

**ORIGINAL**

BUREAU OF MILITARY HISTORY 1913-21

BURO STAIRE MILEANTA 1913 21

No. W.S. 567

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BUREAU OF MILITARY HISTORY, 1913-21

STATEMENT BY WITNESS

DOCUMENT NO. W.S. 567

**Witness**

Professor Michael A. MacConaill,  
Wilton Park House,  
Cork.

**Identity.**

First Aid Instructor and  
Organiser of Medical Services, Belfast Brigade III  
Northern Division 1919-1921.

**Subject.**

- (a) His national activities 1917-1923;
- (b) First Aid and Organisation of Medical Services  
2nd Brigade, 3rd Northern Division, 1919-1921.

**Conditions, if any, Stipulated by Witness.**

Nil

File No S-1800

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BUREAU OF MILITARY HISTORY I. I -21

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STATEMENT BY PROFESSOR MICHAEL ALOYSIUS MacCONAILL,  
M.B., D.Sc., M.R.I.A., PROFESSOR OF ANATOMY,  
UNIVERSITY COLLEGE, CORK.

I was born in Ballymena, Co. Antrim. My father had been a member of the I.R.B. - the Kilrea Circle. My grandfather on my mother's side had been a member of O'Connell's Repeal Association. My mother, apparently a convinced Edwardian, when it came to the Coronation of the son, George V., displayed a green flag with a gold harp from one of our top windows. She was a close friend of the Aberdeens, who visited our house. She was constantly travelling to and from America from the age of 16. She travelled there a week or so before the 1914 War broke out and could not get back and while there assisted the Aberdeens in the organisation of comforts, etc., for the Allied soldiers. She secured a permit to travel back on a troop-ship in 1918, through the Aberdeens, who obtained it directly from George V. This was September. After a week or two she sized up the situation in Ireland and made it her business, when she could, to help in the national movement. In particular, during the War of Independence, first she took a leading part in securing the reprieve of the taximan who drove the section who executed Swanzy in Lisburn, making the fullest use of the Aberdeens for this purpose. Secondly, she visited the house of the MacMahon's on the morning of the murders and sent off the true facts of the case, and what she saw, to the American Press. At no time until after the 1921 Truce did she know that I had anything to do with the I.R.A. Some months after the Truce, Lady Aberdeen visited our house in Belfast and told my mother that they had visited George V. and that naturally, of course, the talk turned to Ireland and George told them that he had been disgusted by the fact that he could not see the people in Belfast ~~and~~ for the lives of armed men - soldiers and police, and that he had taken steps to bring about the moves which led to the Truce. I was at the meal at which Lady Aberdeen made this statement.

My first school, a small private school in Ballymena, run by two English women, both Church of England, who taught me my catechism and hymns and who gave me the rudimenta of Irish history, as well as other subjects, including French. All the other pupils were from the chief Unionist families of the town, one of them later becoming a Commandant in the local 'B' Specials. At the age of 11 the family moved to Belfast and I was sent to the Oxford Street Christian Brothers' school, where my maternal uncle had been before me. On the second day I flatly refused to be taught Irish. At the age of 13 I transferred to the secondary school of St. Mary's Christian Brothers' school. At that school several of my schoolmates were members of Fianna Eireann and one carried the I.V. badge. In 1917 I bought a copy of "The Resurrection of Hungary" and saw that there was a very real possibility of achieving the national aim in Griffith's form, because I thought it would enable Unionists and other Royalists to take part. Then in 1918 my father and I were the first two people to sign the pledge against conscription in St. Patrick's Christian Brothers' schools on the particular Sunday. It was at that meeting that I first saw members of the I.R.A. and realised that leadership had unquestionably passed to people of that sort. I was still uncertain about the moral standing of an army not subject to an

over-riding authority, although the position of the I.R.A. in the anti-conscription fight was clearly legitimate. In the ensuing election I very unwillingly worked for De Valera's candidature against that of Joe Devlin, who was a great friend of my father and whom I liked as a man whose heart and soul were with the sweated workers of both the Falls Road and elsewhere in Belfast. But by this time it seemed clear to me that De Valera stood for one's duty as distinct from one's inclinations and so I donned the tricolour badge of his helpers. I went up amongst Joe Devlin's supporters in fear and trembling and it took the utmost effort not to conceal the tricolour when it received a roar of opprobrium.

When Dail Eireann was constituted in 1919 I did what a schoolboy would to try and make even some policemen see the light, without success in the last case. In the Summer of 1919 I took my Senior Grade Honours in the Intermediate, with the Medal in English and the First Prize for my essay on "Geography and World Power", as well as a First Class Exhibition and other prizes (in the Middle Grade Examination I had taken, inter alia, the Medal for History and Historical Geography). I then took the entrance Scholarship Examination to Queen's University, Belfast, with first place in it and was awarded, in addition, a special scholarship for taking first place in Physics and Chemistry. I was then turning 17 years of age.

I went up to Queen's to study medicine in the Autumn. Half the class consisted of ex-servicemen from the British Forces, with whom I became very friendly; and, as a result, I saw that my duty was to do what they had done after their fights and to join our own Army. I looked around my fellow Catholic students in Queens, got four other names and brought them to the "Sinn Fein Shop" in Divis Street. I asked for somebody who could tell me about the I.R.A. A man was brought out who took my list of names, looked at me very coldly, tore them up immediately into very small pieces and let me know that if he wanted me they would inform me.

In the ensuing months I became accepted as the spokesman of the Nationalist students but heard no word from the Army until the late Spring of 1920 when I was asked to make reports (as I now know) to Intelligence. I brought such things as the layout of the Queen's O.T.C. training hall and the disposition of the armoury and ordnance; and also occasional reports about the layout of the yards and out-offices of certain houses in the Belfast neighbourhood to which my voice and way of speaking could gain me entrance on one pretext or another. By this time a certain clerical student, now a priest, from Portglenone had become increasingly a companion at Queens, and at the Easter vacation of that year he suddenly asked me would I go up to that district and give some instruction to the members of the Cumann na mBan, telling me to appear as if I were just a casual holiday-maker. I did so, to a few. In order to do this I had to teach myself First Aid using the current R.A.M.C. textbooks for the purpose. I was much helped in doing this by the fact that I already knew my anatomy and physiology from the standpoint of a medical student who had had good teachers. At the beginning of the Summer vacation I was instructed to report to Glenravel at the house of a Mrs. O'Loan. This turned out to be the H.Q. of the 2nd Brigade, IIIrd Northern Division, and I was shown into the room used by a certain Frank McCorley, who was Adjutant to

Rory Fitzpatrick, the O.C. Brigade. There he instructed me to give instruction in first aid and kindred matters to the Volunteers and Cumann na mBan in that neighbourhood and I was given accommodation near by and a week later the Oath was administered to me by Fitzpatrick in the presence of McCorley and some other persons. From that time forward until the Truce my time was divided between my studies and the 2nd Brigade, for I slowly increased the region over which I organised the First Aid training to all members of the Volunteers and Cumann na mBan. I formed Depots of First Aid material in various places in the area. In the Spring of 1921 I was given a second and conjoint assignment in the Belfast Brigade, looking after the area, covering the Battalion on the North side of the Lagan. By this time I was attending the normal meetings of the 2nd Brigade Staff as a regular member of it and the normal meetings of the Battalion Staffs of the area in the Belfast Brigade.

In the Summer of 1920 Swanzy was killed in Lisburn. The disturbance began in Lisburn. The active struggle in Belfast started in the early afternoon of a certain Sunday. After lunch I immediately hurried round to the Mater Hospital, offering my services to deal with casualties and making arrangements with the junior medical staff and the nuns to have those persons whom I would name screened off and entered in the casualty books with such names and addresses as I chose to give.

After 1925, when I qualified in medicine, I did locums in Belfast, all in Orange districts, for Protestant doctors. From time to time such people as a husband of a wife in childbirth would remark that the town was now quiet or something of that sort and would recount their experiences at their end, obviously taking me to be of the right sort. On one occasion in the Summer of 1927 a father in Denmark Street (which runs down to Carrick Hill, where the Belfast fighting began) told me that the Fenians had intended to attack them but that they got in first. Again, a little earlier, there had been a revival in the Protestant areas and I had myself heard "converted" people giving testimony to the murders which they said they had committed at the time of the disturbances in Belfast. During the whole of the period from 1919 to the end of these disturbances I was able to pass freely through the Orange districts, thanks to my knowledge of their re-actions to the particular tone of voice I had learnt at my first school, and used such routes as short cuts when passing from one Battalion area to another when time was important.

After a month or two of service in the Mater Hospital (after hours in Queens) it was clear that the mortality rates from gunshot wounds were unduly high, due for the most part to shock and the long delay in getting the victims to hospital because of the difficulty ambulances had getting to or from the areas of conflict. They were often fired on. Furthermore, scenes which recalled those of the Place de la Guillotine in Paris took place almost daily at the gates of Mater Hospital, which was in a hostile district. The women of the district used to gather with their knitting and await the arrival of the ambulances. They assumed that all persons coming there were Nationalists, in plain words, Catholics, would cheer their arrival, jeer at the patients and often try to tear the clothes from them. Nevertheless, no effort was ever made to impede the passage of doctors, medical students or priests.

As a result of my hospital experience I recommended to the Army authorities in Belfast that properly equipped First Aid stations should be set up in the various Nationalist areas on both North and South sides of the Lagan, and that medical students from the Mater Hospital should be put in charge of them with a rota of duty and with provision for increased training of Army personnel and people of the district in First Aid. Small supplies of morphia were placed in those stations, with directions for its use. Each station contained a store of triangular and roller bandages, together with field dressings, iodine and cotton wool. These stations were set up in kitchen houses in the immediate neighbourhood of the danger areas. These supplies were kept up to strength under my direction, and it was a part of the duty of the medical students mentioned in the next paragraph to see how these supplies stood from week to week.

Within a week or two the results of this activity were seen and the mortality rates dropped considerably. This organisation was adhered to until the end of the conflict in Belfast. The medical students in question did their duty well. Many of them (e.g. the present Dr. E.F. McEntee) were members of the Army, others were not, as far as I know. Certain districts, for example the Ardoyne area (the Marrowbone), the North side and the Short Strand area - South side, could often only be approached by running a car in unobtrusively and could only be left by running the same car out at full speed, often followed by bullets. In the Marrowbone area, in particular, which is overlooked by high ground commanded by the Orange element, attendance to casualties had often to be undertaken under heavy fire, and at night time under enemy searchlights.

I speak of these things from my own experiences in the areas. For myself, I always went unarmed, acting on the notion that medical officers should not carry arms. Nevertheless, since a state akin to that of continuous trench warfare existed in Belfast for several years my duties exposed me to the same risks as that of a R.A.M.C. man on the Western Front, and on two occasions I was deliberately fired upon as an individual believed to be a member of the Army. Furthermore, my own house was twice attacked by a disciplined crowd with petrol; the leader of this crowd (a redhaired man much given to a blue suit and very yellow boots) later found himself, to his affright, a patient of mine when I was a house surgeon in the Mater Hospital. In addition, our house was several times raided by the R.I.C., but I had made it a practice not to store anything of a confidential kind in it.

For my own part I looked after the stations in my own areas on the North side and advised those working on the South side. As often as not, the visits to the stations were made under fire. Sometimes the fire was drawn by throwing a coat across a side street and then following quickly, for these streets were narrow enough to enable this to be done. The chief areas where this manoeuvre was necessary were (1) the district between York Street (enemy) and North Queen Street (loyal) and (2) between the Falls and Shankill Roads. The Medical Officers' meetings were usually held in the Mater Hospital for obvious reasons.

After the Truce and before the Treaty my time was divided between Belfast and Antrim - the 2nd Brigade. There was intensified and extended training of Army Units from Fair Head to

*was tested*

Durgan. In this area I was a Brigade Officer and my duties were twofold, first to organise the setting up of the above-mentioned units and, secondly, to organise the training of the personnel; thirdly, to organise the equipment of First Aid depots over the wider area now possible. During this time I was frequently taken for a combat training officer by the Special Constabulary and on one occasion an attempt was made to kill me indirectly by neatly sawing through the front bar of my bicycle while on a journey from Ballymena to Parkmore. My journey on assignments were made as far as possible by indirect routes sometimes by cycle, but as often by walking, sometimes 25 miles in one day, as this was the best way to get a knowledge of the whole terrain of County Antrim. My walking routes covered pathways on hills and dry ways through bogland, so as to find possible routes for removal of casualties in case of a resumption of the fighting. The training given to this Brigade in the local Rising which took place in the Glens Area in 1922 when casualties were treated in the area of conflict, several of them reaching the Mater Hospital efficiently First Aided and without sepsis.

During the whole period I have spoken of I made it my business to be on constant circuit over both Brigade areas seeing at least one medical post every week and keeping the personnel of these posts up to training, both in drill and First Aid practice:

In the last year of the Battle of Belfast this aim became increasingly difficult to achieve because the Nationalist population were increasingly filled with a revengeful spirit which had been remarkably absent up to that time. There appeared to be a greater disposition for local units to act upon their own ~~and was~~ complicated by the division (caused by the outbreak of the Civil War in the South) and the organisation of the medical side dissolved step by step. Fortunately, this coincided with the stoppage of the attack upon the Nationalist population which had maintained its defence with increasing success and a lessening of casualties as shown by admission of casualties to the main hospitals. Further, the ranks of the Volunteers were depleted either by departures to join the uniformed Army in Dublin and partly by increasing numbers of arrests under the Special Powers Act of the Six County Executive. Therefore, at some period in 1923, which I cannot remember distinctly, I regarded myself as effectively demobilised. I had taken care to retrieve all supplies of dangerous drugs (morphia, strychnine) which I had had placed in the First Aid depots throughout the city and such parts of the County of Antrim as I could reach; and this ends the consecutive part of my story.

I then resumed my normal course of studies at the University in Belfast.

I had taken an Honours Science degree in 1922; in 1925 I qualified in medicine, in 1926 I was awarded the Musgrave Studentship in Anatomy at Q.U.B., in 1927 I became demonstrator in Anatomy in Q.U.B., and in 1928 senior demonstrator; in the same year I was awarded the degree of M.Sc., in Anatomy, was awarded the Medical Travelling Studentship and went to University College, London, in 1929. I was made senior demonstrator in anatomy in the University of Sheffield and in the following year I was raised to full time lecturer; later I became Fellow of

the Royal Anthropological Institute and the University's representative at international congresses of anthropology, in 1938 I was made one of Sheffield University's five A.R.P. Officers, my post being that of Medical Officer; my task was to instruct the whole staff in First Aid and to repeat on a small scale what I had done in Ireland but with roughly the same number of people. Here I found my I.R.A. experience invaluable in determining what should and what should not be taught or practised. In 1939 I was (a) asked, in addition, to become the second Medical Officer at one of the Sheffield A.R.P. Stations which dealt with both First Aid and casualty clearance; this station was in action during the two blitzes on Sheffield, (b) I was asked to become a Divisional Examiner in A.R.P. to the city of Sheffield in the period immediately preceding the outbreak of war and was one of the group who selected the personnel for active service in civil defence on the results of the examinations carried out by myself, again based upon my Irish experience. One week before the outbreak of war I was asked by the Vice Chancellor of the University to be one of a group of some half dozen people to sit on a board for the selection of technical officers; this board had also to determine whether applicants unfit for technical branches should be allowed to attest as potential infantry officers.

After Dunkirk I was asked to take on the training in hygiene of that part of the British Army training in Sheffield for foreign service and also to act as one of the corps of lecturers in general cultural subjects to the armies in training in the Northern Midlands.

Some months after the cessation of disturbances in Belfast I was approached by a Commandant of the 'A' Special Constabulary whose area was on the south side of the Lagan. This man was a cousin of Lord Inchiquin and served as an Officer in the British Forces during the 1914-1918 War. He had then joined the Special Constabulary believing it to be a regular police force in the accepted sense. He became increasingly aware that this was not so; that it was in practice indisciplined and biased in its behaviour in the Belfast disturbances; further he observed that the effective control of the district in which he was working was exercised by a body called the Ulster Protestant Defence Association, which body had begun to levy blackmail taxation upon the shopkeepers of this wholly Orange area. Numerous complaints had been made to him by the shopkeepers but his attempts to deal with it were thwarted at the higher level. Finally he took advantage of the wording of the Special Powers Act, arrested some twenty men without cause shown, as he was entitled to do, and (he said) had them transferred to the "Argenta". He then sent in his resignation. It is significant that not a shot was fired in Belfast after this occurrence. Secondly, he informed me that there was a definite plot to have a raid across the Border by the Special Constabulary 'A' and 'B' which would have the effect of starting a gracas which could lead to a military reoccupation of Ireland from the North. He asked me to take him to Dublin to lay the matter before the Irish authorities, he to pay all expenses of travel and hotel. He told me that he was not seeking any post. I accepted, brought him to Dublin a couple of days later and rang up Eoin MacNeill whom I knew personally. The following day he was interviewed by some responsible group, including MacNeill, Diarmuid O'Hegarty

being present at the interview. Mr. O'Hegarty told me after the interview that the Executive Council had already known the main features of this affair and that his statement, though not new, corroborated what was known already.

As an example of the working of the hospital arrangements: On a certain day the O.C. Belfast Brigade (Roger McCorley) was shot in the thigh and had his femur fractured. He was brought into the Mater Hospital between 5 and 6 o'clock. I happened to be in the casualty department and at once issued orders to the Superioress that this man ought to be transferred immediately to the St. John's Nursing Home (opposite the hospital and run by the same Order) and that he was to be put in the room next to D.I. McConnell who had been injured in the same way on the same day. This I thought to be the safest way of placing our O.C., Further, no notice was to be taken whatsoever of his being admitted to the Mater Hospital and the surgeon most competent to deal with fractures was to be sent for to attend him. These things were done within the space of half an hour.

During the Summer and Autumn of 1921 it was observed to me by an officer of the 2nd or Co. Antrim Brigade that the absence on leave of a certain Special Constable stationed in the Glenravel district was invariably accompanied by the throwing of a bomb from Townshend Street into the Falls Road. Somewhat later, I was on duty in the casualty department of the Mater Hospital in Belfast when an ambulance arrived about 6 p.m. with a Special Constable whose three middle fingers were each hanging from his hand by a single tendon. I asked him his name and address which were those we had discovered to be proper to the Special Constable above-mentioned. I then asked him whether he had held the bomb too long after pulling the pin and he answered sorrowfully "Yes". The etiquette of medicine prevented me from preparing any legal charge against him.

At this late date, however, it is probably correct to say that a search of the casualty record book of the hospital of the appropriate date would show an entry signed by myself of the amputation of three fingers of a named Special Constable living at a specified number in Townshend Street, Belfast.

Thanks to my University Scholarships I had a small banking account with the Munster and Leinster Bank, High St., Belfast. Occasionally I would be given a cheque for a considerable sum, a hundred pounds or more, from G.H.Q., in Dublin, which I would lodge to this account. When required the sum would be given to me in notes by the then Manager (Mr. O'Driscoll) in his own office and I would give this to the appropriate Army authority in Belfast, having carried the sum distributed over all my clothes. I would remark here that the Manager took this kind of transaction as a normal occurrence, although he knew the purposes for which the money was lodged and withdrawn.

Signed: Michael A. Mac Conaill

Witnessed: [Signature] [Signature]

31st August, 1951.

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