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COSANTA.

BUREAU OF MILITARY HISTORY, 1913-21.

STATEMENT BY WITNESS

DOCUMENT NO. W.S. 507

Witness

Joseph O'Higgins,
Carrick Road,
Dundalk,
Co. Louth.

Identity.

Member of Irish Volunteers, Drogheda, Co.Louth, 1914 - .
Battalion Adjutant 1920;
Brigade Vice O/C. and Brigade Adjutant 1921.

Subject.

- (a) National events 1914-1921;
- (b) General Election 1918;
- (c) Shooting of T. Halpin and Patrick Moran,
Drogheda, by Tans, February 1921.

Conditions, if any, Stipulated by Witness.

Nil

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Form B.S.M. 2

STATEMENT BY JOSEPH O'HIGGINS,

Carrick Road, Dundalk, County Louth.

I went to Business in Drogheda in 1911. In 1914 at the start of the Volunteer organisation a public meeting was called in Drogheda. This meeting was largely attended and was addressed by Professor Eoin MacNeill and T.E.Kettle, M.P., who were then acting as organisers of the Volunteer organisation. The people of Drogheda at this time were overwhelmingly supporters of the Irish Parliamentary Party and members of the Ancient Order of Hibernians. As far as I then knew there were no Sinn Fein supporters in Drogheda. I was purchasing and reading Sinn Fein periodicals and pamphlets, and I knew of no other person in Drogheda taking the slightest interest in Sinn Fein.

The meeting to organise the Volunteers was addressed by a number of prominent Drogheda men. Some time after this meeting recruits into the Volunteer organisation were sought and large numbers joined up. A Volunteer Company was formed in town and a number of ex-British N.C.Os took charge for drilling and training purposes. A man named Keegan, who was responsible for the training programme, was later on presented with a sword by the Drogheda Company as a mark of appreciation for the good work he done amongst the Volunteers in the matters of training and discipline.

I have no accurate knowledge of how many were in the Drogheda Volunteers in 1914. I should say there were between 400 to 500 men enrolled.

In the summer of 1914 the County Louth Feis was held at Castlebellingham. The two principal speakers at the Feis

were Dr. Douglas Hyde and Sir Henry Bellingham, Bart. The holding of the Feis was availed of by the County Louth Volunteers to hold a Parade and Review in the grounds where the Feis was held during the progress of the Feis. The Drogheda and/^{South}Louth contingents assembled at Castlebellingham and were joined there by Volunteers from all the North Louth districts.

During the time that Dr. Douglas Hyde was addressing the Feis the Volunteers held their 'March Past' the reviewing base where the Salute was taken by a Mr. McGrorey, a Dundalk man, who was on horseback. Dr. Hyde had to interrupt his address for some time to allow the Volunteer parade to be reviewed. At this juncture he made complimentary remarks concerning the Volunteer organisation, using such terms as 'the resurgence of a people', etc.

I attended a parade of Volunteers in the Mayoralty Rooms, Drogheda, at which service rifles were handed out to us. I was fortunate in getting a rifle. After the distribution of the rifles we marched through the principal street of the town, proudly carrying our rifles.

In June, 1914, at Togher, County Louth, a parade of Volunteers was reviewed by Captain Roger Bellingham, a son of Sir Henry Bellingham, Bart. Captain Bellingham was at this time aide-de-camp to the Lord Lieutenant of Ireland, Lord Aberdeen. As a result of this review a question was asked in the British House of Commons about the propriety of Captain Bellingham associating himself with the Volunteer organisation. Captain Bellingham was asked for an explanation which he gave stating that his

local associations and environments were responsible for his being carried away by the occasion. This young man was killed fighting in the British Army in France shortly after the outbreak of the 1914-1918 war.

Shortly after the start of the Great War in August 1914, one of the important local events was a meeting in Drogheda to celebrate the placing of the Home Rule Bill on the Statute book of the British House of Commons. The next important event was a meeting called as a result of John E. Redmond's speech at Woodenbridge in September 1914, in which he declared that it should be Ireland's policy to support England's war effort. At this meeting a resolution was proposed asking the Volunteers to give Redmond's policy enthusiastic support. All those in favour of Redmond's declaration were asked to say "Aye". I only heard one man in a very large crowd saying, "No".

After this meeting affirmed its unqualified support of Redmond's war policy, nothing much happened. The anti-Redmond section in the Volunteers took no definite action until the spring of 1915 when a parade of a small number of men comprising the extreme or Republican section was held in an egg store in Fair Street belonging to a Mr. McQuillan. About twenty men attended this parade and were addressed by two young men then teaching in the Christian Brothers School in Drogheda. - Phil Monaghan, now Manager of Cork City, and Sean Neeson, a native of Cork. From this time onwards this small section met regularly in a more or less secret or underground manner up to the early spring of 1916.

The Redmondite section of the Volunteers had possession of all the rifles in Drogheda. Our section had no rifles

and in 1916 we had only a small number of revolvers. We held regular drills and parades in the country districts outside Drogheda as part of a training programme. We were known at this time - 1916 - as the Irish Volunteers. The Redmondite crowd were known as the National Volunteers. The National Volunteers in Drogheda kept their organisation intact, all through 1915. They went to Dublin during this year and took part in a big Review of National Volunteers from all over Ireland which was held in Phoenix Park.

On St. Patrick's night, 1916, I went to a concert in the Rotunda at which all the well known entertainers of Dublin Brigade of the Irish Volunteers contributed to the concert items. It was at this concert that I first heard as a top secret that a Rising was planned for Easter Sunday 1916. The man who informed me of the date of the Rising was my brother, Brian O'Higgins. I was not aware at this time that there was an organisation known as the Irish Republican Brotherhood. It was after the Rising in 1916 that I first got knowledge of the existence of the I.R.B.

On the Good Friday of Holy Week 1916, our group of Irish Volunteers were mobilised at Rathmullen Hill outside Drogheda. Phil Monaghan was in charge of us at this time. We were ordered that night to mobilise on Easter Sunday morning at a named place carrying any small arms and ammunition we possessed, and also carrying rations for two days. The announced purpose of this mobilisation was Easter manoeuvres. Outside myself, who got the information about a Rising as related above, except a few I.R.B. men - who included Larry Walsh and another, perhaps none of the other Volunteers had the slightest idea of the real purpose of the mobilisation.

On Sunday morning we mobilised as ordered. I knew and a few of our leaders knew that our destination was travelling to Dublin City by a circuitous route via Slane and Blanchardstown. We had only about started on our march on the road to Slane when Dr. Bradley of Drogheda caught up on us with his car and informed us that the manoeuvres were off. He carried written orders calling off all manoeuvres and orders to disband.

The mobilisation then disbanded and each of us went our own several ways, some to their homes, others on their Easter holidays. From this time onwards there was not further effort made to mobilise again in Drogheda.

I spent Easter Sunday and Easter Monday in the country in Castlebellingham district with friends. Monday evening was very wet and I decided to take the train back to Drogheda. When I was passing through the village of Castlebellingham on my way towards the Station, I heard the first news of a Rising in Dublin. A policeman named McGee had been shot dead on the street in Castlebellingham only a few minutes before I arrived on the scene. When I arrived in Drogheda I found that the people of the town were in a great state of excitement. Phil Monaghan had gone to Dublin and was later arrested. No person in the Irish Volunteers in Drogheda knew what to do. Each and every Volunteer was anxious to get news of what was happening. There was much rumour and little reliable news.

About a week after the Surrender in Dublin, a number of young men were arrested in Drogheda. Very few of the men who mobilised on Easter Sunday were arrested. Members of the Gaelic League and the Gaelic Athletic Association were amongst those arrested.

In order to keep our little band of Republican sympathisers together we started what we called a Literary Debating Society in the winter of 1916. This move proved a great success. Papers were read on various periods of Irish History which proved both entertaining and instructive. This form of activity did not appeal to all the people we would like to link up with us. Some young people thought lectures and debates rather tame so early in the year 1917, we organised a hurling club to attract young men of athletic tendencies. Both these activities served their purpose in attracting together a lot of young people with the right national outlook and by association with others spread the gospel of republicanism.

The reorganisation of the Volunteers in Drogheda district started about August 1917. This was a short time after the general release of the sentenced 1916 men, and the Clare Bye Election. As soon as we got small groups organised in Drogheda and South Louth districts we formed a Battalion organisation. All Louth was then intended to form a Brigade area, and a Brigade Staff was at least provisionally formed with the Brigade Staff officers mostly from Dundalk area. I think that either the late Joseph Berrill or James McGuill was appointed Brigade O/C. I held no rank in the Volunteers until 1918 when I was appointed a Section Leader. James McDonagh was then Captain of the Drogheda Company.

In 1917 and 1918 the Volunteers drilled and paraded openly, and we got no interference from the police authorities. From the early spring of 1918 the number of recruits seeking admission into the Volunteers showed a noticeable increase. When the conscription menace arose our ranks became swollen. When the conscription Act became law,

men of all Creeds and classes rushed to join the Volunteers. Members of the Ancient Order of Hibernians, who previously were our bitterest enemies, sought admission and joined the Volunteers, as did many Unionists. When the danger of Conscription had passed nearly all the new recruits dropped out again.

In the spring of 1918 a Sinn Fein Club was started in Drogheda. This Club was sponsored by the Volunteers and proved most successful. Large crowds joined up and became enthusiastic workers. In the autumn of 1918 many of the conscription period recruits who had joined the Volunteers and dropped out joined the Sinn Fein Club. Preparations were then being made for the General Election which was held on the 14th December, 1918. The main burden of the Election work had to be borne by young men inexperienced in election work and new to political activities. Some young men without previous experience had to act as speakers at meetings. Each area had to rely on its own resources as the Election, being general, we could not call on outside help.

The Louth Election was one of the most sensational wins in the General Election, and after one of the hardest fights in the country Sinn Fein won by only 255 votes. The ballot boxes for the votes in the election were held uncounted in the Courthouse, Dundalk, until after Christmas Day. The room in the Courthouse where the ballot boxes were kept was guarded by Volunteers to prevent any tampering with the voting papers from the day of the Election until the counting of votes took place.

In the year 1919, when the Great War had ended and as a consequence all danger of the conscription of our Irish manhood had passed, it was difficult to get any enthusiasm into the Volunteer organisation in Drogheda area. Dail Éireann had been established as the Republican government. This fact created a great political stir but did not cause any great change in the ranks of the Volunteers. The shooting of policeman at Solohead Beg and the rescue of Seán Hogan from the custody of police at Knocklong Station focussed public attention on the militant aspect of the Volunteer organisation and produced a sensation as it was the first attempt since 1916 at serious military action against the forces of the British Crown in Ireland. Another event that did not pass unnoticed in Drogheda was the release of the German Plot prisoners, natives of County Louth, in early 1919. A reception was held in Drogheda to welcome the County Louth men who included Peter Hughes and Joe Berrills of Dundalk, and Phil Monaghan of Drogheda. The prisoners got a warm and enthusiastic reception on their arrival in Drogheda.

Nothing else of much importance took place in Drogheda during the year 1919. The men in charge of the Volunteers did not appear inclined to push the militant side of the Volunteer movement and without any sign of definite leadership the Volunteer organisation in our area dropped into a state of inertia which rapidly developed into a state of disorganisation in which men who really desired to take a militant part in the freedom effort could do very little in the matter. The men in charge of the Volunteers did not relish relinquishing their positions as an alternative to making an effort to carry out an active

Volunteer policy. A state of apathy took possession of the rank and file in the organisation which soon became almost dead to all appearances.

In the political field in late 1919 preparations were being made to contest the Local Government elections. The elections for members for the Drogheda Corporation were held in early 1920. The Sinn Fein party were returned to this body by a large majority. The members returned as Aldermen included Tom Halpin, later murdered by the Tans; Tom Carroll; Paddy Carroll; Phil Monaghan, who was elected as Mayor of Drogheda; Denis Reddin, etc., etc. This election proved that in Drogheda the people had adopted, wholeheartedly, the Sinn Fein policy. The evidence of the change of the people of Drogheda area to the republican policy was later confirmed when the County Council elections were held in June 1920.

In about September 1920, plans were made to attempt to capture Ardee R.I.C. barracks. A Volunteer named Sean O'Carroll, who then lived in Ardee, was in touch with a friendly R.I.C. man stationed in the barracks named Grant who expressed his willingness to assist the Volunteers in the attempt to raid the barracks. On the day fixed for the attempt on the barracks the operation was called off by the Battalion O/C. This fiasco had a demoralising affect on the Volunteers in both Ardee and Drogheda. I was later informed that a leakage of information about the proposed attack on Ardee barracks took place which connected Seán O'Carroll with the affair. Sean O'Carroll and a Michael Tierney were taken from their lodgings in October 1920 and murdered by Crown Forces.

On the day that Ardee barracks was to be attacked the Drogheda Volunteers were mobilised for an excursion to Athlone. I remember this excursion very well as the sack of Balbriggan took place the next day. It looked to me afterwards that the excursion to Athlone was a safe plan made by the Battalion O/C. to keep the Drogheda Volunteers out of the way of any danger of disobeying the countermanding of the attempt on Ardee.

Some time in 1920 I was appointed Adjutant of the Drogheda Battalion. I cannot now remember how I was elected. Perhaps I just stepped into the position when the inactivity of others made it necessary that some person should take up the job. Sometime about the end of 1920 the Battalion O/C. evacuated the area without acquainting me - his Adjutant - of his intentions. About this time a man named Levins came to Drogheda as a paid organiser of the Volunteers from G.H.Q. Levins got a munition factory started in a foundry in town, where a Volunteer named Paddy Murray worked. Murray, when he had the opportunity, made or supervised the making of casings for hand-grenades. A training camp was started by Levins at a place named Corracon between Collon and Ardee near Smarmore. About fifteen to twenty men attended this camp and the men in the camp constituted themselves as an Active Service Unit. This unit went into Ardee on one occasion and made a sniping attack on the R.I.C. barrack. They also raided mails and Post Offices.

Two men in Drogheda, Alderman T. Halpin and Patrick Moran, a Wexford man, were taken out from their homes by Tans and shot in February 1921. This shooting created a sensation in Drogheda, particularly as it was known that

naipin was not a Volunteer and was not of any outstanding importance in the political side of things. After the shooting Levins had to go on 'the run' and did not stay any more in Drogheda area.

A contemplated attack on Dunleer barracks in April 1921 was discussed at a widely attended meeting which was held in Stonehouse Camp, and where it was planned to attack Dunleer barracks at dawn the next morning. Levins attended this meeting and when the decision was made Levins, for some reason, called the whole matter off. A short time after this meeting Paddy Byrne, a local leader - I am uncertain of his rank - was arrested and on his person was found plans concerning Dunleer attack. He got a severe beating from the Tans.

About the middle of April 1921 we received an order from G.H.Q. to raid all the rate collectors in our Battalion area. This was a general order from G.H.Q. as all the rate collectors were to be raided all over the country at the same time. In the absence of the Battalion O/C., and Levins, G.H.Q. organiser, it became my responsibility to carry out G.H.Q. orders by raiding Mr. Jack Gannon, rate collector for Drogheda town area. Mr. Gannon's place was frequented by Tans when they came each morning to draw the rations for Gormanstown Camp. The Tans arrived each morning outside Gannon's place, at 9 a.m. I made arrangements with Paddy Murray, Company Captain, to accompany me at 8.45 a.m. which would give us time to collect Gannon and his cash vouchers and deposit receipts and take him out of town where he would be asked to sign over to us all his official vouchers and receipts which we could then lodge to the account of James Murphy, Chairman, Louth County Council.

I made arrangements with an assistant in Austins, West Street, Drogheda, where I worked, to be in at 8.45 a.m. to let me off to carry out the raid on the rate collector. This assistant was an I.R.A. man and unfortunately he was late coming in, arriving at 8.50 a.m. Then Murray and I rushed at once to Gannon's place. In the shop we met an assistant whom we asked for Mr. Gannon. This man appeared to be antagonistic and I had to force him with a gun to take us upstairs to Gannon's bedroom. On the stairs we met Mrs. Gannon and she became hysterical which created a dangerous situation if the Tans had then arrived. We got Gannon and all his papers and vouchers and took him down the stairs by a back passage and out to a car we had waiting for us in a side street. We learned later than when we were taking Gannon from the house the Tans were actually in the shop. Gannon was taken to Donore and he there signed all his papers and I took possession of them. Gannon was blind-folded and was kept in the cemetery for a few hours. I returned to Drogheda with the car, arriving in Drogheda at 9.45 a.m. When the Banks opened at 10 a.m. I went to the Hibernian Bank and lodged all the Securities signed by Gannon to Mr. J. E. Murphy's Account.

Before this raid was carried out Mr. Gannon was approached and told about the raid and was warned that his co-operation was expected and that his opposition would entail danger to himself. Although he was unfriendly to the Republican Cause he carried out our instructions to be co-operative.

As a matter of interest in connection with the Hibernian Bank, Drogheda, in December, 1920, this Bank was raided and the sum of £600.0.0 taken from the Bank premises.

AS THE TOWN WAS inundated with Tans at this time it was believed by the townspeople that the Tans raided the Banks. It was never known for certain who carried out the raid. The Bank was a lock-up premises in charge of a caretaker. Entrance to the Bank was effected by a window and the robbers left no clues as to their identity.

Shortly after the raiding of the rate collector in Drogheda, similar raids having happened in Dundalk area, the Hibernian Bank was occupied by Crown Forces and they remained in possession for several days with the object of obtaining all possible information about the people involved in the banking of the monies and securities taken from the rate collectors. During the time the military were in possession of the Hibernian Bank in Dundalk, Mr. J. E. Murphy came to me and told me that he was going to Dundalk to find out if the Crown Forces were able to get any information concerning the rate collector's monies. I met Mr. Murphy at the Station on his return from Dundalk and he informed me that the Tans had got information as to who had lodged the money in Dundalk and to whose account it had been lodged. Mr. Murphy then gave me to understand that he expected to be arrested as being the owner of the account to which the money had been lodged in Drogheda. I advised him to lie low in order to find out if they would raid for him and if so he should go on "the run" and avoid being arrested. Mr. Murphy's attitude was that he would not consider going on 'the run'.

Mr. Murphy was arrested a few days after the raid on Dundalk Bank and was sent to Ballykinjar internment camp. About a week later the Hibernian Bank in Drogheda was occupied by Crown Forces. On the day of the occupation a brother of my Manager in Austins came in to the shop and

told me that he went to the Bank to do business and found the door locked. I told him to go back to the Bank and ring at the door, that the people in the Bank could not refuse allowing a member of the public to do banking business. The man returned to the Bank and on ringing at the door was admitted and did his business with the Bank. After he entered the Bank he met the Manager, Mr. Broderick, who told him to tell me that I should skip as the Tans were going to arrest me. I had to wait in the shop for about twenty minutes after I got the warning to get some of the other assistants to relieve me. I then cleared off on my cycle and told the man who relieved me that I would be waiting at the top of Rathmullen Hill and for him to contact me there that evening with news of what had happened after my departure. He came out and informed me that I was only gone ten minutes when a raid for me took place on the shop. I then went up to Bellew's at the mountains, Donore area, and I made this place my headquarters from then up to the Truce in July 1921. I could not say anything good enough in praise of the Bellew family for their kindness to me and other I.R.A. men on the 'run' during the period.

The following Sunday morning about 4 a.m. the house of a man with a similar name in that area was raided under the command of District Inspector Egan searching for I.R.A. men. The raiding party on this raid were evidently brought to this house by an R.I.C. man from Duleek area who was friendly to the Bellews with whom we were staying.

After I had to go on 'the run' Levins and myself were summoned to G.H.Q. from Drogheda area. There we met other officers from the 1st Eastern Division who were similarly summoned. I met Eamon Cullen, Pat Farrelly, Seam Boylan,

Michael Collins, Gearoid O'Sullivan, Dick Mulcahy, Rory O'Connor and others whom I don't know. At this meeting Drogheda Battalion was linked up with the Navan Brigade. The O/C. of the Navan Brigade was then a man named "Brigadier" Kelly. Eugene Cavanagh of Ardee was appointed Battalion O/C. Cavanagh's appointment did not affect the presence of Levins in the Battalion area as he remained with us up to the Truce.

From the end of April, 1921 up to the Truce things became more active in the Drogheda area. Blowing up of bridges, cutting roads, telephone and telegraphic communications were of regular occurrence. The coastguard stations at Clougherhead and at Laytown and the Police Barracks at Clougherhead were all destroyed on the same night. A clash took place between the I.R.A. returning from destroying Laytown coastguard station and a party of Tans from Gormanstown Camp in which shots were exchanged. The I.R.A. were under the command of Tom Clarke and they made a marvellous escape from a large force of Tans. An ambush took place at Monasterboyce where a party of seven or eight under Mick Byrne attacked a patrol of Tans. It was later reported in the Press that a few of the Tans were wounded.

After the I.R.A. had commenced the campaign of road cuttings, it was a common sight in Drogheda to see seven or ten motor tenders come into town and the Tans go into shops and on the streets commandeer men and take them out the country to clear road blocks and fill trenches. In many cases the men commandeered happened to be of pro-British political outlook and some of them got worked up so much with resentment against the way Tans treated them that they became friendly towards our side.

The shop where I worked - Austin's - was raided by Tans on three or four occasions looking for me. My home in County Meath was also raided for me several times and my people were severely questioned as to my whereabouts. On one raid on my mother's house my younger brother was arrested and taken to Kells for identification. A local R.I.C. man was there to convince the Tans of their mistake and my brother was released.

About a week before the Truce a big encircling movement was carried out by Tans to surround Corracon Camp where a number of I.R.A. men on 'the run' were staying. A number of men were in the Camp at the time this effort was made to surround them. Their local knowledge of the topography of the district enabled them to get through the Tans' cordon and get away.

About a week before the Truce our area was incorporated into a newly organised area known as the 9th Brigade, 1st Eastern Division. Eugene Cavanagh was appointed Brigade O/C and I was appointed Brigade Vice O/C and Brigade Adjutant. Mick Byrne was appointed Brigade Quartermaster.

From the time this new Brigade was formed an intensive campaign of recruiting, organising and training was carried out. Recruits flowed into our ranks in great numbers from the Truce onwards. From the date of the Truce our main efforts were directed in an intense effort to acquire a good knowledge of military tactics and to get trained in the use of the various weapons of warfare.

From about early in the year 1920, Republican Courts were held in the Drogheda area. At one time the Courthouse in Drogheda was being used for the holding of Republican

Courts. When military activities became common all over the country and the Black & Tans became aggressive, the holding of Republican Courts in our area became an impossibility. Litigants and witnesses would not risk attending our Courts. On occasions we arrested criminals for committing robberies and when these men were tried and found guilty they were sentenced to detention in "Unknown destinations". During the Tan war, where robbers were arrested and where serious cases of criminal activities took place the culprits were tried by semi-military Courts and when found guilty were imprisoned in Stonehouse, a disused farmhouse of large dimensions. Three men who were involved in the shooting of young Clinton at Nobber, County Meath, in the summer of 1920, were held prisoner in the Sinn Fein Hall, Drogheda, until arrangements were made for their deportation to a place abroad.

Signed:

Joseph Higgins

Date:

2/5/51

Witness:

John Mc Coy.
2nd May 1951

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