

ORIGINAL

BUREAU OF MILITARY HISTORY 1913-21

BURO STAIRÉ MILEATA 1913-21

No. W.S. 524

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BUREAU OF MILITARY HISTORY, 1913-21.

STATEMENT BY WITNESS

DOCUMENT NO. W.S. 524

Witness

Sean Kavanagh,
Governor's House,
Mountjoy,
Dublin.

Identity.

Sinn Fein Organiser, South Kilkenny 1917 - ;
Member of Intelligence Staff I.R.A. 1919-1921.

Subject.

- (a) National activities 1917-1921;
- (b) I.R.A. Intelligence 1919-1921, and cooperation of R.I.C.

Conditions, if any, Stipulated by Witness.

Nil

File No. S.120

Form B.S.M. 2

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STATEMENT BY COMMANDANT SEÁN KAVANAGH

Governor's House, Mountjoy.

Early in 1917 I first became associated with the Volunteers in my capacity as voluntary organiser of Sinn Féin Clubs in South Kilkenny, Kilmacow district. I was also associated with the Gaelic League, and in this connection I taught voluntary Irish classes at night in Waterford city and South Kilkenny area, Slieverue, Mooncoin and Mullinavat. In the daytime I taught in the Christian Brothers Secondary School at Mount Sion, Waterford, from the autumn of 1916 to the summer of 1919.

About August, 1919, I transferred to Naas, County Kildare, where I was appointed Irish teacher for the district and later Gaelic League organiser for Co. Kildare.

While I was stationed in the country I used to visit the city frequently and got to know men prominently associated with the National movement generally.

Shortly after I came to Naas I learned that the County Inspector's chief clerk, Sergeant Maher of the R.I.C., was anxious to help the National movement, by passing on important information, but that he could contact nobody in the district whom he felt he could trust. I reported this to Michael Staines in Dublin, and he brought me to Michael Collins.

Collins instructed me to see Maher and see what he was like, because if he were all right he would be a very important source of information. I met Maher, and found him to be a very enthusiastic, and obviously genuine, man.

This I reported back to Collins.

Collins told me that the police had recently been issued with a new figure cypher and that he was most anxious to get hold of the key of it. He told me he had been trying to get it through other contacts but that, so far, he had not succeeded, and he asked me if I would do my best to get it for him. This cypher was used only for the more important telegraphed messages, (a simple code being used for ordinary telegrams) and the experts had failed to break it down.

I got Sergeant Maher to bring me some messages - they were telegrams always - in cypher, and the same messages decoded. From these he and I built up the current key to the cypher. Subsequently he kept me supplied with all the code messages, and these I passed on to Michael Collins, having first deciphered them.

The County Inspector kept this cypher locked in his safe. After some time Maher succeeded in getting an impression of the key of the safe, and Collins got a duplicate made. Sergeant Maher had free access to the safe from that on, and, as a result, was able to bring me the "key" to the figure cypher each time a new one was issued, which occurred on an average about once a month.

The police exercised the greatest precaution in passing this cypher from Dublin to the various County Inspectors throughout the country. Their method of delivery was to send police couriers in mufti by train. These were met at the different stations by local police couriers, who delivered the cypher into the hands of the County Inspectors concerned. It often took a couple of days for the cypher to travel from Dublin to a distant County, and Collins frequently had the key of the cypher back in Dublin before it reached some of the County

Inspectors.

It is interesting to note that when Terence MacSwiney was arrested he had in his possession the newly issued cypher, which had not yet reached the County Inspector in Cork. I had procured it from the Naas office. This caused a bit of a scare, and the authorities immediately changed the key, but they did not change the type of cypher they used, nor did they change their method of delivery.

I was not under suspicion at all. The local R.I.C. regarded me as a harmless man going around teaching Irish. I was forbidden by Collins to associate with the local Volunteers, although some of the more important of them knew about my Intelligence work; Tom Harris, T.D., was the Battalion O.C. in the district and he knew about it.

I do not know how the authorities got to know about me, but about November, 1920, Maher told me that I was going to be arrested and my lodgings searched, so I went on the run. For the first few days I took up residence in Maher's own house on the outskirts of the town. Maher was not suspected at the time. A very intensive raid was duly made on my "digs" within a couple of hours of the warning but nothing incriminating was found.

Some months previously Sergeant Maher had discovered that the District Inspector's clerk, Constable Casey, was also anxious to give whatever assistance he could. I contacted Casey and found that he was well worthy of our confidence. He was able to supply much useful information that did not come Maher's way. This information concerned the administration of the district generally by the R.I.C., impending raids, arrests, etc. Occasionally I found that I could pass on a warning

indirectly to some prominent Volunteer, but I had to be careful not to give myself away, even to the local Volunteers.

When I went on the run I stayed more or less in the area, and kept in close touch with Maher, but I was told that I could now contact the local men and help with the organisation of the Volunteers.

In the summer of 1920 Tom Harris, the local Battalion O/C, asked me would I ask Collins to send a good man down from G.H.Q., to organise and train his Battalion area. I saw Collins, as requested, and he told me that the best man he had was available at the moment, and he sent him down. Peadar McMahon was the man.

I wanted a holiday in the summer of 1920 as I had about three months leave from teaching. I thought it would not look well if I stayed hanging around the district, apparently doing nothing, so I asked Collins to send somebody to relieve me in keeping contact with Maher. Collins gave me George Plunkett for a month and he carried on the Intelligence work with Maher and Casey in my absence.

I was arrested in Dublin at the Exchange Hotel in Parliament Street, on 15th January, 1921, having just arrived in Dublin by train from Newbridge, Co. Kildare.

Some time after my arrest Maher learned that he himself was under suspicion, and, feeling that his usefulness was at an end, he resigned from the R.I.C. Fortunately he was succeeded by Casey, who was promoted sergeant and made County Inspector's chief clerk. Casey carried on the same Intelligence work for some time. I think Casey also came under suspicion; because he was

transferred to Downpatrick, still as County Inspector's clerk. After a while he contacted the 3rd Northern Division in Downpatrick and continued to supply information until he resigned from the R.I.C. in 1922.

Both Maher and Casey joined the Garda Síochána at its inception, and Maher became the first Chief Superintendent at Naas. Casey also became a Superintendent. He was serving as Superintendent in Ennis when he died a few years ago.

During the last few months I was in Kildare Mick Collins got me to raid the Dublin-Cork mail train frequently for Dublin Castle post. The sorting staff on the train were most co-operative, and whenever I asked for the Castle mail bag they simply handed it over to me. It might have been through those raids that the authorities became suspicious of me, because I always had a couple of the local men with me, and they might have talked. I censored those mails locally, and passed on what I thought was important. I do not remember anything that seemed to me to be of vital importance, but Collins always said that what appeared to me to be of little importance might turn out to be very useful.

I cannot remember the details of the military information which I received through Casey and Maher, but I do know that some of it concerned a scheme of organisation and co-operation between the police and the military in the event of major activities on the part of the local Volunteers.

When I was arrested I was taken to Dublin Castle for interrogation. Unfortunately I had in my possession some despatches from G.H.Q. and a typescript note from Collins asking me to meet him at eight o'clock that (Saturday)

night. I should mention that I had previously arranged to meet Michael Collins at Vaughan's Hotel (our usual rendezvous) on the previous Saturday night, but he had not turned up to keep the appointment and had sent me this note asking me to meet him in "the same place" at eight o'clock on that Saturday night, the night of my arrest. The note was not signed, it was simply initialled "M". When the interrogating officers, Captain Hardy, Major King and "Tiny" saw this note they handled me roughly and tried hard to get me to explain what it meant, as they believed it was from Collins. I flatly denied that the note had anything to do with Collins, in fact I told them that I did not even know Collins, but they were not satisfied.

After some hours one of the interrogating officers got the idea that the meeting place was to be the Exchange Hotel, where I had been arrested early that afternoon, and I reluctantly agreed that this might be so, and fell in with their arrangements.

At a few minutes before eight o'clock I was taken under a large escort back to the Exchange Hotel and put standing above at the hall door. It was arranged that when the man that I was supposed to meet would come along I was to shake hands with him. The Auxiliaries were then to close in and arrest us both.

The Auxiliaries (now in mufti) took possession of the entrance to the hotel, and no one was allowed to enter or leave the hotel, or use the telephone. A number of them concealed themselves inside the hall-door, and a large number in mufti mingled with the crowds passing through Parliament Street, some staying very close to me.

Nothing happened until shortly before ten o'clock,

which was curfew time, when a man whom I knew but who had no connection with the Volunteers at the time, passed by and then came back and stopped to talk to me. I tried to discourage him as well as I could, but almost immediately we were surrounded and both of us were taken into the Castle. It so happened that a D.M.P. man at the Castle gate knew this man so he was released almost immediately. I got another hiding then for leading them up the garden path. I was finally lodged in the Exchange Court; where McKee and Clancy had been murdered a couple of months previously.

The British were convinced that I was in contact with Collins and could lead them to him. They showed me a bad photograph of Collins and asked me did I recognise him, and I said I did not.

After two days in the Castle I was transferred to Kilmainham prison. About a week later I was brought back to the Castle in an armoured car for further interrogation, this time without any ill-treatment, by a more important officer whose name I do not know. He concentrated on trying to extract information about Collins, but obtained none.

I was then placed in a cell near the Birmingham Tower where I found three other prisoners whose names were Vincent Fovvargue, John Noud, and Green, who was an old man. We were there together for about a week. Vincent Fovvargue was the Intelligence Officer of one of the Battalions of the Dublin Brigade, and had been arrested at a meeting of the Brigade Intelligence Officer and the four Battalion Intelligence Officers a short time before this. I afterwards learned that while in jail he was acting as an Intelligence agent for the Castle authorities (for which he was later executed in England by the I.R.A.). I was not aware of this, of course, although one of my

fellow-prisoners, Noud, later told me that he had tried to tip me off, as he was not happy about him.

Foivargue had evidently been put into my cell to see what information he could get out of me. I distinctly recall his asking me searching questions about the leaders of the I.R.A., including Brugha, Mulcahy, Collins, O'Sullivan etc. Fortunately I told him nothing that was not already fairly well known.

After I had been in the Castle about a week, the four of us were removed to Kilmainham.

About a week later I was called to the Governor's office and there found the gentleman who had last interrogated me in the Castle. We had an interview, disguised ~~me~~ as a friendly chat, in which he tried to get me to admit to knowledge of the I.R.A. leaders, especially Collins, but I had nothing to tell him.

Afterwards Foivargue told me that he also had been called to the Governor's office to meet a gentleman from the Castle. Foivargue expressed surprise that he should have been called for that interview.

On another occasion, a few days later, I was again called to the office, this time for a chat with the Governor himself, which developed along the same lines and with the same result.

At this time it was the practice for military and police raiding parties patrolling the city to take as hostages with them prisoners from Kilmainham and other prisons. One evening about a fortnight after my transfer to Kilmainham, Foivargue was taken out as a "hostage" and did not return. The newspapers the following morning reported that he had escaped from the lorry when the occupants left it to chase alleged attackers. A

few weeks later his dead body was found on a golf links in London with a card stating that he had been executed by the I.R.A. During the time I was in Kilmainham with Fogvargue I had very little contact with him, but he did not seem to be under suspicion by any of the other prisoners up to the time of his "escape".

I remained in Kilmainham prison until a couple of days after the escape of Ernie O'Malley, Frank Teeling and Simon Donnelly. I was not aware of the preparatory arrangements for the escape as I was not previously known to the prisoners there. On the evening that the escape occurred I was asked to assist by getting rid of the soldier-warder on duty in our section of the prison. Things were rather lax in the administration of the prison up to that time, and on that evening two soldiers named McDonald, a Belfast man, and Roper, a Welsh-man, were supposed to be on duty from five o'clock to ten o'clock. McDonald absented himself for the evening without leave, as he and Roper usually did alternately whenever both were on duty together. I induced Roper to go out to post a few letters for me, giving him some money for drink as he had said it was his birthday. He put me in charge in his absence, with a special admonition to let nobody escape, but when he returned after an absence of a couple of hours the three prisoners were missing. To play for time I helped him in the search for the prisoners, and it was not for about a further quarter of an hour that he realised that they were gone. Roper and McDonald were courtmartialled and each sentenced to eight years penal servitude, which they served in full.

Patrick Moran, who was subsequently hanged in Mountjoy for his activities on the morning of Bloody Sunday, was also a prisoner in Kilmainham at the time, and on the night prior to the escape had made an unsuccessful

attempt with the other three to get out of Kilmainham. When the actual escape took place Moran refused to take part in it, as he believed he could not be convicted of the charge which was pending.

In another part of the prison at the same time were five other prisoners who were subsequently hanged the same morning as Moran. They were unable to take part in the escape. They were Frank Flood, Thomas Whelan, Patrick Doyle, Bernard Ryan, Thomas Bryan. Rory O'Connor was also in that section of the prison but could not be reached. Rory was transferred after a couple of days.

On the night of the escape there was terrible excitement in Kilmainham. They had bloodhounds in. Then we were kept locked up in our cells for a couple of days without any exercise. I shared a cell with Desmond Fitzgerald for those days, and then late at night most of us were moved to Mountjoy, calling at Arbour Hill to collect some other prisoners. On the journey from Kilmainham to Mountjoy I was handcuffed to Rory O'Connor, whom I had known previously through meeting him with Collins and other members of G.H.Q. staff.

We were placed in a special wing in Mountjoy Prison, "C" Wing, with a special guard of Auxiliaries. No ordinary warders were allowed to deal with us. Several of the prisoners were awaiting trial on capital charges, six of them were later executed and three or four sentenced to death and reprieved. Rory O'Connor was transferred to an internment camp on the Curragh, from which he escaped after a short stay.

I was tried by court-martial for possession of illegal documents. I received a sentence of twelve months which I was allowed to serve in Mountjoy, in "D" Wing. At that time prisoners sentenced for possession

of documents only were regarded as political prisoners and given certain concessions which were refused to those convicted for possession of arms, ammunition, etc. The majority of the latter were transferred to English or Scottish prisons, as the Irish prisons were overcrowded at the time.

When I arrived at Mountjoy, Arthur Griffith, Eoin MacNeill, Eamon Duggan and Michael Staines were interned there in a special class. They were not mixed with the other prisoners. I managed to meet Staines occasionally, and after Sean MacEoin arrived in "C" Wing Staines told me of the plans that were being made for his rescue. For some weeks I had concealed in my cell a revolver and ammunition to be passed to MacEoin to assist him in his attempt to escape, but that idea was abandoned subsequently and the revolver was sent out again. It had been smuggled in by May Staines, a sister of Michael Staines, and brought to me by a friendly warder.

On one occasion when executions were due to take place I was shifted from my cell, which was adjacent to the execution chamber, and with a number of others transferred for a few days to Arbour Hill. As I had concealed the revolver and ammunition in my cell it worried me quite a lot during my absence in case they would have been discovered, but when I returned to the cell again I found them still there.

Signed: Sean Kavanagh

Date: 5th June 1957.

Witness: William Jerry Bondt

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