely on him and he was a strong supporter of the Movement. The following men were asked to hold themselves in readiness and to meet at the Fairgreen on Thursday night at 8 p.m.: James Toal (deceased), John Finnegan (deceased), Thomas Callan, Joseph McGuill, ^(deceased) Felix McQuillan (deceased), Arthur O'Neill (deceased), Thomas Kieran, Francis Neacy, Patrick Duffy, Joseph Duffy, Patrick Quigley, Peter Kieran, John McGuill, Michael Donnelly, John Flynn.

On Thursday evening we got information that the military had a patrol at the end of Navvy Bank controlling the river at a point the motor boat would pass going into Dundalk Bay for Dublin.

We also heard that a gun boat was patrolling the coastline from Clogher Head to Greenore. This information convinced us that our plan of travelling to Dublin by motor boat was doomed to failure and the expedition was called off by James Toal. Toal told us to keep in touch with each other and to consider ourselves available if called on at any time. We met on Friday and Saturday evenings and on Saturday evening we heard that the Rising in Dublin was over. I cannot state who brought this news of the surrender in Dublin to Dundalk but everyone heard it and I believe it came through police channels.

There were considerable police activities in Dundalk during the week of the Rising. The police were inquiring about men absent from their work and also about men they missed seeing on the streets.

It was about the second week in May when the police started to make arrests in town. They arrested a lot of active men and, strange to say, they did not arrest a number of prominent Volunteers.

In April 1917, or thereabouts, an effort to reorganise the Volunteers was made in Dundalk, and part of the campaign was a series of route marches in rural districts around North Louth. On one occasion on a march to the village of Louth we were accompanied by the usual guard of R.I.C. men. On this occasion drill and manoeuvres took place in the presence of the police. Later on the same week the following were arrested: Seamus Toal, Brigadier, Joseph Berrill, William Atkinson, Eugene Hughes, Peadar Donnelly, Packie Flynn, Joe MacGuill. Those men were sentenced to various periods of imprisonment in Belfast jail, from one to two months. The occasion of the trials

of these men caused riotous clashes with the R.I.C. on the streets of Dundalk. After those incidents various route marches were organised in a manner that would not allow the R.I.C. opportunity to make individual identification of officers. The officers marched in the ranks into the Mess. One such march was to Feede mountain and we carried out the march without police accompaniment.

When the sentenced men (1916) were released from Frongoch in the summer of 1917, a reception was organised in Dundalk for the local men. The following released prisoners came to Dundalk: Frank Martin, Sean MacEntee, John Quinn, James Sally, Denis Leahy, Mick Reynolds.

A parade of Volunteers was formed at the railway station for the prisoners arrival in town. The Emmet Band was in attendance, and when the prisoners came out on the platform we formed a guard of honour and carried the prisoners out of the station to a waiting brake and marched through the principal streets and finished our march at the Imperial Hotel where a reception was held. Short orations were given at the hotel by Seam MacEntee, John Quinn and Michael Reynolds.

In January 1918 the South Armagh Election Campaign was in full swing and Dundalk was one of the principal centres for the election workers. All the leaders and prominent men of 1916 took part in the election. Amongst the leaders operating from Dundalk were Austin Stack, who was in charge in Dundalk, Darrel Figgis, Joe Carr, Drogheda, etc.

The Friday before the election Eamon de Valera got a public reception in Dundalk on his journey through the town.

All Dundalk Volunteers were mobilised to attend meetings in South Armagh. This policy was necessary to protect the Sinn Fein meetings from attacks from Hibernian and Irish Party elements in South Armagh districts. A meeting at Crossmaglen, which I attended, was addressed by Mr. de Valera, Arthur Griffith, the Countess, Sean Mulroy. It was customary in 1918, and even as early as 1917, for the Volunteers from Dundalk to attend and take on the role of police duty and protection of speakers at Sinn Fein meetings. One meeting in Carrickmacross addressed by de Valera and Sean MacEntee and Arthur Griffith provided the occasion for 97 side-cars and one two-horse brake to proceed to Carrickmacross from Dundalk as a support for our leaders. This was the first time I ever saw horsemen taking part in a public meeting, as a large body of horsemen from various districts in County Monaghan attended the meeting.

Those Sinn Fein meetings in widely dispersed local areas late in the year 1917 and in South Armagh in early 1918 provided the Volunteer organisation with the opportunity to organise and work for the various aspects of the Republican cause, and generated such enthusiasm that large numbers of Volunteers joined the Volunteers in Dundalk.

During the Election in South Armagh a large contingent of Clare Volunteers came into Dundalk for the election day duty and were under the command of the Brennan brothers - Michael, Paddy and Austin. The conduct and demeanour of those Clare Volunteers, whilst in Dundalk, was an example to all good Volunteers in town. They formed a great impression on Dundalk people

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generally of every political class.

In the General Election in December 1918, the Sinn Fein caididate for Louth was J. J. O'Kelly (Sceilg). The John Boyle O'Reilly Hall in Dundalk was the headquarters for election workers in North Louth.

During the election campaign a meeting was held in the Town Hall, Dundalk. The inside of the hall was packed with people, and thousands assembled outside who failed to gain admittance. Father Michael O'Flanagan was the principal speaker at this meeting. He also addressed the overflow section opposite the Town Hall from a balcony of the Town Hall. Other speakers at this meeting were - Peter Hughes, Joe McKinley, "Sceilg", John B. Hamill, Solicitor, who was Sceilg's election agent, ^{Felix Magee} ~~agent~~ James McGill, etc. During election day, the Volunteers took charge of police work at all polling booths.

At the termination of the polling the ballot boxes for the entire county were taken into Dundalk Courthouse guarded by Volunteers. For some reason the count of votes did not take place for a fortnight. The Dundalk Volunteers insisted on and did mount a continuous guard on the boxes night and day until the counting of votes was completed. Sceilg won the election by a comfortable majority.

During the general election campaign we lost one of the pioneers of the Volunteers organisation in Dundalk - James Toal died. He was O/C., Louth Brigade at the time of his death.

In the years 1919, 1920 and up to the Truce in the year 1921, there was intensive activity in both the military and political sides of the Republican Movement in Dundalk area.

A large number of Republicans were arrested from time to time and raiding of Republican homes was at some periods of daily occurrence. Peter Hughes and Joseph Berrill were arrested in May 1919 in connection with the German plot. They were in prison for nearly a year. At their release a great reception was held in their honour when they returned to Dundalk. About mid April, 1920, Thomas Mulholland was shot dead in Bridge Street during an attack on an R.I.C. patrol. For Mulholland's funeral his Remains were taken to St. Malachy's Church and the coffin remained there overnight under Volunteer guard. The next day he got a military funeral to the burying ground in Castletown Cemetery. Contingents of Volunteers came for this funeral from places as distant as Drogheda and Newry. The Emmett Band headed the funeral procession.

In May 1921/^{when}the Elections for the Six Counties Parliament were held, I and five others travelled to County Down and took part in the election campaign.

A few months before the Truce a large area in County Louth was isolated by the Volunteers cutting down trees and blockading the roads. This activity took place on a Saturday night and on Sunday. I attended at Ardee for a G.A.A. football match in which the Dundalk Geraldines were playing the Ardee Volunteers in the County Championship. During the game the football field was surrounded and a large number of us were commandeered by Crown Forces. We were taken to a road blockade at Lurgangreen near Dundalk, and forced to remove blockades and clear roads.

Signed: Pete Kieran

Date: 22nd March 1951

Witness: John Mc Coy
22/3/51

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