

ORIGINAL

BUREAU OF MILITARY HISTORY 1913-21

BURO STAIRÉ MILEATA 1913-21

No. W.S. 704

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BUREAU OF MILITARY HISTORY, 1913-21.

STATEMENT BY WITNESS

DOCUMENT NO. W.S. 704

Witness

Dr. Joseph Kearney,
12 Pembroke Park,
Ballsbridge,
Dublin.

Identity.

Member of "A" (University College, Cork)
Company, 2nd Battalion, Cork No.1. Brigade.

Subject.

Rescue of Sean Hogan from an escort of
R.I.C. at Knocklong Station on 13th
May 1919.

Conditions, if any, Stipulated by Witness.

Nil

File No. S.1990

Form B.S.M. 2

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STATEMENT OF DR. JOSEPH KEARNEY, M.D.,

12 Pembroke Park, Ballsbridge, Dublin.

On the evening of the 13th May, 1919, I was travelling by train from Galway to Cork. At the time I was a medical student. In the carriage with me were six other students - William A. Moore, now Medical Officer of Freshford Dispensary District, Co. Kilkenny, Edward P. Lahiffe, now Medical Officer of Portlaw or Kilmacthomas, Co. Waterford, Gerald Lahiffe, his brother, now in general practice in London, Patrick Moran, now Resident Medical Superintendent, Mental Hospital, Ardee, Co. Louth, my brother Peter, now on the staff of the South of Ireland Asphalt Company, Lower Abbey Street, and another student from Galway whose name I cannot recollect.

We left Galway at about 2 p.m. on that day and travelled to Limerick where we changed for Limerick Junction. At the Junction we changed again to join the Dublin-Cork train. We had one carriage to ourselves on that train.

On reaching Emly station, a young man entered our carriage and remained there until we were coming into Knocklong. We were in a jovial mood and many of our party were singing songs. I asked this young man to sing a song but he replied that he could not, or did not sing at all and, though we pressed him to sing, he refused. I remember clearly saying to him, "You look like a person who has something on your mind!", and he just smiled. He left our carriage just before the train pulled up at Knocklong.

Although I did not know at the time, I learned later that this man's job was to indicate to the rescuing party the carriage in which Seán Hogan, the prisoner, was with his R.I.C. escort. Up to that time I was not even aware that the prisoner and R.I.C. escort were on the train.

When the train drew up at Knocklong we heard some commotion in the corridor. On opening the door into the corridor and looking down, I saw at least four men, who appeared to be armed, endeavouring to enter the second next compartment to ours. At first I thought it was some kind of game but, on hearing shots, we quickly realised that there was something serious afoot. I looked down the corridor again and there appeared to be a good deal of commotion and a policeman was being pushed out through the door on to the platform, with blood streaming from his head.

We wondered what we should do. Apparently some members of the party suggested that we should get out of the carriage on to the railway line, so as to be out of the line of fire. Before we left the carriage, I looked down the corridor once more and saw a policeman (later identified as Constable O'Reilly) with a carbine to his shoulder and he firing at the rescuers of the prisoner at point-blank range as they were getting on to the platform from the corridor.

Our party got on to the railway line and stood there for a few moments trying to decide what our next move would be but, at the same time, feeling fairly safe as we were below the line of fire. Suddenly Constable O'Reilly appeared from around the back of the train. On seeing us, he immediately took up his carbine and fired at us. We raced up the line in the direction of Kilmallock. I feel sure that records were broken by us in our getaway!

Some distance up the line there was a gate leading from the line into a field. The embankment near the gate gave cover to at least four of our people, that is,

Bill Moore, Paddy Moran, Peter Kearney and the Galway student.

The two Lahiffe's and myself continued on until we got behind a hutment, or large tool-box, and took cover there for a while. While there we were joined by a friend of ours named Matty (Mat) Murphy who was a passenger on the train.

Another man then followed us and joined us for a moment. He had a bullet in his neck from which he was bleeding profusely. We advised him to go back and get his wound dressed, as we were unable to do anything for him because we had nothing with us. He said it was alright and jumped over the fence and went off across the country. Later we learned that he was none other than Seán Treacy himself.

Constable O'Reilly was still firing in our direction and one bullet came right through the tool-box and through the pocket-book of Mat Murphy. At this stage we decided that the place was unsafe. The two Lahiffe's and myself got over the hedge and into the field. The Lahiffe's ran straight across at right-angles to the railway line and, while Constable O'Reilly was firing at them, I ran parallel to the railway line until I rolled over a fence and into a drain. The next thing I did was to continue on at right-angles to the railway line, in an endeavour to join the Lahiffe's but, when I got to the position at which they had crossed the fence, there was no trace of them.

I just wondered what my next move would be. I felt if I ran back towards the train that I would be fired on. On the other hand, had I remained there after the train had gone out, I would have to do a bit

of explaining. I heard Bill Moore shouting that the train was about to leave. So I dashed across the field, got through an opening in a hedge near a railway man's lodge, I think, and over the paling on to the platform. I was pulled into the train as it was moving by Bill Moore and others and I must admit that I felt pretty exhausted.

On the train also was Constable O'Reilly, who had been firing, and he was profuse in his apologies for firing on the students. He told us that they had Seán Hogan as a prisoner, taking him to Cork Jail, and that when the train stopped, the rescue party rushed in and overpowered them, shooting one policeman who attempted to resist.

There was one policeman dead in the carriage. Another was dying. A third had escaped through the window when the shooting started and was discovered the following morning some distance away on the line, with nothing but his shirt and trousers on him and a Rosary beads around his neck. We read about this next day in the paper.

The train went on then to Kilmallock where the dead policeman and the dying man were taken from the train with Constable O'Reilly (or Reilly). The train then proceeded to Cork.

The reports in the papers of the following day contained interviews from passengers who were on the train when the rescue took place. One young lady, who was an assistant in the Post Office in Killmallock, stated that it was the students who had taken part in the shooting of the police. As a result of this lady's statement, the police authorities in Cork made several efforts to interview us following our return to Cork.

We discussed the situation with the I.R.A. authorities, that is, with Raymond Kennedy, who was our Company Captain in the College, and he then discussed it with the 2nd Battalion officers. Raymond Kennedy gave us permission to make statements, so long as they did not incriminate anybody.

I should have mentioned that I was a member of "A" (College) Company of the 2nd Battalion, Cork No. 1 Brigade.

In June, 1920, I was approached by Garrett Scanlan, who was then a medical student at University College, Cork, as to whether I would give evidence for the defence at the trial of a number of men who were charged with the "murder" of the police escort at Knocklong. He arranged for me to go down to Knocklong, in order to meet the solicitor for the defence, Mr. J.J. Power, Kilmallock, and the Junior Counsel, Mr. Joseph O'Connor, B.L. (now ex Judge Joseph O'Connor). I met them in Knocklong and went over the scene of the rescue.

I was called, with Eddie Lahiffe and Matty (Mat) Murphy, to attend the trial at Armagh Assizes in July, 1920. There were about forty other witnesses for the defence, all from the Knocklong district.

On reaching Armagh, we were met by Mr. McMahon who, I was informed, was a brother of the Right Honourable James McMahon. He had arranged accommodation for most of the party. Eddie Lahiffe, Matty Murphy and myself went to make our own arrangements and called at the Beresford Arms Hotel. When we were waiting at the booking-office, a door from the drawingroom or diningroom opened and Head Constable Cahill appeared. He had been in charge of King Street Barracks in Cork on the night

Tomás MacCurtain had been murdered. On seeing us, particularly Matty Murphy whom he knew, he beat a hasty retreat. The receptionist was called in and, on her return, informed us that she could not put us up. We found accommodation elsewhere. The case was to be tried next morning.

When we arrived at the courthouse we learned that, according to the newspapers, Constable O'Reilly, who was promoted Sergeant the day after the rescue, was alleged to have been kidnapped by the Sinn Féiners. In any case, he was not present in the Court.

The prisoners on whose defence I was called were Maher, Foley, Murphy, an ex Irish Guardsman, and at least two Shanahan's, all from the Knocklong district. The case went before the grand jury. They found a true bill against Maher, Murphy and Foley; and the two Shanahan's were released.

When the trial of the three prisoners was about to open, that same day, Mr. Patrick Lynch, K.C., who was the Senior Counsel for the defence, (later Attorney-General) asked was Sergeant Reilly in court and was informed that his whereabouts were unknown as it was alleged that he was kidnapped on the previous night. The prosecution was prepared to go on with the case in his absence, but Mr. Lynch applied for an adjournment on the ground that it was essential for the defence of the prisoners that Sergeant Reilly should be produced to give evidence. It was known that Sergeant Reilly could not and would not identify any of the prisoners as being the persons who took part in the shooting. An adjournment was granted by the Judge.

The case came up for trial in March, 1921,

before a General Court Martial in Dublin Castle. Eddie Lahiffe and myself were again requested to attend as witnesses for the defence.

On our arrival in Dublin, we were taken out to Mr. Lynch's residence to be interviewed by him. Mr. Lynch explained to me that the prosecution's case was that Maher took part in the shooting, that, before the train left Knocklong, he ran across the field, went through an opening in the hedge, over the paling and was helped into the train and that my evidence would be very important because I was the person who came by that route. He also remarked, in passing, that I was very like Maher, and I did not feel at all too happy about that situation.

On the next morning all the witnesses proceeded to Dublin Castle. We were put into a room which was surrounded by barbed wire, with British military sentries on duty there. The witnesses were called up to the courtroom one by one and, in due course, I was called.

On entering the room, I discovered that the Court consisted of a number of high-ranking British officers. I was shown into the witness box and was examined by Mr. Lynch as to my movements on leaving the railway carriage at Knocklong station, on the question of Sergeant Reilly firing at us, my movements up the line and my subsequent movements until I returned to the train.

The prosecuting Counsel was Mr. W. Wylie, K.C. (later to become Judge Wylie. He is now Director of the Royal Dublin Society.) He only asked me one question which was, did I see any of the attacking party, to which I replied, "No", because in my original statement I had given the same answer and Mr. Lynch intimated to me that it was very important that I should stick to my original

statement.

I returned then to the waiting room where the other witnesses were. Very soon afterwards Mr. Power, solicitor, came down from the courtroom to me and told me that he was instructed by Mr. Lynch to inform me to get out of the way as quickly as I could. Evidently Mr. Lynch was to stress the point that I was the person to join the train at Knocklong and not the Mr. Maher in the dock.

The findings of the Court were promulgated some time later. Murphy was acquitted. Maher and Foley were found guilty and were subsequently executed.

I knew then that Foley did not take part in the actual attack, but was a scout on the bridge over the railway line, and that Maher had neither hand, act nor part in it. Maher was employed, I think, in a store in Knocklong. At the time there was a strike of the employees in that store and Maher did not go out on that strike, so that he was more or less ostracised locally. I learned when the trial was over and Murphy was acquitted, both Maher and Foley stated publicly in the courtroom that they were proud to be called on to die for Ireland.

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