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BUREAU OF MILITARY HISTORY 1913-21

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No. W.S. 668

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BUREAU OF MILITARY HISTORY, 1913-21.

STATEMENT BY WITNESS

DOCUMENT NO. W.S. 668

**Witness**

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Dublin.

**Identity.**

Captain - O/C. 'C' Company, 4th Battalion,  
Dublin Brigade, 1917 - .

**Subject.**

His national activities from April 1916  
up to December 1921.

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

Nil

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McCarthy, who occupied Roe's Distillery during the Rising. I went up to Tom McCarthy and told him what Brugha had asked me to do. I said to him: "As you were my Company O/C. I don't want to take the responsibility of reorganisation of the company without first consulting you". He was feeling a bit despondent because he felt that he had been badly treated. He said: "I am not going to have anything further to do with the Volunteers. You go ahead and make whatever arrangements you wish". I then got in touch with a few non-commissioned officers who had served in Roe's Distillery with Tom McCarthy and asked them if they would assist me in reorganising the company. Like Tom McCarthy, they felt they were under a cloud as a result of withdrawing from Roe's Distillery without orders. They said that one way or another they felt they couldn't rejoin until they would be cleared regarding their action in withdrawing from Roe's Distillery while fighting was still in progress. I learned then that Cathal Brugha from his hospital bed had indirectly got in touch with various Volunteers from the four companies of the 4th Battalion. Some of the people concerned were Joe McGrath, Seamus Kenny and a few others. As a result, six of us got together and formed a skeleton battalion staff. I represented C/Company. Joe McGrath represented D/Company and Seamus Kenny, who was a former battalion adjutant, continued to act as such. At the first battalion council meeting I attended we decided what our policy would be with regard to former members who hadn't turned out for the Rising and what steps we should take to comply with Cathal Brugha's order for reorganisation. We also reviewed the position regarding the garrison at Roe's Distillery. We decided to summon those men who had not turned out for the Rising before us and listen to their explanations provided they were willing to come before us. Only a small number responded to this call and, when we examined their explanations, we accepted some and rejected others. With regard to the question of the

withdrawal of the garrison from Roe's Distillery, we sent for the officer in charge of the garrison there and he refused to appear before us. Most of the men who served under Tom McCarthy came before us. Having listened to their explanations we found that it was not their fault that they evacuated the Distillery so we there and then reinstated them in their former company. A short time later we had a semblance of reorganisation established. We started by taking back men of Roe's Distillery Garrison and new recruits drawn from the ranks of the Fianna. That was the position that existed coming near the general release of prisoners.

When the prisoners were released we got in touch with them and the majority of them rejoined their own companies and some time after we held a meeting and company officers were elected. I was elected company captain to command C/Company. J.V. Joyce was my 1st Lieutenant, with Paddy Egan 2nd Lieutenant. When the companies were reformed on proper working lines, a battalion council meeting was held and the company captains appointed. The purpose of that meeting was to elect a battalion staff. My recollection is that Seamus Murphy was elected battalion commandant and Liam Clarke vice-commandant. I cannot remember the names of the battalion adjutant and quartermaster.

At this stage the work of reorganising the battalion had progressed fairly well. The strength of my company would be in the neighbourhood of 50 or 60.

#### All Ireland Volunteer Convention.

Sometime in the month of October 1917, an All-Ireland Volunteer Convention was held in the Pavilion in Croke Park, Jones's Road. I was instructed to attend that meeting as a representative of my company. The venue first selected was some house in Parnell Square. When I arrived there I was warned that the Castle authorities must have some information regarding the

meeting and that the venue was now changed to some other house in the Parnell Square. When we reached that we were again warned that Croke Park was to be the venue. The meeting was held in Croke Park at 8 p.m. It was addressed by Countess Markievicz and de Valera. Other people spoke, but I cannot recall their names. The meeting was representative of 80 to 100 officers drawn from the Dublin Brigade, and areas of the country where a Volunteer organisation was already in existence. I think the main purpose of the meeting was to try and re-establish the Volunteers in those areas and districts in the country where an organisation was in being prior to 1916. The whole question of the 1916 Rising was discussed with particular reference to formations in the country areas, who, through no fault of their own, failed to take part in the Rising, and that steps should be taken immediately to reform the units. At that meeting Volunteer delegates from the country areas and from the city were very critical regarding the general mix-up concerning mobilisation for the Rising. The inactivity of units in country areas had to be pinpointed and the position was more or less clarified to the extent that no blame could in the long run be attached to them on account of the various orders and counter-orders regarding the mobilisation which had been issued on Easter Saturday and Sunday. Everybody went away from the meeting satisfied that it was now imperative on them to assist in every way they could in carrying out a general reorganisation of the Volunteers throughout the whole country.

At that meeting there were five or six representatives from some counties, while there were no representatives from other counties. In such cases, men from the adjoining counties were appointed to establish Volunteer formations in the un-represented counties. For example, if Waterford was not represented at that meeting and Kilkenny was, then the Kilkenny representative was delegated to get in touch with the responsible people in Waterford to get the organisation going there. In this way the 32 counties were covered.

Company Armaments - Sources of supply.

The year 1919 was generally devoted to building up company armaments such as contacting soldiers in the various military barracks throughout the city and procuring from them whatever arms and equipment it was possible for them to provide. These were mostly purchased. A young Volunteer of my company was employed as a telegram messenger in the G.P.O. It was his duty to deliver telegrams to military barracks throughout the city. This young lad saw that his visits to the barracks provided him with an opportunity of getting hold of arms. He came to me one day and said that he could lay his hands on some rifles and asked me about giving money to some soldiers whom he had contacted and who were willing to help. Funds at that particular time were very low, and I contacted my quartermaster. We decided that if we got the rifles we could resell them to some members of the company, who would be willing to buy out of their own pockets. I handed over £3 to the messenger and he came back with the rifle. The rifle was purchased again by an individual of the company. When other members of the company saw this, they became anxious to procure arms on similar terms. The result was that, in addition to the young messenger boy, many other men of the company took it upon themselves to get friendly with British soldiers with a view to procuring as many rifles and ammunition as they possibly could. In this mission they were very successful.

Rifles were got out of the barracks in various ways. The messenger boy would take out one at a time. His method of doing this was to put the barrel of the rifle pointing downwards under his coat. Milkmen going into the barracks with a full churn of milk would come out with the churn emptied of its contents, but containing rifles and ammunition. All this had, of course, been arranged through our friendly soldiers inside. I had one contact whom I knew personally. He had previously served in the Volunteers but left them and joined the British army. He came back as a sergeant in the Tank Corps. He met me one day by accident and,

through course of conversation, he asked me could he assist us in any way. He felt he wanted to help. I saw my opportunity and said I would be glad to get whatever small arms and ammunition or military equipment it would be convenient for him to lay his hands on. He proved a very useful source of supply to us as he brought out quite a number of revolvers and a supply of ammunition, Unfortunately he was not long in the British army after that.

Another way we had of augmenting our company supply of arms was the raiding of private houses for shotguns and other equipment. We called at many houses in Rathgar and Ranelagh districts. In two nights we secured two revolvers and two shotguns. On the whole we didn't meet with very serious opposition. While the people weren't entirely friendly, they nevertheless told us to search their houses. The two revolvers we got were more or less handed over. In fact, the owner told us if he had asked him for them in the first instance, he would have given them to us. When we found the company equipped we handed out the arms to those members we considered the most reliable, with instructions to them that they were now responsible for the safety and the security of their arms. They could store them away where they wished, but they would have to tell the company quartermaster where they kept them.

One of the first serious raids for arms took place at the De Selby Quarries at Jobstown. Joe McGrath contacted me and asked me if I could get a half dozen men who would act as scouts for a Sunday evening. We were to meet in Dolphin's Barn, and he gave me the outline of what we were to do. Joe McGrath and two of the Dohertys and Pat Gordon, who owned a pony and trap, went as far as Tallaght. We had sent half the scouts on in front and kept the other half behind the trap. In Tallaght we contacted a man by the name of Walkins who knew the district well and knew De Selby Quarries. William Downes was also with us. We got as

near as we could to the quarries with the pony and trap. We then made our way across the field and entered the quarries. We got boxes of gelignite, detonators and batteries. We took them back with us across the field to the pony and trap and drove as far as Walkinstown and handed them over to a man by the name of Willie Gorman. He stored them until the following Monday night. On that night we shifted the stuff by pony and trap to Foran's Yard in Dolphin's Barn. The stuff captured was regarded as battalion property and was divided up amongst the companies of the battalion. Eventually, it was taken over by the engineers for the making of bombs and different things.

Another source of supply of rifles was from soldiers coming home on leave to the city. We made it our business to become friendly with those men and in this way we were able to buy the rifles from them. I think they explained the loss of the rifles to their own authorities by the excuse that they were taken from them by members of the I.R.A. by force.

#### Street Patrols.

Towards the end of the year 1918, street patrols were established without arms. Later, patrols went out with arms. The company was divided into four sections, a section to each of the four districts of the company area. The section in turn sent out a number of men each night to patrol the streets of its own area. Initially their duty was to consider themselves as on intelligence work. They were to observe the movements of Crown Forces - the houses they frequented and the people with whom they were friendly. All this information was passed back first to the section commander and then to the company officer.

#### Plans for the formation of a Grenade Company in the battalion.

Sometime in 1919, I was transferred to the battalion staff for the purpose of establishing a grenade company within the



battalion. A number of men were to be selected from each company and I was to train and instruct them in the use of grenades. The project didn't materialise to the extent anticipated, as the men didn't wish to leave their old companies. When Volunteers were asked for this new company, the response was very poor because they didn't like the idea of severing connection with the company, with the result that the battalion decided not to go ahead with the idea. As an alternative, I was sent round to each company of the battalion in turn to instruct the entire company in the use of grenades. This instruction was carried out round Greenhills. I had a number of dummy grenades and demonstrated to the men how they should be thrown, at the same time explaining the mechanism to them. Coming to the year 1920 I asked permission to return to my own company. This was granted.

#### Burning of Income Tax Documents.

On my return, I think one of the first jobs was the raiding of Income Tax Houses. This would be in the month of April. This raid was carried out on the private house of an Income Tax collector at Ashdale Park, Terenure. Five or six of us went in there. We told the collector that we were taking over all documents in his possession dealing with income tax. He protested and we had to more or less put him under arrest while we collected the documents and burned them in the fire grate in his house. He quietened down when we assured him that we had no designs on his private property; that we were only interested in him in so far as his government work was concerned.

#### Inspection of Dublin City Hall as preliminary to raiding it for arms.

At the time that Joe McGrath was battalion commandant he told me to make a thorough inspection of the City Hall and report whether it would be feasible to raid the military guard there with a view to capturing their arms and ammunition. He told me to see

Rory O'Connor who was then an engineer in the Dublin Corporation I went along as instructed and took the late David Sears with me. We examined the place thoroughly and felt that in view of the position of the City Hall in close proximity of the Castle and the position of the sentries both in the Castle and on the City Hall entrances, the job would probably entail the loss of some lives. I asked Rory O'Connor would he be in charge of the raid if it took place. He said that he would not, in view of the position he held in the Corporation. I went back and reported to Joe McGrath at a battalion council meeting. I said to him: "Since Rory O'Connor is not to take charge of this raid, who will be in charge?" He said: "You, in all probability". I told him I was quite willing to take on the job if it was considered that the arms that could be captured would justify the loss of lives which it would entail. Joe McGrath gave me no further instructions and, presumably, he reported the matter to the brigade council. Evidently my recommendation must have been accepted because the raid didn't take place.

Men selected for battalion active service.

In the summer of 1920, I was asked by the battalion commander to prepare a list of men in my company who weren't employed and who would be available for active service work within the battalion area at any time of the day or night on which it might be necessary to call them. I selected about twenty men and handed in the list of names to the battalion. As a result these men were employed fairly often for patrols during the day time. They watched the movements of British military and police to and from the various barracks. As these patrols finished their tour of duty they reported to me anything which they thought worth while reporting. One such report that comes to my mind just now was one received from one of my men

who had observed a porter in the Wicklow Hotel travelling from there by cab to Dublin Castle at certain times during the week. I passed on the information to the Brigade Council. It transpired that this porter was an agent for the Castle authorities and he was subsequently executed by members of the battalion for that area.

Plans for raid on Custom House Guard.

Plans were made for a raid on the British military guard at the Custom House, with a view to capturing its arms. Some time in the early autumn of 1920, fifteen or twenty men of C/Company were selected under the command of Paddy O'Brien. On the day in question we moved on to the Custom House armed with revolvers and grenades. I remember six of us going down Dame St. and, to our amazement, as we entered Dame St. from Cork Hill direction we saw a British tender pulled up on the side of the street and all passers-by were searched. We thought then that we would have to fight our way out of it. However, we kept walking on and got through without even being halted. I think the military and Tans must have taken us to be some of their own party. On reaching the Custom House, we moved up the stairway ready to take the sentry by surprise and enter the guardroom. Midway up the stairs to the sentry post word reached us that we were to get back as quickly as possible, because the guard had been doubled and we would have no chance of succeeding with our plans. We withdrew as quickly as possible. We had some discussions outside and some of the Volunteers were very disappointed and wanted me to lead a party of them back to carry out the raid. While this discussion was taking place, Sean Dowling, battalion vice-commandant, came along and told us that he was a spectator. As a result of what he said we dispersed.

Bloody Sunday.

About a week before Bloody Sunday, I was at a meeting in Keogh Donnelly's in Cork Street. The late Paddy O'Brien told those present that some operations were taking place on Sunday the 21st November. Denny O'Brien and myself were to consider ourselves a small street patrol to patrol the area from Leonard's Corner to Rialto, and that if we saw any British military or police travelling citywards before 9 a.m. we were to fire a few shots at them with a view to delaying them. On the morning in question we carried out this two-man patrol but saw no British military activities.

Arrest and internment in Ballykinlar.

Some time before Bloody Sunday I was advised not to sleep at home, as the British were then very active in raiding houses of known Volunteers. Acting on this advice, we set up a place in the Marrowbone Lane Distillery where we would bring in food and sleep there. One night I called back to my home to see the family I remained there until after curfew and, since I had no reason to believe that the British would raid the place considering it was such a long time since they had raided around that area, I decided to stay with my people that night. This proved to be a bad decision on my part, because by a strange coincidence I was not long in bed when I heard a British patrol coming in round the back. I partially dressed myself and rushed to the front door and before I reached it I heard a knock and knew then that the military were coming in the front as well. They had the place surrounded. Both my father and myself were taken into custody and brought to Wellington Barracks. On arriving there we met Joe McGrath, who had been arrested some time previously. We immediately set to to consider ways and means of escaping, but before we had time to put any plans into effect, we were transferred to Arbour Hill. We were issued with blankets and iron rations there. We knew that we were due for some internment CAMP.

After a few hours stay at Arbour Hill we were taken to the North Wall and put aboard a British gunboat for Belfast. Before leaving Arbour Hill I should have said that we were on an identification parade where members of the "G" Division inspected us. Eventually our destination was Ballykinlar Camp. When the gunboat pulled into the landing stage in Belfast, we were attacked by a mob in the shipyards. They threw iron bolts at us and used most abusive language. A British cordon was drawn up on the quayside and as we came ashore the mob tried to break through the cordon. We would have been badly handled were it not for the presence of mind of one of the gunboat officers. Immediately he saw what was about to happen, he approached the military officer in charge and told him that if he permitted the mob to break through he would shoot, or words to that effect. I heard him use those words. Eventually they had the desired effect, because the military then became active in preventing the mob from breaking through. In discussing the matter afterwards, we learned that we were in charge of the naval officers until the entire party of prisoners, numbering a couple of hundred, were safely landed on the quayside. From the quayside we were taken by lorry and train to Ballykinlar. For the first six weeks or two months of our stay at Ballykinlar the food was very poor. We were supplied mostly with emergency ~~bisc~~ biscuits and tea or coffee and a stew for dinner. As a result of protests, the food condition improved somewhat later on. At that particular time all cooking arrangements were left in the hands of the British military. At first we refused to co-operate with the British military, but as time went on we organised ourselves and appointed a camp commandant who was Joe McGrath, and a man named Fitzgerald was appointed vice-commandant. Paddy Colgan was adjutant, and a camp council was formed. Representations were then made to the British military governor, through our camp commandant, that we should be allowed to appoint our own cooks and our own line captains.

We represented that all cooking and other routine arrangements in connection with the camp should be left to us. After some consultation this was agreed to. From then on we had no further trouble with regard to food conditions. Interned with us at the time were Peadar Carney (author of The Soldier's Song) Seamus Walton (?), Frank O'Higgins, the traditional violinist, and numerous others who were fairly prominent in the movement for independence. On the plea of keeping fit, we obtained permission to carry out physical training and ordinary drill and later staged football matches between the personnel of our lines of huts. On the whole, life was pleasant enough in Ballykinlar. From the time that we entered the camp until we were released the one idea in the minds of all prisoners was to escape. We considered tunnelling under the barbed wire out into the open country. The camp itself was really a very bad place for tunnelling on account of the very sandy nature of the surface and the watery nature of the ground underneath, which was not far from the surface. We had one tunnel almost complete. It ran under one of the principal entrances to the camp and on the day before arrangements were made for an escape one of the heavy military lorries broke it down. The tunnel was discovered immediately and a general thorough search of the camp was carried out with the result that the whole source of the tunnel was traced and subsequently covered in.

While things worked generally fairly well between ourselves and the military guard, there was one very unpleasant incident. It resulted in a hunger strike. The British officer in charge of our line of huts (A), a Lieutenant Greenwood, was over officious. One day our Line Captain made a complaint to him. He immediately placed him in solitary confinement. The general body of prisoners then withdrew their co-operation and refused to comply with any further orders from the British camp commandant. The Camp Council demanded the release of the Line Officer, but this was refused. The Line Officer went on hunger strike and

all other prisoners fell into line with him. One day the Camp Commandant came round to the huts escorted by his staff. As he came to my hut he asked for complaints and I told him that the reason we weren't co-operating was that Lieutenant Greenwood had arrested our Line Captain as we believed for no cause. I said we considered this completely unjustifiable and that we would refuse to obey any orders from the British military until our Line Captain was released and Lieutenant Greenwood transferred to some other duty. The British Commandant became very angry then and asked me if I was trying to instruct him as to how he should carry on with his officers. However, he didn't go to any other hut and gave his bugler instructions to blow the "Dismissal" and they departed from the lines. A short time later the men on hunger strike were released, but our strike of non-co-operation continued. Eventually our camp commandant, Joe McGrath, and the military commandant straightened out matters and the normal life of the camp again prevailed.

We staged many other strikes of non-co-operation for various reasons, such as margarine being supplied to us instead of butter, and things like that.

We were released from Ballykinlar Camp a short time before Xmas 1921.

Signed: *Gerald Garry Byrne*  
Gerald (Garry) Byrne.

Date: *8/4/52*  
8/4/52.

Witness: *William Ivory Comdt.*

William Ivory, Comd't.

