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BUREAU OF MILITARY HISTORY, 1913-21.

## STATEMENT BY WITNESS

DOCUMENT NO. W.S. 495.....

## Witness

Sean McConville,  
Ballynary, Ballinacor,  
Portadown, Co. Armagh.

## Identity

Company O/C. Sept. 1920 - 1921;  
Battalion O/C. March 1921 - May 1923.

## Subject

- (a) National activities, Co. Armagh, 1917-23;
- (b) Destruction of Income Tax Offices,  
Belfast, April 1920;
- (c) Death of Anthony McConville, 8/5/1922.

Conditions, if any, stipulated by Witness

Nil

File No. S.1662.....

Form B.S.M. 2.

Evidence of Seán McConville.

No. W.S. 495

Ballynary, Ballinacor, Portadown, Co. Armagh.

I am a native of Lurgan, County Armagh. I joined the Irish Volunteers in Belfast in 1917 when the reorganisation of the Volunteers took place. I was then about 20 years of age. W. P. Ó Riain was O/C. of my Company - "A" Company. There was only one Battalion in Belfast at this time. Sean O'Neill was Battalion O/C., and the Battalion contained four Companies. "Wish Fox was O/C. "B" Company. Each Company was divided into four Sections for drill and training purposes. The entire Company was mobilised, most week-ends, for field exercises on the mountains outside Belfast. One of the Section Leaders in "A" Company in 1917 was Sean McGauran, a native of Dundalk. This man had a flair for explosives and went to the Engineers later on. A Seamus McPhillips from the West of Ireland was a Lieutenant in "A" Company from 1917 to 1920.

The main activities of the Volunteers in 1917-1918 and 1919 were training, drilling, lectures on military subjects. Some time in 1918 W. P. Ó Riain left Belfast and Joe McKelvey replaced him as Company O/C. McKelvey was later appointed Battalion O/C, and he was replaced as Captain of "A" Company by Hugh Donnelly.

In April 1920 the destruction of the Income Tax Offices in Belfast took place. These operations were the first serious attempt made to carry out military operations in Belfast in an organised and planned manner. All the Income Tax offices in the city were to be done on Saturday night, 3rd April, 1920. I took part in the destruction of an office near the Docks - Custom House Quay. Two men, including five men as a covering off party, carried out this operation. All documents and books were destroyed. I

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cannot now remember how many of those offices were destroyed on the 3rd April. I know, however, that in a short time later I took part in the destruction of an office in Donegall Square West - Scottish Provident Buildings. What made this operation rather difficult was the fact that this particular office was guarded by police as a precaution since the earlier burnings. The police were placed on the street in close proximity to the building. Joe McKelvey, Seamus Woods, myself and two others, whom I cannot now remember, carried out this operation. The office was situated in a large building containing numerous other offices and was equipped with a lift. We purchased evening papers and stood about in the large entrance to the main building in a large hallway. We kept an eye on the police guard. In this particular office one of our Volunteers was one of the staff working in the office. He gave us all the information about the lay-out of the office, the location of the staff and other matters useful to know for the successful carrying out of the job. On this particular evening some of the staff were on overtime and at about 7 p.m. three of us rushed the door of the office and overpowered the "Volunteer". We tied him up. There were three girls also working at the time of the raid. These girls presented a problem, as they got very excited, screaming and shouting. We had to tie them up also, as they were liable to give the alarm and so make the operation ineffective. A caretaker was also on duty at the time, but did not show up to us.

The idea in those operations was to destroy the papers and books only. The destruction of the entire  
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office by fire would cause considerable danger to all neighbouring buildings and we did not then desire any such complications. All books and papers for destruction were put into the fire grates, sprinkled with paraffin oil and set alight. During the act of lighting one of the "fires", Seamus Woods got his hair and eyebrows singed by a slight explosion which took place due to paraffin vapour.

In January, 1920, a friendly British soldier then stationed in Kilroot Fort near Carrickfergus got in touch with Joe McKelvey and informed McKelvey that arms and ammunition could be procured at the Fort by raiding for them. The soldier gave particulars as to the best time to carry out the raid and other particulars concerning the Fort and its garrison necessary to ensure the least danger of detection during the carrying out of the operation. McKelvey made plans for carrying out the operation which included that the friendly soldier should apply for a week's leave and be available to accompany the raiders. This part of the plan was intended to ensure that the soldier would not attempt to let us down or to place a trap for us during the raid. Joe McKelvey, "Wish" Fox, Hugh Donnelly and myself were amongst the two motor loads - twelve in all - who proceeded to the scene of the intended raid, the soldier being with us. When we arrived at the Fort we were in a position in full view of a sentry whom we could plainly see when he passed a light as he marched on his beat in the darkness. As we were in complete darkness, the sentry could not see us. We proceeded to cut telegraphic and telephone wires leading from the Fort. As we were delayed in getting out to the Fort, by the time the

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wires were cut soldiers who were out on a night pass began arriving in our vicinity accompanied by their girl friends. Some of our men held up a number of those soldiers and questioned them about the strength in garrison in the Fort, etc. A number of those soldiers' stories tallied and went to show that the strength of the garrison was very much greater than the friendly soldier's version to McKelvey. McKelvey and "Wish" Fox had a consultation and later they informed us that it would be impossible to carry out the raid successfully, and we returned back to Belfast. In order to prevent any alarm being given which would make our return journey to Belfast dangerous we, in our own car, took two of the captured soldiers and their girl friends with us to Belfast and released them there.

In July 1920, the pogrom started in Belfast amongst shipyard workers on Queen's Island. The pogrom rapidly spread all over the city. Our Company was detailed for duty guarding Clonard Monastery. This Monastery is situated in a border district where the Shankill Road and the Falls Road are close to each other connected by Cupar Street, which was subject to intermittent gun firing and sniping. We had to be constantly on the alert to prevent raids into Catholic districts or attacks on the Monastery.

About August, 1920, Hugh Donnelly, who was Company Captain, got information about arms being stored in a house in the city suburbs - Castlereigh district. Donnelly took charge of the raid and amongst those participating were Joe Smyth, Hugh Donnelly and my brother and myself. Joe Smyth went to the door of the house and rapped on it. We concealed ourselves behind the porch. A son of the owner of the house, when opening the door, became suspicious, and

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he and his father opened fire on us, rendering the attempt to raid the house abortive. Shortly after this the house in which my brother and I lived with my aunt was attacked by an Orange mob and destroyed to such an extent that we were forced to evacuate the place. This house was located in an Orange district and we had to clear out. To illustrate how difficult it was made for a Catholic family to evacuate from an Orange district, I may mention that we had to make very secret arrangements to have our furniture and belongings ready for removal at 6 a.m. At this early hour the Orange rowdies would not be about in large numbers. As it was a usual practice for the Orangemen to allow a Catholic evacuating one of their districts to pack undisturbed all their furniture and belongings on a conveyance and then to attack and burn all up, this plan made the act of burning easier and tended to create a famine in transport facilities. In our case we called on two Volunteer friends to help us in protecting the removal of our belongings. On each street corner on our way out a number of Orangemen were assembled and we had to "run the gauntlet" at all those places. As our convoy comprised four armed men, the danger of our attackers getting shot restrained those watchers from attacking us.

We left Belfast and came to Lurgan, and my brother and I joined the Lurgan Volunteers. At this time Michael Murney was Battalion O/C of Lurgan Battalion, Barney McAnn was Battalion Adjutant and Hugh McShane was Battalion Quartermaster. Shortly after our arrival in Lurgan I took part in the general raid for arms. When this raid took place I had been appointed O/C. of Derrytrasna Company, and in the raids for arms I was in charge of this Company.

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The first night's raiding was carried out as a surprise affair and the raiding of each house visited presented no opposition or difficulties. On this night we carried out six successful raids and at the seventh house we were met with determined opposition. The owner was an old man and he made a determined show of resistance and we did not press the matter. It was impossible for us to raid all the places in our Company area in one night, so we had to finish the places not raided on the first night later. In the first night's raiding a number of our men were unarmed, except for sticks. Arms were very scarce with us. After the first night's raids we had as much arms as we required for subsequent raids, principally shot guns and revolvers. On the second night's raiding, we had not the advantage of surprise which existed on the first night. On the second night we carried out raids on two houses, and got away without much fuss. On the third night we tackled what was considered to be a tough job in raiding the house of two Orange brothers whom we knew would put up a fight. When we approached the vicinity of the house the brothers, who were apparently watching out for us in hiding, opened fire as we approached. We returned their fire and we had later to relinquish our attempt to raid the place. There were a number of friendly houses in the Company area, and we arranged that those people would hand over their guns. Later those people reported to the police that their houses had been raided and guns taken away.

On the 8th December, 1920 - it was a Church Holiday - we mobilised and burned Birches evacuated R.I.C. barracks and adjoining Courthouse. This operation was carried out in an notorious Orange district. To carry out any I.R.A.  
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activity in that area was fraught with the greatest danger, as there was a large number of armed B/Specials in the vicinity. This operation was carried out in day time. We had to hold up and make prisoner of all hostile people we encountered near the barracks. We had also to commandeer the incendiary material - paraffin oil - from local shopkeepers. We were able to carry out a practical destruction of both barracks and courthouse and to leave the district without opposition or attack from any local opponents. Over a year after this operation a local Volunteer named Robinson, who was seen in the vicinity of the barracks when it was burned but who took no part in the operation, was shot dead by B/Specials. The only apparent reason for this shooting of Robinson was as a reprisal for the burnings.

In our battalion area the population was very much mixed politically with a most hostile Orange majority of approximately 67% of the population. Of the 33% of Nationalists the A.O.H. had a majority of adherents and the Republicans could only claim about 15% of supporters amongst the entire population. Later on, when the Volunteers became active in a military way, the Volunteers gained support from the Hibernians. Even had we the enthusiastic support of the entire Hibernian organisation in our battalion area we would still be outnumbered two to one by our Unionist rivals. Amongst the Orange population 80% of the young men were members of the "B" or "C" Special constabulary. In addition to the "B" and "C" class Specials, in the rural districts, the towns of Lurgan and Portadown were garrisoned by large numbers of A/Specials in addition to the usual R.I.C. strength. Our whole battalion

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area was covered by heavy B/Special patrols each night. Those men were all well armed and being locals had personal knowledge of each individual Volunteer being, in most cases, next door neighbours to each other. From the above it will be seen that the carrying out of any extensive military operations was not practicable. Even to attempt minor operations, such as cutting Post Office wire, raiding for mails, etc. entailed grave risks. That we carried out a programme of activities in the face of such overwhelming opposition is a matter of pride as we feel that we have amply justified our existence by a continuous programme of small activities which must have caused the British Authorities much worry and annoyance. The raiding and arrests that were a constant feature of the times from November 1920 onwards did not cause a break down in our effort to carry on. All active Volunteers in the Battalion area were on the 'run', and the feat of evading arrest with a person's next door neighbour ~~and~~ working enthusiastically for his capture was in itself some achievement. That operations did continue under such conditions up to the Truce in 1921 is a tribute to those who survived.

From November 1920 onwards the activities in my battalion area were the cutting of communications, wires, roads, railways. Those activities were of a diversionary nature and designed to keep the British Authorities in a constant state of annoyance, as to prevent forces stationed locally to be transferred to areas where more ambitious military operations were possible. We succeeded tying up a large number of Crown Forces who were trying, by all the usual methods practised at that time, to deter

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us from our plans. A large number of our officers and men were being captured from time to time. In or about March 1921 the entire Battalion staff was captured and also other officers and men. After those arrests I was appointed Battalion O/C to replace Michael Murney then a prisoner.

From March 1921 onwards the Belfast trade boycott was being intensively enforced by the Volunteers who took all possible steps to prevent the sale of all Belfast goods in the battalion area. There were several Belfast bread carts burned in the Battalion area. A peculiar aspect of the Belfast boycott work, as far as the Bakery trade was concerned, was that Barney Hughes, Ltd., Bakers, who were a Catholic firm and doing a large trade over a wide area, were also included in the list of boycotted firms. This was done, I believe, to ensure that Hughes would not be left in the position of selling bread for the other boycotted Orange firms and so evading the Boycott regulations. As a result of our activities in the Boycott sphere, especially when a few burnings had taken place, was that the Crown Forces had to send armed escorts to accompany all bread carts operating in our area.

Another of our activities was raiding of mails and holding up of postmen. In all those operations the mails were taken and censored. The British then had to send out armed escorts with all postmen and place guards on the Post Offices. On one occasion the Belfast-Dublin train was held up and searched. We did not find anything on the train which required action from us, so when the search was finished the train was allowed to proceed.

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All those little activities had an unsettling affect on the British Authorities and led to a serious dispersal of their armed forces to ensure the functioning of the routine Government services and to protect public and private property.

The activities outlined above together with work on organisation, the providing of safe dumps for our meagre supply of arms, the important job of retaining our freedom from capture in the face of incessant raiding and the constant effort to keep our small day-to-day activities going continued up to the Truce - 11th July, 1921.

When the Truce was declared all military activities ceased. The Truce showed that the rival parties in our Battalion area could still carry on together notwithstanding the bitterness which was generated in the period before the Truce. There existed a feeling of standoffishness but no evidence of bad blood in the relations between us and the "B" and "C" Special-Constabulary. Had a settlement of the Irish Question been arranged, at this time, which would include the Six Northern Counties, there is little doubt that the Orangemen and the Republicans - the Specials and the I.R.A. - could have come together and agreed to forget the unpleasant incidents which had taken place and worked amicably together in a Thirty-two County Government.

The first activity which the Volunteers from our Battalion were asked to undertake after the Truce was our attendance at a Divisional training camp. This camp was set up in September 1921 at Killeavey, County Armagh. All our Battalion Staff Officers were called to the Camp

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and underwent a two-weeks' training course which embraced instructions in the use of rifle, machine-gun, hand-grenade, engineering, map reading, scouting, signalling, close order and open order drill formation, tactics, etc. The course was intensive and provided us with much needed knowledge of basic elementary principles of the science of warfare, especially as applied to guerilla fighting. After the Battalion Officers course finished at the camp, all Company Officers were called up for a week's training. Later on, Battalion and Company Engineers, signallers, medical section, got a week's special training in the Camp.

When all the training programme was completed in the divisional camp, a series of battalion camps were started at which all the Volunteers in each Company area, who were available to attend, got a course of instruction on the same lines as was carried out in the Divisional Camp. These series of classes held in Battalion and Company areas kept our men engaged up to the New Year of 1922.

At the conclusion of all these courses of instruction, the Divisional O/C. held a general inspection at a parade of all officers and men of our Battalion.

During all this period subsequent to the Truce there was no effort made by Orangemen or the Special Constabulary to interfere with our training programme. We gave no provocation and we received no annoyance from them.

Some time about February or early March 1922, the R.I.C. and Special Constabulary started to carry out raids for arms, etc. At this time no effort was made to arrest any of our men. Apparently, the British Authorities were

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anxious to get our arms.

James Robinson, whom I have mentioned already, in connection with the destruction of Birches Barracks and Courthouse, was shot about February or March 1922. This man, being a Volunteer, we decided to carry out a reprisal by attacking the Banfoot B/patrol who, it was believed, shot Robinson. About six Volunteers took part in this attack. The attack took place at Derrytrasna cross roads. We opened the attack by using G.H.Q. type hand-grenades. Those grenades were defective which rendered the attack only partly successful. The patrol members got behind a wall along the road and we were unable to dislodge them. Only one of the grenades exploded. Several of the patrol were wounded by bomb splinters - none seriously.

The next item of special importance which took place was the importation of arms to our Battalion area. This importation of arms was general all over the Six-Counties area. Our share in this general distribution of arms was sixty service rifles, one thompson machine gun, sixty hand-grenades, some revolvers and a large quantity of ammunition. Most of this material was taken to a small hall near Ballymacnab and was stored there for removal by us. The remainder of our allotment was handed over to us at a place near Armagh City. We removed all this material in a motor lorry to dumps which we had previously prepared for its reception. At the transfer of the rifles we had them packed into bread hampers and their removal in this way did not attract any unwelcome attention.

On the 8th May 1922, a Catholic named Anthony McConville was murdered. This man was an Hibernian. It appears that a policeman from Portadown was killed in an

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ambush in County Tyrone. He was taken home to be "waked" in Portadown and during the Wake some of the mourners suggested that a Catholic should be shot as a reprisal. The result - the shooting of the unfortunate man, McComville. At the time of McConville's shooting we all believed that the shooting was carried out by a particular B/Special patrol.

On the 15th May, 1922, we mobilised a number of men to attack the suspected patrol and we moved into position to await their arrival and attack them. When in position, awaiting, another patrol came on the scene and noticing one of our scouts in the vicinity they opened fire on him. We immediately attacked them and in the ensuing engagement seven of the patrol were wounded. There were no casualties on our side.

Shortly before the 19th May 1922, we received orders from the Divisional O/C. to capture a number of B/Special officers and have them conveyed to an area where they could be safely retained in custody. As far as I can remember the place selected was in the Twenty-six Counties. Just before we started to carry out this order - at the last moment - a countermanding order arrived.

The general attack on the Crown Forces in the Six Counties' area, which was to have started simultaneously all over that area, was timed for about the 19th May, 1922. The importation of arms, ammunition and warlike stores had been most successfully accomplished to all areas some time previously. When all the preparations were completed and men awaiting to carry out these plans, the Rising was called off at the last moment. In some areas in County Tyrone and County Antrim the calling off orders apparently

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did not reach the men in time and fighting took place.

Soon after the 19th May, 1922, with the partial rising in a few isolated places, the British Authorities carried out a general round up of all I.R.A. men and active Republicans all over the Six Counties area. A large number of prisoners were captured in many places. In some small areas hundreds were arrested. In our battalion area during the first week of the raiding for us we lost about twenty officers and men.

The calling off of the general attack on the Crown Forces in the Six Counties area and the subsequent round-up by the British caused a perceptible degree of demoralisation amongst the rank and file of the I.R.A. The split in the ranks of the Republican movement in the South in connection with the question of the acceptance or otherwise of the treaty and the divisions in the ranks of the I.R.A. accelerated a feeling of despair in the I.R.A. in the Northern Counties. We looked to the South for help and assistance. On our own we were faced with overwhelming odds. The two sections of the I.R.A. in the South were drifting towards Civil War. When this position started to develop the British Authorities in the North were not slow to take advantage and they put on the pressure. Up to the time the situation had gone smash in the South the Northern Authorities remained more or less on the defensive.

When the Civil War broke out at the end of June 1922, in Dublin, I was in my Battalion area trying to keep things going in an organised way. About the end of July 1922 when the 4th Northern Divisional Staff, after their divisional area had been attacked by pro-Treaty forces,

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decided to take the anti-Treaty side in the Civil War, I got a note from the Divisional O/C asking me to send him a number of men, including two good motor drivers. I also got instructions to remain myself in the Battalion area and try and keep things going there. I sent the men, as ordered. Some time later I got further orders from the Divisional O/C to send a number of men to County Cavan to reinforce or relieve a column who were operating there. This I also did.

I had several meetings with the Divisional O/C. in County Louth during the Civil War period. The Divisional O/C. at this time was acting as O/C of the Northern Command and he was giving much attention to the state of the Volunteer organisation in the Six Counties area. My opinion, at the time I had those meetings with him, was that he had no liking for the activities carried out in the South of Ireland and that he was more keenly interested in the Republican position in the North.

About May 1922, the Northern Government decided to take over a house in Derrytrasna district as a police barrack. When I got to know of those intentions concerning the house, I had the building destroyed. This operation caused a considerable surprise to the police authorities and the police started intensive raiding in all local areas. Several Volunteers were arrested during these raids. In July 1922, on a Sunday, I had occasion to visit a house in connection with the removal of some war material from a dump in the vicinity. Shortly after my arrival in the house, a number of police in plain clothes came on the scene and arrested me. I was eventually sent on to Crumlin Road Prison, Belfast. There



I was charged with the burning of the house intended for a barracks at Derrytrasna and also with the possession of arms. I was tried and found guilty of these charges and sentenced to four years penal servitude. I served this sentence in Belfast Prison up to the time of my release in January 1926 when I was released before the expiration of my sentence. My release, like a number of other releases, followed the findings of the Boundary Commission.

*Sean M<sup>c</sup> Donnell*  
Signed: \_\_\_\_\_

Date: 23<sup>rd</sup> March 1951

Witness: \_\_\_\_\_

*John Mc Coy*

23/3/51.

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