

W.S. 824

ORIGINAL

BUREAU OF MILITARY HISTORY 1913-21

BURO STAIRÉ MILITAIRA 1913-21

NO. W.S. 824

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BUREAU OF MILITARY HISTORY, 1913-21.

STATEMENT BY WITNESS

DOCUMENT NO. W.S. 824

Witness

Charles Donnelly,
"Glenamoy",
Grange Road,
Rathfarnham,
Dublin.

Identity.

Member of I.R.B. Dublin, 1913 - ;

Member of 'E' Company, 4th Battalion,
Dublin Brigade, 1913 - .

Subject.

- (a) G.P.O., Dublin, Easter Week 1916;
- (b) Distribution of the Proclamation of
Easter Week 1916.

Conditions, if any, Stipulated by Witness.

Nil

File No. S.2133

Form B.S.M. 2

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STATEMENT BY MR. CHARLES DONNELLY

"Glenamoy", Grange Road, Rathfarnham, Dublin.

In the Autumn of 1912 when I was working in Magee's Grocery Store, Rathmines, with Sean Treacy, who afterwards became my brother-in-law, he asked me to join the I.R.B. I agreed and he brought me along to 41 Parnell Square, where I was initiated into the Fintan Lalor Circle by Sean McDermott, who was Centre at the time; Seamus O'Connor was secretary. Padraig Pearse was a member of the Circle.

Some time afterwards I introduced a very reliable person into the Circle. Shortly after his initiation, the Bishops made a pronouncement on secret societies. This man's conscience was troubled and he confided in me. I brought him to Sean McDermott, who took him aside and, following their talk, the man was released from his oath. He became a very good Volunteer and fought in the War of Independence from 1916 to 1921. I had some doubts in my mind ^{as a result} of the man being released. Occasionally visitors from other Circles attended our meetings and gave lectures. The next lecture happened to be by a Father Sheehy and after his lecture I had no further qualms of conscience. Among the visitors who lectured us were Tom Hunter and Con Colbert.

When the Volunteers were formed in 1913, we were instructed by the I.R.B. to join the Volunteer companies in our own areas. This was to ensure that there would be I.R.B. members in almost all the companies formed.

I joined the Rathfarnham Company. Liam Clarke, who was also a member of the I.R.B., was one of the principal organisers of this company. Padraig Pearse was a member from the start and eventually was elected company captain. Michael Boland was 1st Lieutenant and Liam Clarke 2nd Lieutenant.

The company was about 200 strong up to the time of the Split. A band was formed and instruments were purchased from public subscriptions. The band, with instruments, went over to the National Volunteers when the Split came. There was also a fund with a Joint Banking Account operated by Frank Sheridan and Peter Horan. When the Split came, Frank Sheridan went with the Irish Volunteers and became adjutant of the company. Peter Horan went with the National Volunteers. Consequently, the funds could not be drawn by either party and, to the best of my knowledge, the money was still in the bank at the time of Frank Sheridan's arrest following the Rising. I never heard what eventually became of the money.

Training was carried out at Ballyboden by ex-British soldiers put in by the Redmondite leaders at that time. They were sent from Volunteer H.Q.

8 When the Split came, we were paraded at the Old Mill on Whitechurch Road and addressed by Frank Sheridan, the company adjutant, who explained that Redmond wanted us to fight for England and that Pearse wanted us to fight for Ireland in Ireland. He asked those who wanted to follow Redmond to go to one side and those who wanted to follow Pearse to go to the other side. Of the 100 to 150 Volunteers present, all but about 30 sided with Redmond.

The company was reorganised as E/Company, 4th Battalion, with Padraig Pearse as company captain, Michael Boland as 1st Lieutenant, and Liam Clarke as 2nd Lieutenant. We still held the Old Mill as our training centre and paraded there every Monday evening.

The company at this time was about 30 strong, about 12 of whom were St. Enda's students. In addition to drills, we received lectures on military subjects. One of the lecturers I remember was a person named Slattery, who was always present but I could never tell if he was a member of the company.

At these meetings Pearse always emphasised that we were to guard our arms with our lives. The greatest offence a Volunteer could commit, in his eyes, was to point a rifle at another Volunteer.

For about eighteen months before the Rising, Pearse would call me at the end of each parade and tell me he had an important dispatch to be taken to Eamon Ceannt at Larkfield, which I was not to allow to fall into the hands of the police. At this time the "G" men were always on the watch, particularly around Larkfield. Pearse always inspected my .38 revolver before I set out.

On the Monday of Holy Week, after Pearse had given the details of the equipment, rations, etc., to be carried the following Sunday, and the parade had been dismissed, he called me as usual to deliver a dispatch to Larkfield. I told him I had arranged to be best man at a wedding on Monday morning and asked to be released at about four or five o'clock on that morning for a few hours. He said: "I am going to tell you something that you are not to repeat inside or outside this Hall". He then told me that the Rising had been planned to take place on Easter Sunday and finished by saying: "I leave it to yourself whether you come with us". When I said I would withdraw my request he smiled, shook hands with me and said: "I thought you would". This was so unusual that the other Volunteers standing around and out of hearing asked me why he did it. I replied that I had told him a funny story.

Although this was the first definite information I had of the Rising, with the repeated warnings to guard our arms and the air of tension, I already had a feeling that something was in the air.

Having read the cancellation order in the Sunday paper, I remained about all day and eventually contacted Frank Sheridan. I told him about the wedding I was to attend the

following morning and gave him the address in Dolphin's Barn where I would be staying that night.

I attended the wedding, which took place at Terenure Church at 7 a.m. Having seen the bride and bridegroom off at Westland Row Station, I returned with the remainder of the wedding party to Dolphin's Barn.

At about 10 o'clock two Volunteers, Mick Kerr and Paddy Mitchell of the 2nd Battalion, came into the house and told me they had received mobilisation orders. I went to Magee's, Rathmines; collected my revolver, went on to Rathfarnham and got my rifle before joining the company at Rathfarnham Church. Michael Boland ordered me to take charge of the cyclist party and to follow the tram route to Liberty Hall. I was told not to leave until Joe Sweeney, who had gone to St. Enda's for canister grenades, returned. The main body, consisting of about 30, went off by tram. The cyclist party, which numbered about 12, left about half an hour after the main body.

When we got as far as Kelly's Corner and were turning into Camden St., two dogs ran across the street and I was knocked off my bicycle. I was picked up by a woman who, I later learned, was the wife of Seamus Murphy of the 4th Battalion, Marrowbone Lane Garrison. Bullets were flying around at this time. The firing, I learned afterwards, was between Citizen Army members in Davy's publichouse at Portobello Bridge and the military from Portobello Barracks. This was the reason we had been instructed to follow the tram lines from Rathfarnham, rather than to go by Rathmines. Passing by Jacob's, we were attacked by British "separation" women, but Volunteers from Jacob's cleared the way for us. When passing College Green, an elderly senior British officer attempted to strike me with his stick, but I drew my revolver and frightened him off. When we eventually arrived at Liberty Hall, the main body was already there. We put away our bicycles and this was the last we saw of them. After about ten minutes

an order came from Pearse that we were to proceed to the G.P.O. When crossing O'Connell St. from Abbey St. on our way to the G.P.O., we saw the Lancers charging down O'Connell St. Lieutenant Boland was leading our party and, when he saw the Lancers, he gave the order "right and left form". On this order we extended along O'Connell St. with our backs to Prince's St. and our rifles at the "ready" with bayonets fixed, ready to meet the Lancers. Fortunately, or unfortunately shots rang out from the Henry St. corner of the G.P.O. I saw horses falling and the Lancers retiring. The doors of the G.P.O. were barricaded and we could not get in. We went to Prince's St. and smashed the windows there to make an entry. My brother-in-law, John Kiely, was killed when getting through the window by a shot which was alleged to have been fired by a British officer from a window in the Metropole Hotel.

We had to move from room to room to get to the main hall. The first thing I saw was a D.M.P. man lying face downwards on the floor, resting on his arms and moving his head from side to side. I think he was suffering from fright.

The first incident of note that I can remember was seeing Paddy Sweeney with a tin can grenade in his hand, with the fuse burning, which he had picked up off the floor. He tried to throw it out of the window but the street outside was crowded. He dropped it and kicked it into a corner. Liam Clarke, who came along just then, picked it up and it exploded in his hands. When I saw him he was bleeding freely from the face and knee. He never recovered fully from these wounds.

Our party was assigned the duty of erecting and guarding barricades in different parts of the building. The O'Rahilly, who was supervising our work, was very zealous in getting barricades properly and securely erected. On one of the barricades I saw a Finn and a Swede - two seamen. One had a shotgun and the other had a gun which was either a Martini or

a shotgun. I was amazed and asked them what they were doing there. They told me they wanted to fight for small nationalities. One of them let off a shot accidentally and wounded a Volunteer in the foot. When James Connolly heard the shot, he came over and said: "The man who fires a shot like that will himself be shot". I don't know what eventually happened to the two seamen.

While presenting printed copies of the Proclamation of 1916 to three members of the Dublin Typographical Society who set up the Proclamation of 1916 in Liberty Hall, Mr. Traynor, Minister for Defence, stated he was aware that 2,500 copies were printed and that probably they were intended for distribution throughout the country. He was in the G.P.O. for the best part of the week and did not see the Proclamation. He did not see a copy afterwards except the one the President of Ireland had framed at present, and the time had come when someone more closely connected with this aspect of the Rising would have to fill the void.

On Easter Monday evening 1916, while on a window barricade at the G.P.O., Commandant-General P.H. Pearse instructed me to hand bundles of the Proclamation to the newsboy for distribution through the city. I called a newsboy of about eighteen years of age whom I asked to have the Proclamation distributed. He took a large bundle of same and, in less than an hour, he came back holding his cap by the peak and the back, full of silver coins, mostly 2/- and 2/6d pieces. I refused the money, telling him he was told to give them out free. He said he thought we wanted the money to buy food for the garrison. I asked him who he had at home and he informed me he had a widowed mother and small brothers and sisters, so I told him to go and give the money, which he had got for the Proclamation, to his mother. (This I believe he did). He came back again and collected the balance of the Proclamations, stating he would give them out without charge (which I believe he did).

This boy came to the barricade on Easter Tuesday and asked to be allowed into the G.P.O. so that he could fight for Ireland. After questioning, he said his mother had agreed and he was accepted into the G.P.O. garrison. I saw this boy on duty during the week and, when Volunteers were called for special duty, he was one of the first to "fall in".

I never saw him again after the evacuation of the G.P.O. I do not know what his name was. I don't know if he is dead or alive and I will take opportunity of paying tribute to this brave Dublin newsboy.

Later in the day a big burly man of the dock-labourer type came to the window and said he wanted to fight with Mister Connolly. I told James Connolly about him and he said: "Let him in". I brought him to James Connolly who gave him a Martini rifle and a bandolier of ammunition. He told me to instruct him in the use of the weapon. After trying for a long time to teach him to load and use the rifle, I realised that he would never learn. I went and told Connolly this and asked him to take back the rifle. He told me to send the man to him. When the man reported, Connolly told him he wanted a strong man who could use a pike. The man accepted gratefully and was put on guard at the main door of the G.P.O. I saw him there for a couple of days. On Wednesday morning I saw him again coming down Henry St. in the direction of O'Connell St., in the middle of the road. He seemed to have lost his head, as he was unarmed and was moving along in a pugilistic attitude. He was riddled with bullets.

On Tuesday or Wednesday a person whom I recognised as a member of the Detective Division came to one of the barricades and casually inquired how long we thought we could hold out. I told Pearse about this and asked if we should shoot him. He said: "No, let him go". On being sent out on a night patrol, I met two unarmed soldiers near Parnell St. One had

a cardboard box under his arm. I identified him as the detective who spoke to me at the barrier earlier in the day. We took them both to the G.P.O. When we brought them upstairs to the place where prisoners were held, Brian O'Higgins opened the box and found it contained a suit of civilian clothes. This detective must have got away during the evacuation of the Post Office, for the next time I saw him was at the Rotunda with the rest of the "G" men identifying the prisoners.

When the roof of the G.P.O. went on fire, I was one of the party detailed to take all the bombs to the basement. The upper part of the building was burning fiercely at the time. The bombs went off about 12 o'clock that night.

Leaving the G.P.O. by a side door in Henry St. on Friday evening of Easter Week, the members of the garrison entered a lane opposite and, by entering mineral stores, etc., proceeded in the direction of Moore St. While in a mineral stores that night an explosion, believed from the G.P.O., caused part of the stores (in which we were guards for the night) to fall in on us.

In the early hours of Saturday morning I proceeded along a lane towards Moore St. At the last house of this lane with a frontage in Moore St. Commandant General P.H. Pearse was standing in a gable end doorway. After some conversation with him he instructed me to bring the men for food from the stores to the Moore St. house.

During the day we were engaged boring from house to house in direction of Parnell St. In the afternoon that day all Volunteers were assembled in a backyard in Moore St. and were addressed by Sean McDermott, who informed us of the surrender which was to take place near Findlater's in O'Connell Street. There was a general cry from the men not to surrender but to

fight on when Sean informed us it was an order from Volunteer H.Q. which must be obeyed, after which he praised the men for their noble stand and fight against the overwhelming odds of the British army. He then shook hands with each man and bade us all goodbye. We saw him once more in the Rotunda Gardens where he was unarmed and assaulted by a British officer.

We surrendered our arms in O'Connell St. that evening after which we were marched to the Rotunda Gardens where we spent the night lying on the grass.

On Sunday morning we were marched to Richmond Barracks, Inchicore, where we spent the day. That night we were marched to the North Wall (Dublin), packed into a cattle boat and deported to England. My destination was Knutsford Jail, Cheshire, at 9 a.m. the following morning.

I did not see Ireland again until Christmas Eve 1916, after spending the winter in an internment camp at Frongoch, North Wales.

Signed: Charles Donnelly
(Charles Donnelly)

Date: 27th March 1953
27th March 1953.

Witness: J. Kearns Comd't.
(J. Kearns) Comd't.

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