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COSANTA.

BUREAU OF MILITARY HISTORY, 1913-21.

STATEMENT BY WITNESS

DOCUMENT NO. W.S. 536

Witness

Commandant James Harpur,
"Derbereth",
Swords Road,
Dublin.

Identity.

Member of:

- (1) 'C' Company 4th Battalion 1917;
- (b) 'F' Company 1st Battalion 1919;
- (c) A.S.U. Dublin, 1920 - .

Subject.

Active Service Unit Operations, Dublin,
1920-1921.

Conditions, if any, Stipulated by Witness.

Nil

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Statement of Commandant James Harpur,

Derbereth, Swords Road, Dublin.

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ORIGINAL

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Statement of Commandant James Harpur,

Derbereth, Swords Road, Dublin.

Following the general release of the 1916 prisoners, efforts were made to reorganise the Volunteers.

Early in 1917 I joined "C" Company of the 4th Battalion, Dublin Brigade. At that time the Company was commanded by Garry Byrne and John V. Joyce was Lieutenant and afterwards he (Joyce) became O/C. of the Company.

For a considerable time after I joined the Volunteers our activities were mainly concerned with organisation, drilling and training. Drilling was carried out at the Sand Pits in Crumlin area.

The first occasion on which I had to use arms was on a night when the police raided our parade ground. I was on guard that night and as the police approached to raid a few of us opened fire while the remainder of the Company were getting away.

Armistice Parade 1918:

I learned of the Armistice Parade in town in the year 1918, and I was mobilised for, I think, 41 Camden Street. The Battalion O/C., Phil Cosgrave and the Vice O/C., Joe McGrath, were there. I was given an old Spanish revolver and, I think, three rounds of ammunition by Joe McGrath and my instructions on that occasion were to patrol from the Mail Office - Liffey side of ^{PARLIAMENT} ~~Parson~~ Street, and I was to prevent anyone taking photographs of the Parade, the idea being that this British military parade was not to be given any publicity in the local papers. I was

accompanied on that occasion by another Volunteer whom I think was Jim Fulham. As the Artillery were passing I saw a camera-man with a tripod camera on the ^{SOUTH} ~~north~~ side of Capel Street Bridge endeavouring to take photographs of the parade. As we were making our way towards him to prevent him from doing so I observed two more Volunteers approaching him from the Quay side. I recognised these as Paddy Holohan and Pat Doyle - the latter was afterwards executed. They reached the camera-man first and I heard an altercation going on between them. The next thing I saw was the camera and the man (the operator) being thrown into the Liffey. We resumed our patrol.

Early in 1919, I was transferred to "F" Company of the 1st Battalion where I became a section leader. The O/C. of the Company was Paddy Holohan.

Raid on Ship, Alexandra Basin:

From the time I transferred to the 1st Battalion, activities were increasing, starting with the raids for arms on private houses. The first raid of importance I remember was a raid on a ship that had anchored at Alexandra Basin which, we were informed, contained a number of arms. For this raid a number of us were specially selected from the Company and Charlie Dalton of the Intelligence Department more or less directed the raid. My job, with Paddy Doyle, was to take up a position on the bridge of the ship and hold up the man on duty there, which we did, while the other fellows went down below and searched the ship. A number of rifles and, I think, a Lewis gun and several revolvers were taken away. I think this ship had some connection with the Naval Service at the time. Our party got safely away with their 'booty' and in a short time afterwards the whole place was taken over by the British military.

The Active Service Unit organisation:

Late in the year 1920, the Company Commander sent for me and informed me that it was the intention of the Army Council to increase the activities of the I.R.A. and to counter increased British activities in Dublin, and to this end the Active Service Unit was being formed. He asked me would I leave my job and go with this Unit, at the same time informing me that he had already nominated me to the Brigade Council, and I was approved. I asked him what did it imply. He informed me that active operations were going to be carried out openly against the British Forces in Dublin, night and day. This meant that we would be employed full time, and for this reason we could not work at our ordinary civilian employment. I told him I would be only too happy to do so and he informed me that my name had already been approved by the Brigade Council. I was, therefore, instructed by him to attend at Oriel Hall at the back of Amiens Street Station on a certain night, the date of which I cannot remember, but it must have been late in 1920, for the formation of the Unit. I attended at Oriel Hall on the appointed night and there I met, approximately, between 40 and 50 other members from different units in the Brigade. We were addressed by Oscar Traynor. First of all he told us that Michael Collins was to have been there but was unable to make it. He informed us that the British were becoming a bit too 'cocky' in the city and were being allowed too much freedom of movement to carry out their policy of subduing the population, and that it had been decided to counter this activity on their part by giving them battle on our own ground. He complimented us on our patriotism in coming forward and, actually, he did not hold out much hope of us surviving, but added that there would be more men to take our places.

We were then organised into four sections, each section to operate in each of the four Battalion areas, and our assignment to the sections was decided by our place of residence in the city. As I was residing at that time in the 4th Battalion area I was assigned to the section operating in the 4th Battalion area. On that night Paddy Flanagan was appointed O/C of the Unit. He came from the 3rd Battalion. There were Section Commanders appointed for each section and Gus Murphy, I think, was appointed Section Commander of our Section, i.e. the 4th Battalion. When Gus was killed, Micky Sweeney took his place. As far as I remember the Unit worked in this manner - the G.H.Q. Intelligence Section collected the data for jobs. If the job to be carried out was an 'execution', it was passed on by the Intelligence Section to the Squad. If it was an 'ambush', it was passed on by the Intelligence Section to the Active Service Unit. But in addition to that the Unit had its own Intelligence Section which was the 3rd Battalion Section, and this Section collected a lot of information which it passed on to the Unit Headquarters in Eustace Street. The 4th Section Headquarters was in the Brickworks in Dolphins Barn. The Section Commander, Gus Murphy, used to attend at Unit Headquarters each morning, which was in Eustace Street, and he brought whatever instructions he got to us at the Brickworks.

The A.S.U. started with an approximate strength of 50 and although a number were killed and executed it was not until after the Custom House, when we lost practically half our strength, that new members were brought in to bring the unit up to strength again. It was after the Custom House burning that the Squad and the A.S.U., who had previously worked in co-operation, were then amalgamated under the leadership of Paddy Daly. As we had left our civilian employment since we were to be employed full time

on Active Service work, it was arranged that we would receive a subsistence allowance.

Active Service Unit operations:

Before embarking on any operations one of our first duties was to familiarise ourselves thoroughly with the area in which we were about to operate. This meant a very comprehensive reconnaissance of main streets, back streets, laneways, cul-de-sacs, etc. in the 4th Battalion area. We found to our advantage that the knowledge we had gained stood to us well later on.

The first ambush with the Unit took place at Bachelor's Walk in 1921. We were told beforehand that this was supposed to be the debut of the Active Service unit. It was in the 1st Battalion area, as far as I remember, and I don't know if the whole section was selected for the job or only a representative number, but I do know that all sections were represented there. It took place between O'Connell Bridge and Liffey Street. This was the area of operations. I was stationed with, I think, Padraig O'Connor at Liffey Street. We were told that a number of lorries would come along with Auxiliaries arriving from England, and that the signal for the ambush would be the first grenade bursting at O'Connell Bridge. The Tans did not arrive at the time scheduled, but we remained in position for a considerable period, and eventually the firing started and was continued right down along. By the time the Auxiliaries got to Liffey Street I could see, at least, four trucks coming towards me with the personnel firing in all directions, evidently as if panic-stricken. We carried out our part of the job and got away by Abbey Street to the North Wall. When we got to the North Wall they (the Auxiliaries) were still firing in spite of the fact that the A.S.U. had completely withdrawn from the area, as we were the last people to leave.

Shortly after the attack on the Auxiliaries at Bachelor's Walk a number of us were seconded to the 3rd Battalion Section to carry out a job against four Intelligence personnel travelling between the Castle and the Auxiliaries' barracks at Beggars Bush. 'Onion' Quinn from the 3rd Battalion Section was to give us the signal when the car was coming. We took up positions as follows - Myself and, I think, Paddy Rigney at Holles Street corner passing Merrion Square; two men, whose names I cannot recall at the archway of Goff's Sales Yard and two more at the street at the first turn to the left after passing Goff's Sales Yard. Quinn took up his position at Merrion Square, east corner, to give the signal when the car came along. We saw a closed car approaching from the Clare Street area along Merrion Square and as this car was about half way up Merrion Square, Quinn crossed the road and, when in the path of the car, he took out a white handkerchief and waved. He then pushed down Holles Street. As well as giving the signal to us he also gave the signal to the people in the car who started firing from the car at us before we opened fire on them. When they were about 12 yards from us we opened up with one grenade and revolver fire. A grenade landed in the centre of the car and as it passed us and before arriving at Goff's it exploded in the car. At this time the car was practically stationary, when the other lads opened fire from the other two positions. By this time we had retreated down Holles Street and into Sandwich Street. From information afterwards received this job was a complete success with 100% results.

As far as I can remember the next operation I was engaged on was in Camden Street and was carried out against a staff car containing what we believed to be courtmartial officers moving from Portobello to the Castle and these

court-martial officers were those who had sat on the trial of our comrades of the 1st Battalion who were captured at Clonturk Park ambush and had been sentenced to death. We took up positions. I was at the Camden Row corner at the public-house with, I think, Jimmy McGuinness. Others of the Section took up positions between there and Bishop Street. We ambushed the car and fire was returned from it, one of the shots wounding Paddy Rigney in the leg. We got Rigney away, Jimmy McGuinness covering the retreat, as far as I can remember. As my own house was the nearest place at the time and as my sisters were always 'standing to' when a job was being carried out in the area, we brought Rigney there where he was treated by the A.S.U. Doctor - Dr. Flanagan. He was afterwards removed to the Mater Hospital. While we had one casualty there were definitely, at least, two casualties amongst the British party. One of the officers in the car, to my mind, was a very brave man, as from the very beginning of the ambush he deliberately sighted each shot, firing from a parabellum and I am of the opinion that it was one of these shots that wounded Paddy Rigney.

I was still in touch with my old Company and talking one night to the Company Officer, Paddy Holohan, he told me that they had a job lined up for an ambush in North Frederick Street. He asked me if I were not doing anything particular at that time with the A.S.U. would I go on the job with them. I said I would. The job duly came off and was carried out against the British military actually in the Frederick Street area. On this occasion I went into position at Findlaters Church and there were three of us at this particular spot - Tom Sheerin who was Lieutenant of the Company, Rossa Mahon and myself. We started the job by firing grenades at a lorry. Others were in position at the L.S.E. garage at the corner of Hardwicke Street. I believe this job was also a big

success and there were no casualties on our side. Gus Murphy, who was my Section Commander in the A.S.U., got to hear of my going on this job and gave me what is now known as a "Disciplinary choke-off", and told me that in future I would confine my activities to those ordered by him.

At this time we got information through our own sources of a party of R.A.F., who were stationed in Tallaght, coming in regularly from Tallaght to collect mail in the city. I was detailed with Jimmy and Joe McGuinness and Padraig O'Connor to get 'tabs' on this lorry. We accumulated the necessary information and verified the fact that the lorry came in after curfew hours, which was at 10.30 o'clock at the time, to make this collection. They came in via the Naas Road, and having collected the information it was decided to carry out the job. Speed was necessary in this particular case as we were aware that "C" or "F" Company of the 4th Battalion were also after this job. We went into position one night behind what was known as "The Valley Wall" just on the Naas Road after passing Dolphins Barn Bridge. We waited there for a considerable time but the lorry did not come. Further investigation and inquiries elicited the fact that the route had been changed and that they were now coming in via the Crumlin Road.

We went into position another night on the Crumlin Road. Somewhere about 11 p.m. word was passed up from the lookout man, who was Padraig O'Connor, that the car was coming from the direction of Dublin and we prepared to ambush it. However, just as we were all keyed up for the job word was passed on again to lie low and not fire, as the lookout man had discovered that this was not the job we were waiting for but was a convoy escorted by, I think, three armoured cars and a very heavy escort and about eight lorries. This necessitated further investigation and it

seemed to be now a race to see whether the Company or ourselves carried out the job first. We now discovered that the car was still using the Crumlin route but was coming in by daylight. It was decided then that we would ambush it on the way back to Tallaght from the city. It was a big lorry and I believed it was fairly well loaded with about 15 soldiers. It had steel plates practically up to the cover and the difficulty of getting a grenade or grenades into the car was our chief worry. At this time our lads who were in the munition factory in Vicker Street were beginning to turn out what is known as the famous No. 9 grenade and we had been given two or three of these grenades to try out. I believe that the time fuse had been reduced from seven to three seconds. McGuinness and Sweeney, prior to the evening fixed for the ambush, made a thorough examination of the road and selected the best position to carry it out. This was in the vicinity of Yeates' public-house known as the "Half-Way House". This was an ideal situation for the job as it was on a bend in the road. Yeates' public-house was situated at the left on this bend and at the gable end of the building which faces on to the road there was a concrete structure used as a lavatory with the opening facing towards the Dublin side and which gave anybody inside a complete view of the road for a couple of hundred yards. Above the building was a small triangular field with a low stone wall on the roadside.

The plan was that Micky Sweeney (who was now Section Commander, Gus Murphy having been killed) and Jimmy McGuinness would position themselves in this lavatory with a No. 9 grenade, each watching the road for the approach of the lorry, and that the remainder of us would take a position at the stone wall of the field above the building. The intention was, when the lorry came to the bend of the road, the two lads in the lavatory would time

themselves, emerge from there to cross the road, talking to each other casually, and that they would arrive at the centre of the road, having to stop here to allow the lorry to pass, and as it was passing to lob the No. 9 grenades through the narrow opening in the lorry. We were then to open fire with revolvers, peter-the-painters and grenades, one man being specially detailed to get the driver in an effort to stop the lorry, fight it out with them and get their rifles. We were not long in position when we got word that the lorry was coming. McGuinness and Sweeney timed themselves perfectly and as the lorry was passing them they lobbed the grenades through the opening, Sweeney's grenade struck the outside of the cover and fell back, exploding at his feet, and due to the shortness of the fuse he had no opportunity of taking any cover. He was severely wounded in the legs by the explosion and superficially around the face. McGuinness's grenade exploded in the centre of the lorry. The lorry swerved towards the Lansdowne Valley Road and by this time we were giving it everything we had, and we were actually preparing to cross the wall when it picked up again and gathered speed up the road.

We retired from the position and came out on the road leading towards Walkinstown Cross and immediately in front of Walkinstown House where we met Jimmy McGuinness who was holding Micky Sweeney. We realised that Sweeney was badly hit, and Paddy Rigney, Alley O'Toole and myself went into Walkinstown House where we knew there was a chauffeur and a car. We located the chauffeur in the kitchen and when we tried to get him out he could not move off the chair from sheer fright. We could get no good of him and returned to the road and just as we arrived there the workers from the Blessington Steam-Tram Works came cycling down towards us, just leaving off work. They immediately grasped the situation and without request or

order jumped off their bicycles and handed them over to us to get away. Jimmy McGuinness or Simon McInerney mounted one bicycle and Micky Sweeney was put on the back step and escorted by one or other of these two chaps and Paddy Rigney they made away. After getting him away all of us mounted bicycles and made for the canal bridges to get back into the city. I know myself that we were not long over the bridges when they were taken over by military and everybody going into the city was searched and examined, and were it not for the action of the lads from the Blessington Steam-Tram Company in giving us their bicycles we would have found it very difficult to get back into the city that night. Paddy O'Connor would have been with us that time but he had been wounded some time previously. Nevertheless, knowing the job was coming off himself and his younger brother, Sean, who was not a member of the A.S.U were actually making their way over Lansdowne Valley to get to the Half-Way House when they heard the firing. I was very troubled that night as I had lost a new velour hat in the hedge in my get-away. I feared that if it were located my identity would be only a matter of time, so next morning, against the wishes of my comrades, I returned to the area and retrieved my hat. I believe that this was the most successful ambush carried out in the Dublin area and this was afterwards proved by the fact that an official reprisal was carried out that night by the Auxiliaries who burned Yeates' public-house (the Half-Way House).

The Igoe Gang:

Previous to the Half-Way House job we had, on numerous occasions on information supplied in conjunction with the Squad, gone to different places to get the Igoe Murder Gang. On one occasion towards evening in or about 4 o'clock, returning from one of these chases,

Johnnie Wilson of the Squad and myself, having dumped our guns in the Strand Street dump, were walking up along the Quays towards O'Connell Bridge when behind us we got an order to keep going the way we were, not to move our hands or make a move in any direction and, turning round, we discovered Igoe and his bunch immediately behind us. We got as far as the Home of Billiards on Bachelors Walk. On arriving there we were told to turn to our left down the laneway alongside the Home, and our followers came down after us, some of them stopping at the entry to the laneway and others going to the far end. They made one serious mistake there. Igoe and his assistant started to question us and, as we always had our stories made up as to what we should say in the case of such an eventuality, we were able to account for our movements. Unfortunately, this did not seem to satisfy them. There is a point of interest here which probably saved both our lives and showed up a very serious fault in their (the British) form of interrogation. At the time they questioned us I knew my own story but I did not know Johnnie Wilson's, nor he mine. They, however, made the mistake in the beginning of questioning us both together so that Wilson heard my story and I heard his. Whether they were trying to frighten us or not they told us that they had decided to shoot ^{us} there and then and made us turn our faces to the wall and gave us three minutes to make the necessary preparations. At this point I had given up all hope of coming out of that laneway again, knowing Igoe and his henchmen, but as the men he had placed on guard at the top of the laneway were having some difficulty with the crowd they decided to bring us to the Castle, which they did. A strange coincidence again arose here. The route they took was via Eustace Street where our own headquarters were situated. I was sure that having passed the headquarters something was bound to happen as we had been chasing this gang for weeks and as

someone was always observing from headquarters I had no doubt they would avail themselves of this golden opportunity of getting at least some of this gang. As luck would have it no one was observing at this particular time. As we went up Dame Street towards the Castle and nothing seemed to be happening I felt very disappointed and depressed. When we arrived at the Castle we were separated and questioned separately but by this time we were each on our guard and when I was questioned about Wilson I stuck to his story and when he was questioned about me he stuck to mine. After about three-quarters of an hour we were told we could go but this did not by any means allay our worst fears as we now believed we would both be shot "trying to escape," but to our amazement we reached the Castle gate and finally gained the street without being shot and neither one or other of us could understand or believe that we were free. My one purpose now was to get home to my own house as Padraig O'Connor was in bed there seriously wounded and as they (the British) had now got my address it was imperative to get him away. Luckily the house was not raided and shortly afterwards it continued to be used as a First Aid Station for the wounded of the A.S.U. and the Squad, as Simon McInerney of the A.S.U., Joe Byrne of the Squad and Harry Pender of the 4th Battalion were each treated there.

The burning of the Custom House:

A few days before the burning of the Custom House, the whole unit was called together - I think it was at Strand Street- and we were given an idea of the job by the O/C., Paddy Flanagan. He told us that it was proposed to burn the Custom House and that it was the 2nd Battalion were doing the job but that we would, in conjunction with the Squad, protect the 2nd Battalion in carrying out the burning. For this purpose a number of us were detailed for outside protection and a number for inside protection. As far as

I remember the majority of the A.S.U. were used for outside protection and a small number to work in conjunction with the Squad were utilised for inside protection. I was one of those sent inside and I think the majority of the 1st Battalion Section were also inside. Our mission inside was first of all when we entered to cover the doorways and allow no one out and allow no British Forces to get in, to shut the doors and if the British arrived they would be engaged on the outside by our comrades outside and if they got inside the building we were to engage them from the inside. On the day the Custom House was burned I assembled with some more of the A.S.U. and the Squad in the vicinity of Brook Thomas's about 12.45 p.m. At 1 o'clock we crossed the street and entered the Custom House by the Beresford Place door. At the same time I saw other parties converging on the Custom House from other directions. As soon as all the lads were inside we closed the doors and remained there until the fighting started. The first we heard was the explosion of the grenades and the firing outside but by this time they had not even started to burn the Custom House, so we mounted the windows and I could see in Beresford Place two British trucks pulled up and British Auxiliaries lying on the ground firing at the Custom House. We returned the fire and after fighting on that side we heard firing all round the building. I saw military moving into position along the Quays in lorries and covered off by an armoured car. The armoured car, as it approached, was firing at the Custom House. Eventually we were forced back from the windows but by this time the fire was starting all over the building on the inside. I heard the order being passed that all guns were to be dumped and that all Volunteers were to mix themselves amongst the staff. At this time I was in an office which I believe was the Stationery Office

and was adjacent to the Custom House Dock where I met Tom Keogh of the Squad. I asked him how the job was going and what were the instructions regarding guns for the A.S.U. and the Squad. Tom at this time looked very happy and said that the job was going to be a huge success, that nothing would stop the fire and that it would be safe now to dump the guns and mingle with the staff and try to get away that way as there was no other hope, that he had already tried himself and could see no way out. In a corridor off what I believe was the Stationery Office, the offices were burning furiously and Tom Keogh and myself and, I think, Tom Flood with some other Volunteers from the 2nd Battalion after smashing our weapons threw them into the fire. From this moment on we felt very naked and at the mercy of the British who were already in the building. We mixed with the staff and eventually found ourselves outside the Custom House dock. In passing out there was a gentleman there with some Auxiliary officers who was identifying the staff but who did not identify myself, Tom Flood, Tom Keogh, Ned Breslin or Mick Dunne as members of the staff, and we were separated from them and brought down to another party on the Quays and ^{we} recognised them as all Volunteers. We were searched and during the search a hole was discovered in the lining of Ned Breslin's pocket and on feeling around at the back of his coat a round of ammunition was discovered and the Auxiliaries who were searching him took him out and gave him an unmerciful hiding. Ned Breslin was separated from us and after interrogation Tom Flood was also taken away. We were bundled into lorries and brought to Arbour Hill. Breslin and Flood, I afterwards discovered, were brought to Mountjoy. Mick Dunne, during the interrogation in his inimitable way, satisfied them that he was a quite respectable business man of the city and was allowed to go free. I might

mention that during the time we were on the Quay, which would be a good while, after about 2.30 or 3 0'clock our lads were still sniping from the south side of the river and, indeed, on our departure from the active scene of operations it was good to know that there were still people left outside who were not going to be subdued by the fact that more than half our number were either captured or killed.

We were kept in Arbour Hill for about a week or a fortnight when we were transferred to Kilmainham where we were kept until December 1921.

Signed: James J. Harper

Date: 21-6-51

Witness: William Ivory Bond

