

ORIGINAL

BUREAU OF MILITARY HISTORY 1913-21

BURO STAIRÉ MILEATA 1913-21

No. W.S. 655

ROINN



COSANTA.

BUREAU OF MILITARY HISTORY, 1913-21.

STATEMENT BY WITNESS

DOCUMENT NO. **W.S.** 655

Witness

Miss Nora Thornton,
12 Rathgar Road,
Dublin.

Identity.

Member of Cumann na mBan, Liverpool, 1915 - ;
Courier to Tralee, Easter Monday, 1916.

Subject.

- (a) Delivery of despatch to Tralee, Easter Monday 1916;
- (b) Biographical note on her brothers, Frank, Hugh, and Paddy.

Conditions, if any, Stipulated by Witness.

Nil

File No. .S.1944

Form B.S.M. 2

ORIGINAL

BUREAU OF MILITARY HISTORY 1913-21
BURO STAIRÉ MILCATA 1913-21
NO. W.S. 655

STATEMENT BY NORA THORNTON,

12 RATHGAR ROAD, DUBLIN.

We started Cumann na mBan in 1915 in Liverpool where my family - my father and three brothers and sisters - lived. We were from Drogheda and the whole family emigrated to Liverpool when we children were very young. My mother died shortly after leaving Drogheda.

I went into business in Liverpool. We joined the Gaelic League and started the Branch of Cumann na mBan about the same time as my brother Frank started the Volunteers. Then came the danger of conscription and we decided to come over to Dublin. Frank came first; then my brothers Hugh and Paddy, and myself as well as several other members of the Volunteers and Cumann na mBan. The boys went to Kimmage Camp. Frank secured a job for me in Mrs. O'Keeffe's Farm Produce shop in Camden Street.

I joined Inghinidhe Branch of Cumann na mBan as soon as I came to Dublin and we carried on with the preparations for the Rising. We knew there was to be a Rising in or about Easter, but we were not sure of the day.

My chief activity was attending first aid classes and drill in the hall in Camden St. where the Inghini Branch met. I think it was Captain Lon Kennedy drilled us, but I am not positive. I did not know the names very well.

The girls I remember that came over from Liverpool were Kathleen Murphy, a teacher, who went back to Liverpool after the Rising. She was with the boys in Jacob's and she finished up in the G.P.O.; Peggy Downey and Frances Downey, sisters. Peggy was in the G.P.O. and did most of the cooking during the week. She also went back and resumed her work as a cook in Liverpool. Frances was in Jacob's and she, too, finished up in the Post Office. Miss Fleming, a teacher, was another who came from Liverpool. She was sent, I think by Frank - who was

asked to get some girls who were not known - with a dispatch to Mullingar to say the Rising was starting. She is dead. I lost touch with all these girls and I don't know how they got on afterwards, except Kathleen Murphy, who is married.

All the Liverpool girls went up to the Castle after the Rising was over and said they had come over on a holiday, were held up by the Rising and had lost their tickets and everything and couldn't get back. The Castle authorities gave them their fares and they all went back and resumed their jobs, except myself.

Sean McDermott sent Frank with a dispatch to me on Easter Monday morning to carry to Tralee. A very funny thing happened about that dispatch. It was addressed to Paddy Cahill, c/o Father Joe Breen. I wasn't up when Frank came with the dispatch I had only time to get up and get a taxi for the 9 o'clock train which I caught. Peggy Downey, who was also staying at O'Keeffe's came to the station with me to see me off. I reached Tralee without any hitch. I called at the Presbytery, but Fr. Breen was not there; he was gone to Killarney for the day. I went to the Hotel, I think it was Benner's, to await his return. I went back several times to the Presbytery up to 11 o'clock that night I did not see him till the next morning when I delivered the dispatch. It was then too late, but it was not my fault. It was unfortunate that they had not given me an alternative address. I did not know anyone in Tralee and I could not very well start inquiring for Paddy Cahill. Fr. Breen was very upset that he should have been away that day above all days. My mind, too, was a hell to me during all the time. The police were watching any stranger that came into the town and made inquiries about me, so I was told to go on to Castlemaine where I had a friend. As far as I remember, I was brought by Fr. Breen to where the Volunteers were and met Cahill early on Tuesday and I think I also met Kate Breen.

I know nothing of the reactions of the Tralee Volunteers to my dispatch. They did not discuss it in my presence, as far as I can remember. Of course, I was young and inexperienced at the time - about 20, and I felt a stranger. I did not know many people in Dublin either.

I stayed in Castlemaine until the first train to Dublin ran; I can't say when that was. During that week I suffered a lot thinking of my three brothers who were in the fight in Dublin and wondering when I could get back there. I was also worried that my dispatch could not be delivered on the Monday of my arrival. The fact that I was not able to get back to Dublin and take part in the fight prevented me getting full credit for Easter Week service when I was claiming a pension. It was not my fault that I could not get back; there were no trains till the following week.

When I came back to Dublin the first sight that met me was a bunch of prisoners being marched along the quays to the North Wall. Of course, I had to walk from the station to Camden St. as there were no trams or taxis.. When I got to the Farm Produce shop I found that Paddy had been released - under age - he was only 16½ years. The Rising caused him to fall into bad health. He never recovered from the effects of the hosing the prisoners got at the Rotunda after the surrender, and the cold and hardship of the barracks where they were held. The result was he developed T.B. and spent a long time in Newcastle Sanatorium. I don't know where he was fighting during Easter Week, but it might have been around Fairview.

Hugh, who was about 18, was in the Post Office and was afterwards interned in Stafford. He was through the Black and Tan war, working with Frank with Mick Collins's crowd. After the split he joined the Free State army and went to Cork. He was killed accidentally in Clonakilty by a rifle going off in the lorry in which he was travelling. He had intended to go

back to his old job in the New Ireland Insurance Company on the very day that the Civil War broke out, but he had then to stay on in the army.

When I went to inquire at Kilmainham where, I found out, Frank was imprisoned after Easter Week, an officer whose name I now forget informed me that he had been condemned to death and would be executed the following morning, Fortunately, the decision to stop the executions must have been taken that night, for his sentence was commuted to 25 years' penal servitude. He was arrested under the name of Captain Drennan and was wearing a captain's uniform when he was taken.

Frank was one of those who founded the New Ireland Insurance Company about 1918 and he is still director and assistant manager of it. He has only one son.

I continued in my job and then joined the Fairview Branch of Cumann na mBan to some members of which I had been introduced by my Liverpool friends. I participated in the usual Cumann na mBan work during the next few years. There is really nothing of importance to relate about that.

When my brother Frank was a prisoner in Dundalk gaol I went to visit him on the Sunday before Labour Day. I can't remember what year that was. Diarmuid Lynch was a prisoner there at the same time, as well as the two Brennan brothers. Frank asked me to bring home a letter for the girl Diarmuid was engaged to. He had, I think, already been refused permission to come out and marry her. I delivered the letter and I think it was the next day she went up to see him, accompanied by a priest who married them in the cell. That was the time Diarmuid was deported to America. I think she either accompanied or followed him. I knew her because she worked in Gorevan's in Camden St. quite near where I worked, but I can't remember her name.

After the Treaty was accepted I went down to Cork for a visit to some friends of Hugh's. He had been on the run in Cork during the Black and Tan period and was working with the Volunteers there. Once I paid him a visit while he was on the run and he met me at Bandon station. A police sergeant recognised him, brought him into the waiting room and read to him a deportation order telling him to leave Co. Cork immediately. He did not obey the order, but carried on his work there.

I don't propose to touch anything connected with Frank, because he is better able to deal with that himself. He was one of Michael Collins's closest associates and a member of the active service unit with Tom Cullen and Liam Tobin.

Paddy died at Drogheda in 1921 in a house to which Frank had him removed from Newcastle Sanatorium. Frank could not come to the funeral, as he was on the run and the police were waiting for him. The remains were removed to the chapel, although the Parish Priest had said if we placed the tricolour on the coffin he would not allow the remains in. Nevertheless, we put the flag on the coffin and a volley was fired over the grave. The British authorities had forbidden that, and at midnight after the funeral, the man in charge of the firing party - Halpin was his name - was taken out of his home by the Black and Tans, tied by the legs to the back of a lorry and dragged along with his head bumping on the road until he was dead. Halpin was a personal friend of my brother Paddy. Another man from Wexford, who happened to be staying in Halpin's house, but had nothing to do with the Volunteers, received the same treatment. Hugh, who was also at the funeral, but was not so wellknown as Frank, stood at the back of the graveyard and escaped detection.

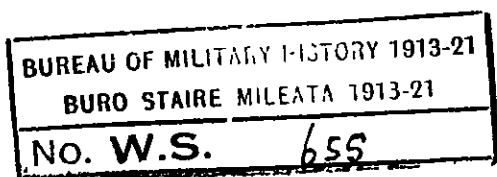
During the Civil War, Frank went to Clonmel in a motor car instead of Prout - probably on a tour of inspection. The other

party - they were called Irregulars - who were expecting Prout, had put a tree across the road outside Clonmel. Frank, who was accompanied by two privates, got out of the car to see what was the matter. A machine gun was turned on them and Frank was very seriously wounded. He was laid up for three months and not expected to recover. I went to Tom Cullen to inquire where Frank was. I travelled by train to Clonmel on a Wednesday and visited him in the Cottage Hospital. On the way down I heard that Michael Collins had been ambushed and killed in Cork. Frank recognised me, although he was very bad. I stayed nearly a week there. On the Sunday Frank, who was then delirious, said "You're a nice one. Why didn't you go and see Hugh? He was in here last night with a bandage on his head". The following morning I got word to say that Hugh had been seriously wounded in Cork and they were taking him to Dublin. I guessed that he was already dead and started for Dublin. I took a car to Maryboro' - I think - and was held up by the Republicans on the way. I knew some of them and they apologised for the ambush on Frank, saying it was not meant for him, but for Prout. I told them about Hugh and they were very sympathetic.

When I reached Maryborough a fire that had started in the prison was being put out. You can imagine my state of mind at this time. I did not expect Frank to live as he had a hole in his back from which his spine protruded, and yet I had to leave him as I knew Hugh was dead and I was the only one left to bury him. My father and sister were in Liverpool.

Hugh got a military funeral and is buried in the Free State plot in Glasnevin.

I can't remember anything else of importance to tell you.



Signed:

Nora Thornton

Date:

3/3/52.

(Nora Thornton)

5/3/1952.

Witness:

S. Ni Chiosain
S. Ni Chiosain.