

ORIGINAL

BUREAU OF MILITARY HISTORY 1913-21
BURO STAIRÉ MILEATA 1913-21
No. W.S. 773

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BUREAU OF MILITARY HISTORY, 1913-21.

STATEMENT BY WITNESS

DOCUMENT NO. W.S. 773

Witness

Gilbert F. Barrington,

10 Cremore Park,

Glasnevin,

Dublin.

Identity.

Brigade Quartermaster,

North of England Brigade, 1920-1922.

Subject.

**Irish Self-Determination League,
and Irish Volunteers, North England and
Scotland, 1920-1922.**

Conditions, if any, Stipulated by Witness.

Nil

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STATEMENT OF GILBERT FRANCIS BARRINGTON

10 Cremore Rd. Glasnevin, Dublin.

I was demobilised from the British army about March 1919. Shortly afterwards I was approached by some people who had formed a political party which they called The Irish Labour Party. At this stage, it only existed in South Shields and Tyne Dock and I joined it. In a very short space of time there were branches all along the Tyneside. Later, it spread further afield, even as far as Wales.

The objects of the promoters were to replace the defunct United Irish League and, at the same time, to build up an Irish influence inside the British Labour Party. In the North East of England this latter object was achieved as Irish sections of the community obtained even disproportionate representation on local bodies through their affiliation with Trades Councils within the English Labour Party. I myself was elected on the Labour ticket as a Poor Law Guardian and was a delegate from the Irish Labour Party to South Shields Trades and Labour Council. Several of us, however, became increasingly apprehensive of the trend of this movement towards complete absorption in English Labour interests. We succeeded in getting an application made to the headquarters of the Irish Labour Party proper in Dublin for affiliation, and Mr. Tom Johnson came to Newcastle-on-Tyne sometime in 1919 to discuss the matter. He was not favourably disposed towards the proposal and left the situation unchanged. A further attempt was made to give our organisation a more genuinely Irish character and, at a later stage, possibly early in 1920, Mr. Laurence Ginnell met a Delegate Meeting in Newcastle-on-Tyne. The outcome of that meeting was the formation of the Irish Self-Determination League, of which the first Branch was formed in South Shields on the day of the meeting.

The Irish Self-Determination League had its headquarters in London and from the outset was under the Presidency of Art O'Brien, with Seán McGrath as Secretary. Its whole purpose was the organisation of the Irish population in England with the object of bringing the Irish case before the English electorate. So far as my area was concerned, the Tyneside district, which embraced Northumberland, Durham and Yorkshire, was governed from a Central Council in Newcastle-on-Tyne, of which Richard Purcell was President and I was Secretary. Both Purcell and I engaged in the work of opening new branches. Later on, Purcell became a paid organiser of the I.S.D.L. After a time we were both dissatisfied at the rather ineffectual nature of our work, depending as it did solely on the cultivation of a favourable public opinion. We discussed the establishment of Volunteer units. Early in 1920, in fact, we did recruit a number of Companies of Volunteers in South Shields, Jarrow, and Newcastle-on-Tyne. Their operations consisted in providing funds with which to obtain arms, weekly parades and the acquisition of munitions of one kind or another. While this was proceeding, we made cautious inquiries as to how our position could be regularised and finally got in touch with Liam McMahon of Manchester whom we knew to be an active I.R.A. officer there. In November 1920, he attended a meeting in Newcastle and met all the Volunteers from the Companies already formed and administered the Oath. At the same time, brigade headquarters staff was set up consisting of - officer commanding, R.J. Purcell; quartermaster, G.F. Barrington (myself); adjutant, David Fitzgerald.

In November 1920, Rory O'Connor visited the area, met the Brigade Staff and arranged to send over M. McEvoy to confirm appointments, inspect the Companies and report. The organisation now consisted of (in addition to the Brigade Staff already mentioned) six Companies, as follows:

A Company (Jarrow & South Shields)

O/C - John Connolly
Strength - about 40 men

B Company (Hebburn)

O/C - James Connolly
Strength:- about 25 men.

C. Company (Newcastle)

O/C. John King
Strength - about 20 men

D. Company (Wallsend)

O/C. E. McAndrews
Strength - about 35 men

E. Company (Bedlington)

O/C. A. Mullarkey
Strength - about 30 men

F. Company (Consett)

O/C. John Larkin
Strength - about 30 men

Between January and March 1921, the following additional companies were formed:-

G. Company (Stockton-on-Tees)

O/C. W. Whelan
Strength - about 40 men.

H. Company (Chester-le-Street)

O/C. J. O'Neill
Strength - about 30 men

I. Company (Thornley and Wheatley Hill)

O/C. M. Tunny
Strength - About 30 men

J. Company - (Sunderland)

O/C. J. Green
Strength - about 25 men

The first operations of an incendiary nature were carried out on 28th February 1921. The places chosen by the brigade staff, in conjunction with M. McEvoy, were the bonded stores and neighbouring oil stores on Newcastle quayside, and the timber stores ^{at} ~~on~~ Tyne Docks (South Shields). Rory O'Connor visited the area and approved of our plans about a week or so before they were implemented.

The plans approved for the Newcastle operations provided for the selection of four men from each of four companies with a leader in charge of each group. Each group was equipped with a revolver, a bolt cutter, petrol and cotton waste.

On the night of the burnings the selected men assembled at the Labour Hall in Newcastle-on-Tyne, where they were given instructions as to the exact location of the premises they were to burn and were provided with the equipment for the job. Each of the men in charge of the four sections was in fact O/C. of his company or a member of brigade headquarters, as in my case. I was in charge of one group.

At 8 p.m. on the night of 28th February, each party set out for its allotted warehouse. They made entry and in two cases fires were started. In one case there was police interference, before the fire could be set going. In the fourth case the second pair of men defaulted. The failure of these two men to appear was the subject of a brigade inquiry as a result of which they were both replaced. On the same night, another party was detailed to burn the timber yards at Tyne Dock (South Shields). While the burning of the timber yard was considered a great success (considerable damage was done), the burning of the warehouses was not so successful.

Some lessons were learned from all this, however; the chief thing we learned was the necessity of most careful survey of the objective before undertaking any future operation.

During the burning operations we sustained one casualty. A man by the name of Salmon was arrested and subsequently sentenced to, I think, 12 months hard labour. Much police activity followed. Members of the special branch of Scotland Yard were sent into the area, but no arrests were made.

From the time of our official recognition in October 1920, the brigade came under the direct control of Rory O'Connor, who was O/C. Britain. I was entrusted at this time by Liam Mellows with the duty of obtaining by purchase or otherwise supplies of arms and munitions for Ireland, which were shipped through Liverpool where Paddy Daly looked after shipment.

M. McEvoy was recalled to Dublin early in March. On 27th

March 1921, the second series of operations was undertaken. All companies were successful. The Press had attributed the earlier operations to a flying column with the object, no doubt, of minimising the extent of the I.R.A. organisation. In order to dispose of this misrepresentation, fires numbering thirty eight ^{were} started in 20 different districts scattered over three counties and all timed to occur at 8 o'clock on the same night. All these jobs were of the same kind, i.e., burnings of barns, haystacks, outhouses, sheds, etc. Their general military value lay in their effect on the insurance companies and the evidence of a widespread organisation in England. There were three or four casualties, among them being James Conroy, B/Company, A. Morley, G/Company, Martin Lynskey, G/Company. Conroy was armed when arrested during the operations and was afterwards sentenced to seven years penal servitude. Morley was sentenced to two years hard labour, and his companion, Lynskey, received a similar sentence. I cannot say precisely how their arrests came about, but it would appear that when the fire started they weren't able to get away from the scene quickly enough with the result that the police surprised them.

Shortly after this event, a raid on an explosive magazine in Middlesbrough was carried out by G/Company. Entry to the magazine was made by removing the roof in its entirety. The stocks of explosives had apparently run low at the time and the haul was not a very large one. M. McCann, G/Company, fired at ~~&~~ ^{and} missed a policeman, but was caught and later sentenced to penal servitude - I think three years. The explosives, which consisted mainly of gelignite and Thames powder, were later collected from this hall and shipped to Ireland.

In these March burnings over 100 men were engaged, and in the magazine job six men.

At a date shortly before McCann's arrest, Whelan, O/C. G/Company, and McCann put the electrical circuit controlling the power supply to Stockton out of action by breaking cable connections at a place just outside the town. This was not a planned job, but was a case of seizing an opportunity when it arose. On 8th April 1921, the aerodrome at Gosforth, which is a suburb of Newcastle-on-Tyne, was burned down, two planes being destroyed in the hangar. The plans for this job were prepared by Purcell and myself, who inspected the structure and surroundings a few days previously. It was arranged that a fire would be started at Benton a little earlier so as to keep the Gosforth Fire Brigade occupied whilst the aerodrome was going up. This job, in which five haystacks were burned, was performed by John King, O/C., C/Company, and about ten men. The aerodrome burning was done by E. Kerrigan, Lieutenant, C/Company, and E. Costello, C/Company, with four men.

The next large-scale burnings were carried out on 21st May 1921. All companies had been instructed to prepare plans which were submitted to the Brigade Council. The company areas were visited by the members of the brigade staff, the objectives being inspected and the company arrangements checked. On the evening of the operations the company officers were called to a meeting of the brigade council held in the Irish Club, Newcastle, where they were given final instructions and supplies of arms, gelignite, detonators, cable and batteries. Over forty jobs were successfully undertaken. There were no failures, but there were five arrests.

A/Company, Jarrow.

Blew up a gas main at Jarrow which put the town of Jarrow in darkness leaving it without street lights for a couple of days, as well as cutting off the supplies to works and dwellings. The two men in charge of this job were John Ward and Martin Flaherty. Same company was also responsible for

farm fires at Monkton and North Shields on the same night at the same time.

B. C. and D. Companies combined in the cutting down of telegraph poles by means of chain saws, along a stretch of about four miles between Hebburn and Wallsend, and completely breaking telegraph and telephone communication on the Eastern Road from London to Scotland. For nearly a week the system was dislocated. The officers and a large number of men from the three companies were engaged on this job.

E/Company (Bedlington, Ashington and Cowpen) set fire to the Post Office at Ashington and started a number of ^{farm} fires around Blyth.

F/Company (Consett) was responsible for farm fires at Chopwell, Ebchester and South Moor. The O/C. - John Larkin - was arrested. This company also set fire to the railway station offices and the bridge over the line at Annfield Plain

G/Company (Stockton and Middlesbrough) blew up the water main from which the towns of Stockton, Thornaby and Middlesbrough drew their supplies. The officers of the company, W. Whelan and M. Kelly, were in charge of this operation which formed part of a larger scheme. It was intended, once the water supply had been cut, to fire a big tannery works and timber yard at Thornaby, which was expected to ignite the adjoining tramway sheds. The tannery works were set going but the fire did not spread.

H/Company (Chester-le-Street) started seven or eight farm fires at Houghton-le-Spring, Lanchester and Stanley.

I/Company (Thornley and Wheatley Hill) carried out farm fires at Thornley and Shildon.

J/Company, Sunderland, carried out similar operations at Penshaw and Hylton.

From the outset, valuable assistance was given by members of the Cumann na mBan in carrying arms after a job, in covering up operations such as the cutting of telephone poles, and in collecting funds. The cutting of telephone poles along four miles of busy road would have been impossible of performance without the assistance of members of Cumann na mBan. These ladies accompanied the men detailed to carry out the operation. Had the men gone alone they would have attracted attention, but with their escorts it appeared to all and sundry that they were courting couples. The Misses Brennan of Jarrow were tireless in giving every possible form of assistance to the I.R.A. in connection with operations including the acquisition and storage of munitions, as well as in the activities mentioned above. One of these ladies was engaged to be married. Before her marriage she had secured a house and we used it freely as a dump.

As already stated, the initial activities of the brigade consisted in the collection of arms and explosives which were transferred to Liverpool periodically, either directly or via Manchester. As soon as operations were started, i.e., at the end of February or early in March 1921, I was called to Dublin and given instructions and cash by Liam Mellows for the purchase of arms, it being understood that gelignite, blasting powders, detonators, etc. were obtainable without cost. I returned to Newcastle and summoned my company quartermasters to a meeting where I told them that each company would have to play its part in the procurement of arms by purchase, in addition to the work of acquiring explosives, in which they were already engaged. Purchases of arms were made from seamen and ex-servicemen by Purcell, Fitzgerald, T. Flynn, M. Macken, James Connolly and myself, or, alternatively, I was put in touch with the seller by one or other of those mentioned. Companies bought arms for their own use at their own expense. It should be mentioned,

however, that prior to the opening operations in March, it had been necessary for me to collect a supply of small arms and ammunition from P. O'Donoghue, Manchester, who also supplied the heavy bolt cutters.

In some instances arms were got by capture, as in the case of three machine guns which were removed from Saltwell Park, Gateshead, in July. These were guns which were captured from the Germans by the 5th Battalion of the Durham Light Infantry and they bore an inscription to that effect. The main difficulty here was one of transportation, for which purpose a horse and cart had to be hired from a shady character in Gateshead. He was a member of a gang known as the Askew Road Gang, who were of the underworld type and I had to do the bargaining with him for the transportation of the goods. We got those guns safely a way to Liverpool, together with a half-dozen rifles which were removed in March 1921, in a similar fashion from the drill hall at Gateshead. Both jobs were performed by Kerrigan and Costello of C/Company, the arrangements having been made by Purcell and myself. Altogether about £1200 was expended on arms for Ireland between March and October 1921. We must have procured about 400 to 500 revolvers or automatics, in addition to considerable quantities of explosives, and the heavier weapons mentioned above.

As already stated, the political organisation preceded the formation of I.R.A. Companies and maintained this precedence throughout the whole period. That is to say, that in the Counties of Northumberland, Durham and Yorkshire the formation of a branch of the I.S.D.L. invariably preceded the formation of a company of the brigade. The latter, however, not infrequently embraced an area covered by more than one branch of the political organisation. As a general rule, the prime movers in the formation of a branch of I.S.D.L.

were also prominent in the recruitment of Volunteers. Not a great deal of pressure was necessary to encourage the formation of new branches; on the contrary, it was usual for the initiative to be taken locally. Similarly, it was not long after a branch of the I.S.D.L. was formed until endeavours would be made by some of the members to get in touch with responsible officers of the I.R.A. with a view to the establishment of a company in the district. It must be borne in mind that all the activities of the I.R.A. had to be conducted with the greatest secrecy and precautions had to be taken to ensure that the sponsors of the proposal were of trustworthy character. The usual procedure in the creation of a new branch was the calling of a local meeting to be addressed by Purcell and myself on the objects of the organisation and to elect officers. In this way, the personnel in contact with each I.S.D.L. branch was, in general, the same as controlled the activities of the I.R.A. in the area.

Regular and frequent public meetings were held in all the principal centres in order not only to maintain, but to keep Irish Republican principles constantly in the minds of all supporters. This propaganda, mainly directed at the education of our own members, was most essential in view of the complete absence of a favourable press, with the exception of a limited number of copies of irregularly circulated Republican journals published in Ireland. Furthermore, the close correspondence in location between brigade companies and I.S.D.L. branches afforded excellent cover for the activities of the former.

In addition to the propaganda conducted in this way by Purcell and myself, we also arranged special large meetings from time to time to be addressed by prominent personages from Ireland and elsewhere. Among the speakers who addressed such meetings were the Countess Markievicz, Mrs. Sheehy-Skeffington, Darrell Figgis, Sean Milroy, C.M. Byrne, Archbishop Mannix and Father O'Donnell. Public meetings directed at English

audiences were held on the Town Moor, Newcastle; the seashore, South Shields; the 'Miners' ^{Gala} Grounds, Morpeth, and Wharton Park, Durham. These meetings were attended by crowds of from 10,000 to 25,000. The Irish case was stated at these meetings in uncompromising terms and was always received without interruption and, apparently, with interest. In fact, it was our usual practice to take a collection from the audience for such purposes as "Belfast Distressed Workers" or "Irish Prisoners' Aid". The response was invariably good and not confined to Irish people in the audience. A remarkable instance of the impartial attitude of Durham miners was shown when a substantial sum was collected for one of these purposes at an open-air meeting outside the railway station at Annfield Plain, addressed by Purcell and myself, on the Sunday morning following the burning of the station the previous night and while the remains were still smouldering.

On the death of Terence MacSwiney in Brixton Jail we arranged a symbolic funeral from the Irish Club in Newcastle to the Town Moor. The coffin, draped in the Tri-colour, was borne in a hearse at the head of a procession consisting of members of I.S.D.L. from all branches within reasonable distance of Newcastle, and other sympathisers not actually enrolled under the I.S.D.L. banner. Funeral orations were delivered by Rev. Fr. Byrne, South Shields, and myself to an audience of something approaching 15,000 people, mainly English, who listened attentively and without interruption to the strongly-worded discourses addressed to them.

In all this work unstinting assistance was given by a number of people who occupied positions of prominence in English public life. Among these were Councillor O'Connor, Jarrow; Professor Hayes, Gateshead; Mrs. Mason and Mrs. Larkin, Newcastle (who were also active members of Cumann na mBan), and the Misses Brennan, Jarrow.

Special tribute must be paid to the late Rev. Father Byrne of South Shields, who presided at all meetings held in that locality and also at some of the major meetings held in Newcastle. It was, in fact, due to his instrumentality that we obtained Archbishop Mannix for a meeting held in St. James's Hall, Newcastle, in December 1920. The dimensions of the crowd were so great that the Archbishop was obliged to address an open air meeting outside the hall after his principal speech. Mention should also be made of the generous fashion in which musicians and singers gave their services free of charge, repeatedly and whenever possible, at concerts arranged for the securing of funds for the two organisations.

During the Truce period - I think about the month of August - Henry Grattan, Director of the Armstrong-Whitworth Ordnance Factory and a descendant of the Irish patriot of the same name, was introduced to me and gave information of a cargo of German rifles and ammunition lying at Antwerp which could be got out through the agency of a man with an address at Sielk St., Antwerp. It would be piloted out of the harbour, but we were to find a crew. Full details of this offer were submitted to the Director of Purchases, but the cost - about £2,000 - was considered too high in relation to the risk of failure. Consequently, no further action was taken in the matter. I was very disappointed because I was quite willing to travel to Antwerp to see the job through myself.

When the Truce was declared in July 1921, we were instructed by Rory O'Connor, who visited the area, to cease open military operations but to continue with as little danger of discovery as possible to acquire arms and ammunition. The shipment to Ireland of such material did, in fact, continue throughout the Truce period.

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In August 1921, Purcell and I were called to Dublin to meet Cathal Brugha, Minister for Defence, and submit plans which had been prepared on the assumption that the Truce would break down. These plans included the destruction of the High Level bridge at Newcastle and of the ~~Transportation~~ bridge at Middlesbrough, the destruction of the waterworks at Cleadon (source of water supply to South Shields, Harton and Tyne Docks), fires at timber yards in Stockton, Hartlepool and on the Tyne, and certain factories such as the alkali factories at Hebburn and Wallsend. Rory O'Connor visited the area accompanied by M. MacEvoy and inspected these sites along with Purcell and myself, and approved our plans. The personnel to undertake these operations had already been provisionally selected and were only awaiting instructions to act.

The arrest of Purcell and myself arose from an operation which had been carried out at Bedside Colliery, Northumberland in the Ashington-Bedlington area, in September 1921. The raid was carried out by two officers and four men of E/Company (Bedlington) on the colliery magazine. The job was timed so that the stocks of explosives would be ready to load on to a taxi, hired by me in Newcastle for the purpose. Everything went according to plan and the taxi was brought to the house of a man called Margetts, an Englishman who had been of occasional use in getting arms. It was intended to remove the material to the dump at Jarrow, but before this could be done, Margetts had been given away by his wife, corroborated by a spying neighbour. He attempted to mitigate the case against himself by telling all he knew, with the result that Purcell and I were arrested the following day and later sentenced to three years' penal servitude. We were released on 3rd April 1922, as a result of representations made by Michael Collins, reinforced by appeals organised by the Irish Self-Determination League.

Witness: W. Jerry BondSigned: Gilbert F. Barrington
Date: 23, 12, 1921 (Gilbert F. Barrington)