

ORIGINAL

BUREAU OF MILITARY HISTORY 1913-21

BURO STAIRE MILEATA 1913-21

No. W.S. 598

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BUREAU OF MILITARY HISTORY, 1913-21.

STATEMENT BY WITNESS

DOCUMENT NO. W.S. 598

Witness

Garda John T. Connolly,
Balbriggan,
Co. Dublin.

Identity.

Captain, Roslea (Co. Fermanagh) Company
Irish Volunteers, 1918 - .

Subject.

- (a) National activities, Co. Fermanagh, 1914-1922;
- (b) Belfast Trade Boycott, 1920;
- (c) Burning of Unionist and Nationalist houses,
Co. Fermanagh, 1920.

Conditions, if any, Stipulated by Witness.

Nil

File No.S.1854.....

Form B.S.M. 2

ORIGINAL

Evidence of Garda John Thomas Connolly,
Balbriggan, Co. Dublin

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I was born in Tannaghboy, Roslea, Co. Fermanagh, in June 1899. The population of my native area is composed of a small farming community. The area is thickly populated with a small Unionist majority.

In 1914 the Volunteers were organised in Roslea area. I was not a member, being only of schoolboy age at the time. My father insisted that I join the Volunteers. The 1914 organisation ceased to exist after a short time. I took little interest in the Volunteers at this time and it was only in or about the end of 1918, when Sinn Fein and the Volunteers were again being organised, that I took a serious interest in matters political.

It was General Eoin O'Duffy who first came to Roslea to organise the Volunteers in 1918. When the company was formed I was appointed company captain; Patrick Prunty 1st Lieut. and James Flynn, 2nd Lieutenant. Edward McGuinness was appointed adjutant and Charles Began was appointed Quartermaster

During the year 1919 and in early half of 1920, the company's principal activities were drilling and training. We had the use of a local hall in Roslea and we took part in rifle drill there, using wooden guns for drill purposes. The R.I.C. had evacuated their barracks in Roslea early in 1920. I attended a meeting of the Volunteers in Scotshouse at which Eoin O'Duffy presided, where the question of burning all evacuated R.I.C. barracks in the area was discussed. The question of burning Roslea Barracks came up. As the local Catholic Curate lived next door to the barracks and as at this time he was ill and confined to bed, it was decided not to burn the barracks.

The first public parade in which we took part as a company

of Volunteers was the attendance at the funeral of a young man named Keenan, who was shot dead in a raid for firearms on a near Monaghan town. This shooting took place during the general raid for arms about September 1920.

Some time after the R.I.C. had evacuated the barracks in Roslea they returned to the village one night in motor tenders and raided the hall where we were in the habit of drilling and they seized all our equipment.

The next important event in our area was the carrying out of the Belfast trade boycott by Sinn Fein assisted by the Volunteers. In connection with this boycott, General O'Duffy wrote a draft letter intended for all traders who did business with Belfast trading houses. He handed me a copy of this letter with instructions that a copy of it should be written out and posted to all traders dealing with Belfast houses. This letter forbade, in the name of the Irish Republic, the handling or sale of all Belfast merchandise. I did as ordered and posted the letters at midday on the same day as I got the orders.

There was another man named Sean Connolly - no relation of mine - who lived in the village of Roslea. This man was married and much older than I and was active in Sinn Fein circles. On the evening that letters I had sent out forbidding the sale of Belfast goods were delivered in Roslea by the postman a Unionist trader named Lester, who lived opposite Sean Connolly, and had received one of my letters, rushed across the road and into Connolly's house with a revolver in his hand and demanded to know from Mrs. Connolly where her husband was. When he could not find Connolly he left the house. This Lester was a member of the Special Constabulary and was armed with a revolver supplied by the British authorities.

Shortly after the above incident, Sean Connolly came to my house and made a report to me of what had happened at his house.

I immediately sent a dispatch to General O'Duffy giving details of the affair. I got a dispatch in reply from O'Duffy ordering me to have Lester shot.

On the following Monday morning Coy/Lieut. Patrick Prunty, myself and another Volunteer went into Roslea armed with two shotguns and a revolver. We took up positions at the Market House which was opposite Lester's house and about 100 yards distant and we waited until we saw Lester opening his shop door when we fired on him. Lester was wounded. Then Lester's brother jumped out of the shop door and opened fire in our direction with a revolver. We had only five cartridges for our two shotguns and one of the guns misfired, so that only one shot was fired at Lester. When Lester's brother fired on us we retreated out of the village. When we got about half a mile from Roslea, two Unionists and B. Specials named Magwood came out of their house in an attempt to cut off our retreat. The Magwoods had heard the shooting in Roslea. When they saw that we were carrying firearms they made no effort to intercept us.

When I got back to my own house which was about $1\frac{1}{2}$ miles from Roslea, I harnessed two horses and went to plough with a neighbour named Cassidy. I heard at dinner hour that R.I.C. Specials and military forces were in Roslea and that a threat was used to burn the village that night. Later on that evening from the field in which I was working I saw different families getting out their furniture and belongings in preparation to evacuate their houses. I saw Sean Connolly, already mentioned, with his wife passing on a byroad leaving the village. There was an exodus from the village in all directions.

That night nearly all the Catholic houses in the village were burned. Police came into the village and took over Flynn's publichouse and the market house - the two largest

buildings in the village. Any of the few Catholics remaining in the village on the night of the burning were thrown out of their homes which were set on fire. Flynn, the publican, took over the local village hall when his pub was commandeered by the police and there resumed business after the fire.

Sometime within the next four weeks General O'Duffy, who had been out of his own area organising in Co. Tyrone, returned to our area. In discussing the happenings in Roslea he expressed the opinion that an Orange house should be burned for each Catholic house burned as a reprisal. He called a meeting in Boyle's, Derryhinlish, for the purpose of discussing the question of reprisals. I attended this meeting and I cannot now remember the number of officers who attended the meeting. There were various expressions of opinion from some of the officers present as to the advisability of the postponed burnings and also as to the number of Unionist houses which should be burned. On the question of shooting members of the B.Specials, General O'Duffy asked me as a local officer for my opinion about the attitude of the local nationalist population, and if they would stand behind the I.R.A. when the reprisals were carried out. Being young at the time and feeling an intense resentment against the wanton burning of so many nationalist houses in my area, I expressed approval for the carrying out serious reprisals on the houses and in some cases on the persons of those responsible. During the holding of this meeting a strong armed guard was placed on Boyle's house to prevent the British forces making a surprise raid on the place of meeting. A large reward was also offered for the capture of General O'Duffy and, for this reason, a guard on the house was essential.

During the course of the meeting the door of the room in which the meeting was held was suddenly opened and a stranger stepped into the room. This created a feeling of shocked surprise to many of us, especially when the stranger said to

General O'Duffy: "I have got you at last". It was lucky that General O'Duffy recognised the stranger as Frank Aiken, or he might have been shot. After Aiken's arrival, O'Duffy and he started a discussion on the Roslea business. Frank Aiken did not at first approve of the burnings, as he thought that the B.men would retaliate by burning double the number of nationalist houses. O'Duffy struck the table and said: "When you hit them hard they will not strike again". Aiken then said: "Well, burn them and their houses".

It was arranged to burn a number of the Unionist houses. Later on a date was fixed as exactly one month after the night the nationalist houses were burned. All the neighbouring companies were detailed to take part in the operation and about from 8 to 10 men were detailed to attack each house selected for reprisals. This number for each house might include the scout or scouts supplied by the Roslea company to take the attackers to the vicinity of their appointed objectives.

Superintendent James McKenna, our brigade O/C. and Comdt. Mathew Fitzpatrick were jointly in charge of the operations. Supt. McKenna was with one of the parties and Comdt. Fitzpatrick was in charge at a house where shooting took place, where he was wounded and where the owner of the house received fatal gunshot wounds. The shooting of the owner of this house was not part of the plans. Frank Connolly, a cousin of mine, was the scout at this particular house, and he also received a gunshot wound. After this affair, and after he arrived home at his father's house, his father told him that the police had been at the house looking for him and that before they left the place they shot two dogs. His father advised him to leave from about the place as the police would likely return. Connolly then went away and, when about a mile on his way towards the mountains, he was fired on by B.men and wounded. He made good his escape, and a horse and cart was procured for him and he was conveyed

to Clones and there he was attended to by a Dr. Tierney. After this medical attention, he went to a place belonging to Edward Reilly near Eishakiernan.

In one particular burning - Nixon's - it was decided to shoot Nixon in addition to the burning of his house. The officer in charge of the attackers decided, however, not to burn the house on account of Nixon's large family. The shooting of Nixon was carried out.

My part in those operations was in charge of a party of about six men who were posted at a bridge between the police barracks in Flynn's pub in Roslea and Magwoods house where there was a burning. It was our duty to keep a fire on the police barracks if any attempt was made by the police to come out to relieve the attacks on Magwood's or Nixon's. Those two houses were attacked by Derrygannon Company.

I don't know now how many houses were burned. I do know that approximately 21 houses were listed for burning and the plans for the burnings provided that all the fires should be started at midnight. Some of the houses listed were not attacked and in a few cases the attackers were beaten off without effecting their purposes.

There were 12 to 14 Catholic houses burned by the B.men in the first reprisal for the wounding of Lester. After Lester's wounding he was removed to Monaghan Hospital and the question of shooting this man in the hospital was at one time being discussed.

After the Roslea affair we had all to go on the run and sleep away from home. We could take no chances of either being seen by B.men or being captured by Crown forces.

We carried out a raid for arms on Unionist - B.men - houses after Roslea. I cannot now remember if it was shortly before the

Truce in July 1921, or after the Truce. A number of us went to Derrygannon area. We called first at a house belonging to people named Warrington, about 11.30 p.m. on a summer night. The inmates of the house were the father, two sons and two daughters, and all were praying in the dwellinghouse. Our walking in on them came as a complete surprise and the two boys made an attempt to get outside when we arrived. In preventing the boys going out we explained to the inmates of the house that we were calling to get their firearms. They then took us out to the barn loft where all the household beds were arranged and we found that each member of the family had arms at their bedsides - girls included. We also found a quantity of ammunition in a winnowing machine also in the loft. At this time we knew that all Unionists had received secret instructions to sleep in their out-offices as a protection against raids on their dwellinghouses and to keep their arms convenient to their bedsides.

We got rather elated by our success at Warrington's and we proceeded to go to a place belonging to a Unionist family named Anderson for the purpose of also raiding the premises. When we arrived at Anderson's we took up positions opposite the dwellinghouse and behind a fence. One of our men named Peter Devlin crept up to the door either to force an entrance or demand admission. Before he reached the door fire was opened on us from our rear in the fields. We replied to this fire and retreated from our positions.

The inmates of this house undoubtedly knew that we were coming in their direction and were in positions to receive us if we made any hostile move against them. However, the night's raiding produced material that made a valuable addition to our armament. We got 3 rifles and 2 revolvers and a quantity of

ammunition in Warrington's.

From early in 1920 onwards, the Roslea Company carried out a regular system of road blocking and the cutting of telegraph and telephone wires. This phase of our activities had a certain annoyance value and it kept the British forces on the alert and, to some extent, kept forces on the spot locally that might otherwise have been transferred to suppress activities in other areas.

During the Truce period I attended a training camp at Laughbawn near Ballybay for two weeks. There were little activities during the first six months of the Truce period except training and drilling.

About mid-January 1922 a number of 5th Northern Division officers, including Dan Hogan, Divisional O/C., were travelling through Northern Ireland to take part in a Gaelic football match in Derry when they were held up and searched by Special Constabulary at Dromore, Co. Tyrone. Arms were found on some of the officers and they were detained as prisoners. When demands made for their release were ignored we received orders to kidnap a number of Unionists from Six County territory and hold them as hostages. Lists were made out of men for capture in each area. I got orders that I was to capture a Mr. Lester, a creamery manager. I went back into Roslea in preparation for this operation and I remained for about a week indoors awaiting the orders to seize my man when the appointed time had arrived. The expected orders did not arrive and I returned to Co. Monaghan again. Some days later, at about 6 p.m., I got instructions to carry out the operation at 12 o'clock that night. I went into Roslea but failed to get Lester as he was not there. I then looked around to see what would be the next best and I decided to kidnap a policeman. I went into Keenan's pub in Roslea,

but found no policeman there. I got information, however, that there was a policeman in a house outside Roslea village where he was visiting a girl. I then went to a Mr. Kerr who had a car for hire and I asked him to have a car out at my future brother-in-law's place as I was taking my future wife to a dance. I was waiting outside this place when the car arrived. I showed Kerr a revolver and told him I was on an official job and he was to drive me as directed. I was driven to the house where the policeman was. I knocked on the door and the owner - Robert Martin - opened the door. I said: "Goodnight, Robert" and I walked past Martin in the doorway and the policeman in a room sitting with Martin's daughter. I told him to come with me out to the car. I searched him and I told him that I was taking him to Laughbawn Camp as a reprisal for the arrest and detention of our officers. When I got time to examine my prisoner I found that he was a fine big fat sergeant. The poor fellow was so scared that I purchased a half-pint of whiskey for him in Scotstown and I gave it to him. When I arrived at Bawn Camp I found that I had the first prisoner of the night there. Later, other prisoners arrived and we took them all into the barracks in Ballybay where they were detained and I returned to our billets near the Fermanagh border in Co. Monaghan.

In early 1922 the Northern Government started to consolidate their position within the Six County area. Heavy lorry patrols of military and police were sent around on all the country roads. B.Specials commenced to carry out armed patrols in all local areas; a system of halting and questioning people going about their own business was introduced and Government forces, both police and military, commenced to put up defences on all roads crossing the frontiers into Southern Ireland road; bridges were being destroyed on the border line between Co. Fermanagh and Co. Monaghan. As it appeared to us

that the British authorities in the north were preparing for a period of complete isolation which would prevent all access to and from Southern Ireland, we commenced a campaign of activities to prevent the cutting of road communications. We fired on and attacked all patrols of British forces - police or military - travelling in the vicinity of the frontier and in northern frontier districts. We had, at this time, evacuated northern border territory and were operating from Co. Monaghan. In effect, we acted as an armed guard on the Co. Monaghan side of the northern frontier. We were supplied with ammunition from Clones barracks. We had to use the arms, rifles, etc. belonging to the pre-Truce I.R.A. as the authorities in Clones barracks would not give us rifles which were handed over by the British military when they were preparing to evacuate Southern Ireland. It was not considered good policy at this time to risk the capture of such arms by Northern Government forces.

I joined the Civic Guards in November 1922, and so ended all connections with military or political activity in Northern Ireland.

Signed: John J. Connolly

Date: 12th Oct. 1951

Witness: M. Connolly
12/10/51

