

ORIGINAL

BUREAU OF MILITARY HISTORY 1913-21  
BURO STAIRE MILEATA 1913-21  
No. W.S. 555

ROINN  COSANTA.

BUREAU OF MILITARY HISTORY, 1913-21.

STATEMENT BY WITNESS

DOCUMENT NO. W.S. 555.....

Witness

Michael Leahy,  
Ard Muire,  
Upper Road,  
Cobh,  
Co. Cork.  
Identity.

Vice O/C. Cork I Brigade,  
1920-1921.

Subject.

Projected purchase of arms in Italy,  
1920-1921.

Conditions, if any, Stipulated by Witness.

Nil

File No. S.548.....

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STATEMENT BY MICHAEL LEAHY, "ARD MHUIRE",  
UPPER ROAD, COBH, RE PROJECTED PURCHASE  
OF ARMS IN ITALY, 1920-1921.

Following a decision to purchase arms in Italy, I was selected to proceed there and make contact with Donal Hales, a member of the well-known West Cork family. I was picked to accompany the arms ship from Genoa to Ireland and to act as pilot to bring her in to a landing place on the West Cork Coast. As I had served my apprenticeship to Marine engineering the intention was that I sign on as Engineer on the arms ship as a cover for my presence on board when in due course events would reach the appropriate stage.

Towards the end of 1920, I was Vice O.C. Cork No. 1 Brigade and I got my orders from Sean O'Hegarty, the Brigadier, to proceed to Dublin and report to Michael Collins to receive my passport for Italy. I travelled to Dublin on the 2nd January, 1921, and that evening contacted Gearoid O'Sullivan, the Adjutant General, at his office over the "Reliable Tailors" on the North Quays. He set off with me and made a very lengthy journey through many streets and eventually finished up at Devlin's public-house in Parnell Street, only the length of O'Connell Street from where we started. I asked Gearoid why the considerable detour had been made and he said one couldn't be too careful in these times in Dublin on account of the likelihood of being followed by enemy touts. Nevertheless, I had the suspicion that it was all done to impress me, the boy from the country. Actually, when we entered Liam Devlin's pub, I was surprised to find nearly all the G.H.Q. Staff assembled and a merry party in progress, this, despite Gearoid's intimation that Dublin was a dangerous place for the likes of him.

My choice of lemonade when whiskey was being pressed on me did not go down too well with Michael Collins who seemed to be master of the revels. The party was a prelude to the wedding next day of Tom Cullen, then, I think, Quartermaster General. Dick Mulcahy was in Devlins but was quiet in comparison with a number of the others, and was not drinking and left early. No reference was made to the reason for my journey to Dublin and it was not until next day after the wedding breakfast in the Wicklow, or perhaps it was Barry's Hotel, that the matter of providing me with a passport was discussed. As well as Collins I again saw Gearoid O'Sullivan and also Sean O'Muirthuille. It was decided that I proceed to Italy via London and Paris and that in London I contact Art O'Brien who would arrange for the provision of a passport for me, and in Paris I was to see Sean T. O'Kelly who could advise as to preliminary stages of the project, he having already been involved in it, as an important representative of ours on the Continent.

In London, I got in touch with Art O'Brien and Sean Mc Grath, and between them they contrived to make of the business of securing a passport a very hush hush matter altogether, with many warnings as to how I should deport myself when making application at the Foreign Office. I found that actually all I had to do in the first instance was to collect a form of which piles were there for the public to take away. However, when

it came to securing the name of a reputable person to witness as to my bona fides there was some difficulty, as I was supposed to pass myself off as a clerical student by the name of John C. Lane. Art O'Brien suggested a priest as being the best for the purpose but I couldn't see how any priest could vouch for me without cross-examining me as to upbringing, education, etc., and speedily finding me to be an impostor. The only thing to do was to find out an Irish priest of my acquaintance and favourable to the Movement. After some time I did this and in due course got my passport without any trouble. I have it still with my photo, birthplace, date of birth, assumed name and the information that I was a clerical student en route to Italy via France and Switzerland. I never had any trouble in leaving or entering British or other territory with this passport, and in fact I used it with the same particulars on it to enable me to travel to the United States after the Civil War here.

In Paris I met Seán T. O'Kelly and members of his staff, among them Michael MacWhite, and I was coached as to the part I should play in the arms project and the people I was to contact once I got to Genoa. I did arrive there ultimately, entering Italy by Modane on the Swiss border on 28th March.

I met Donal Hales in Genoa. He taught in the University there and was more like an Italian than an Irishman. In fact he had spent all his life from his youth up in Italy and was married to an Italian. It was his idea, I think, to secure a shipment of arms for the I.R.A. and he explained to me that D'Annunzio who, with a private army, had recently seized Fiume in the face of the Allies had likened his force to ours and his aspirations for Italy to our own efforts to be free. He introduced me to three of D'Annunzio's Officers in the Fiume coup and with my smattering of Italian I was able to talk to them and understand their attitude of sympathy towards us in our fight for freedom. England was apparently the arch enemy in connection with their endeavour to secure Fiume as Italian territory and one of them indeed, Captain Frugoni, had fought for the Boers against Britain. The other two - Captains Bardi and Lungie - were equally enthusiastic for our cause, but Frugoni wanted to accompany me back to Ireland in the arms ship and take a hand in the fight with us.

The ship was the "Stella Maris", a four-masted barque with an auxiliary engine, and was one of five ships owned by the Federazione della Mare, the powerful Seamen's Union. These ships normally sailed out of Genoa in ballast to England for cargoes of coal from Newcastle. This time, the "Stella Maris" instead of travelling light was going to carry rifles, machine guns, revolvers and proportionate ammunition to Ireland, unload at the pre-arranged landing place and then go on to Newcastle for coal for Italy. Contrary to what some think, there was to be no question of beaching the ship but boats were to put out to her and bring in the arms to shore.

As well as Genoa I was in Milan and Brescia and once I met D'Annunzio but I never met Mussolini. Actually he had not at that time attained the prominence he afterwards achieved. I met Madame Vivanti, too. She was a Journalist

on the "Corriere d'Italie" and was a most enthusiastic supporter of ours.

Time passed and soon began to drag as I began to worry. The arms were available in plenty and were to be had, not for the asking, but for the money, and no money was coming from Ireland. In fact, no dispatch about any part of the plan was arriving, neither reference to money, landing place, arrangements for receiving the arms or anything about the project at all. Madge, a sister of Donal Hales, came out to him on a holiday but she had no information for us either. The money given me for living expenses during my absence from Ireland was now diminishing and would have been gone long before had I put up at the hotel I was instructed to go in Genoa. This was the Bristol, the most swanky hotel in the place, and it was well I changed almost immediately to a more modest establishment. During this time, too, I was apparently expected to act as a booking agent for some of our representatives on the Continent as I received a cable from George Gavan Duffy in Barcelona to reserve a room with a bath in some hotel, maybe it was the Bristol. To have a bathroom all to oneself in a hotel in Genoa involved engaging a whole suite of rooms so Gavan Duffy had to be provided with the very best accommodation. I had to make the same arrangements for one Hamilton coming from Berlin where he was supposed to be trying to arrange for the purchase of arms. Neither of these gentlemen had anything to do with the project I was engaged on and in any case did not stay longer than a couple of days in Genoa.

Practically all the money I had been given had now run out despite my simple existence and I could foresee that very shortly I should have to use the small amount of my own. I was becoming desperate, not so much on account of the state of my finances, as because of no direction of any kind coming from Ireland to further the purchase of the arms. The ship was there in port and the owners were asking when was the venture coming to a head. I resolved to go to Paris and see Sean T. O'Kelly whose office was the channel through which any communication should come to us in Italy.

I went to Paris arriving there on Easter Sunday and found that Sean T. was in Brussels. None of his staff could enlighten me about the purchase money for the arms and I was making arrangements to stay in Paris and at the same time wondering how I could get money to cover expenses for I had hardly anything now but a £10 Bank of Ireland Note which I shouldn't have been able to change into French money. This note incidentally was my own money to be used by me only in the last resort. Suddenly, Sean T. O'Kelly arrived back in Paris that Easter Sunday night. Unfortunately, he had no news for me. He advised me, however, to go to London to Art O'Brien who, nearer Dublin and in closer contact should be urged to get something done by General Headquarters towards securing the Italian arms.

I left Paris the same night by the midnight Express and reached London next afternoon. I saw Art O'Brien and tried to get word from Dublin that there would be a move on for the purchase of the arms. But he could get nothing

out of them - nothing, except eventually that I was to return to Ireland. So back I went and without any explanation from Collins or anyone else as to the negative outcome to date of the project, I was attached to the Purchases Branch under Liam Mellowes.

I got tired of doing nothing for the next couple of months and resolved to return to Cork and take up my previous duties there. I left Dublin and was only a fortnight in the South when the Truce came.

From that day to this I never heard just how or why the purchase of the arms in Italy was not pursued and the gun running carried out according to plan. However, I drew my own conclusions. I used wonder, too, in what embarrassing position Donal Hales found himself vis a vis his Italian accomplices in consequence of the failure of the people at home to rise to the occasion and give him all the support and the finances necessary to carry through the project he did so much to shape.

Professor Liam O'Brien, now in University College, Galway, was not in Genoa when I arrived. He had been out there on a holiday some time before that and it was through him that Hales sent word to Collins of the possibility of getting the arms.

Signed: Michael Leahy

Witnessed: [Signature]

Date: May 5<sup>th</sup> 1951.

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Note.

One of the main arguments used by those in favour of acceptance of the articles of the agreement for a Treaty was the shortage of Arms and ammunition.

As Collins and some of those closely associated with him were continually engaged in overtures with "peace" representatives of the British Government from the autumn of 1920 up to the Truce of 11 July, 1921, it is possible that he (Collins) was simply playing for time so that with the people tired of war and the I.R.A. unable to procure any arms and ammunition from Headquarters, the way would then be clear to settle with Britain for something much less than a Republic.