

W.S. 910

ORIGINAL

BUREAU OF MILITARY HISTORY 1913-21
BURO STAIRÉ MILEATA 1913-21
No. W.S. 910

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BUREAU OF MILITARY HISTORY, 1913-21.

STATEMENT BY WITNESS.

DOCUMENT NO. W.S. 910.....

Witness

Alphonsus J. O'Halloran,
7, The Crescent,
Limerick.

Identity.

Lieutenant 'D' Company Limerick City
Battalion, 1916.

Subject.

Limerick City Volunteers,
Easter Week 1916.

Conditions, if any, Stipulated by Witness.

Nil

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STATEMENT BY MR. A.J. O'HALLORAN,

7, The Crescent, Limerick.

It would be impossible for any of us to forecast what the judgement of posterity will be on the inaction of the rest of Ireland at that time, and especially Munster. I am only interested in Limerick, and as one who had no voice in the decision not to go into action, or to surrender our arms, I resent very much attempts that were made afterwards to cast all the blame on Limerick for Munster's failure. If we failed, Cork and Kerry were equally culpable.

In the following statement, I simply relate my personal experiences and impressions during that week. I confine myself to those. Needless to say, since then I have scores of detailed accounts of local movements related to me, but make no reference to them. Possibly they will be covered in other statements submitted.

In order to appreciate how matters stood locally, it would be well to consider the set-up of our Battalion (1st), I.V. There were three dominant personalities in it, viz., Michael P. Colivet, Commandant, George Clancy, Vice-Commandant, and James Leddan, Chairman of Management Committee, and it was on those that the decision not to take action really rested.

Colivet, as a member of the A.O.H. which at the period enjoyed a mushroom growth in Limerick, seemed to have taken an active interest in the Volunteer movement once the question of inaugurating it locally was considered by that body. At a later stage he was co-opted on the Organising Committee. (See my sketch in

"Limerick's Fighting Story".) At the first meeting he attended, when the minutes of the previous meeting were being read, I noticed him looking around at the other members in a puzzled manner, which seemingly was caused by the entry that, in view of the disturbance that had occurred at the Cork meeting, the question had been raised as to whether it would not be well to postpone our contemplated meeting. Before the minutes were signed, he stood up and said: "Mr. Chairman, I understood that this Committee was appointed to organise a public meeting, not to consider the advisability of organising one". With - I think - one other member of the A.O.H., he voted with the I.R.B. section to carry out the project, and this was done. I mention this incident, because an almost fanatical adherence to facts was perhaps his chief characteristic. It will be noted that in his own report of his interview with Pearse previous to Easter Week, he heckled him as to the help that was expected to come from Germany. In other words he was not prepared to take anything for granted. When the Irish Volunteers were organised here, I should say that Colivet was just an Imperial Home Ruler, and it was only by degrees that he embraced the Republican ideal. As showing this, we were about six months in existence when one night he and I were coming down from the usual weekly parade at the Fianna Hall, when he said to me in a very hesitating manner, as if he were not quite sure as to how I would take the suggestion: "I have been thinking it would not be a bad thing were we to obtain complete separation from England". My reply was: "I've been thinking that since I was fourteen!". As far as I am aware, it was only a very short while before Easter Week that he was sworn into the I.R.B., and what puzzles me is why he was not brought in

sooner, having regard to the fact that he was on the most intimate and friendly terms with both Clancy and Leddan.

George Clancy was Head Centre, I.R.B., here, a graduate N.U.I. and a teacher (official) of Irish by profession. Very popular with all with whom he came into contact, he would have made an ideal leader in such a movement as ours but for one weakness in his character, the fact that he was very highly strung. The following instance will show what I mean. In "Limerick's Fighting Story" I have related with some detail the events of our Whit Sunday, 1915, parade. I did so because I am afraid it will be very hard for future generations to realise how bitterly the vast majority of our people were opposed to the Irish Volunteers. On that day, after the parade, visiting Volunteers were invited to stack their arms at the Fianna Hall (our Barracks, as we were wont to term it), so as to facilitate them in sightseeing, etc. Each of our four Companies were to mount guard there in turn. The Company to which I was attached (D) were to do duty from about 4 p.m. When I arrived there, probably some time before the hour, I was surprised to see Clancy sitting on a form in the yard, his head between his hands, and bowed down almost to his knees, his whole attitude betokening great dejection. I assumed that he was ill, went over, sat beside him and, putting my arms around his shoulders, said: "What's the matter, Seoirse?". He raised his head, looked at me in a very troubled way and replied: "Is it worth it? Is it worth it?". What he intended to convey was that, in view of the malignant hostility displayed against us that day by the populace generally, could anything be done for the country! I never would take Clancy seriously when he was in such a mood so I laughingly reminded him of that Spanish officer of

the Armada, wrecked on the Irish coast, who found himself ill-treated by our forefathers and who, when he reached Spain, wrote an account of his adventures in which he expressed his opinion of them thus:- "Surely never died for such a people". I am laying emphasis on this incident, because I know from previous experience that, had I met Seoirse next day, that mood would have vanished and he would have made a laugh of all the events of that Whit Sunday!

I should say that both Clancy and Colivet were men of exceptional character and great natural ability.

James Leddan was of quite a different type. An upholsterer by trade, he had a small workshop at 20 Thomas Street where he carried on business with the aid of an apprentice. Though intelligent, he was slow of speech and gave the impression that he considered a point very carefully before he ventured an opinion. In 1915 he was 51 years old, and thus much older than the average Volunteer (in Limerick). He was an old member of the I.R.B. and was personally very popular with all ranks, but I imagine the respect in which he was held by them was attributable to the fact that he was Chairman of the Management Committee, a body which (unwisely perhaps) was allowed to continue in existence up to 1916, and the deference with which he was treated by Clancy and Colivet.

Now, as to my personal experiences during Easter Week. Some few weeks before that I had, for the first time in my life, suffered from a pulmonary cold which left a rather inconvenient aftermath. My chief outdoor relaxations for years had been walking and cycling, but for about two weeks I had to give up both, as any quick

movement threw me into a profuse perspiration. Curiously enough, I never again suffered in this way until about five years ago when recovering from an attack of pleurisy. Anyway, as a result, I missed one or two distance parades. On Holy Thursday night there was the usual weekly parade at the Fianna Hall at which I attended, and at which (as I have related in "Limerick's Fighting Story") Colivet delivered an address in which he hinted very plainly that we might expect to go into action very soon. On Good Friday night nearly all the men of the Battalion attended again for the purpose of receiving some equipment, including first-aid outfits. When that was finished I was about to leave the Hall, when F. Kivlehan stopped me and said: "You are to remain. Paddy Walsh (Captain, D. Company) has been promoted Quartermaster, I am Captain and you are 1st Lieutenant, so you are now on the Battalion Council". A meeting was then held. Seán Fitzgibbon was present. All the plans re the landing of the arms, etc., were then outlined and details discussed. These plans and details are now well-known, but, if necessary, I shall go into them in the projected second part of my testimony. Later on, Kivlehan and Jim Hennessy, who was not a Volunteer but was, I think, on the Management Committee, collected all .303 ammunition from the different dumps and brought it to the Hall in a pony and trap. We all then helped to carry this into John Daly's house in Barrington Street, from the back garden of which there was an entrance into the Fianna yard. We left Daly's in twos and threes so as not to attract attention at that hour (about 11.30 p.m.). Steve Dineen and I were down town together, and discussed coming events. It had been ordered that all of us who could

arrange to do so, should report at the Hall about 10 next morning. I was there at that time, or a little later. On my way up town I met a teacher of my acquaintance, who stopped to tell me of an item of news which had appeared in the "Cork Examiner" that morning re the finding of the collapsable boat, etc., at Banna Strand. On my arrival at the yard, Colivet posted me to do duty there with F. Fitzpatrick (Lieut.). We were to admit those we judged to have business with the leaders, and my recollection is that Colivet ordered us to fire on any of the enemy forces who tried to enter. I retain but the vaguest idea of the messengers who entered and left that day. All day, conferences were going on in Daly's house.

One extraordinary incident took place, possibly about noon, which I can only relate without being able to offer any explanation. Colivet came into the yard from Daly's, and asked Fitzpatrick and me to help him shift some of the forms to the door of the Hall, so as to form a barricade. Needless to say, we did not ask his reasons for this. We had just finished when Clancy, looking somewhat excited, came from Daly's and asked me where the Colonel was. I said, "In the Hall". He was about to enter when he saw the "barricade", and turning to me said: "What's the meaning of this?" "Only just a matter of form - I mean form" (giving the latter the pronunciation usually given to a seat), I replied. Clancy certainly did not appreciate the pun, but gave a very wicked look at me and then made his way into the Hall. A few minutes later, on looking in, I saw Colivet with his back to the wall listening to Clancy who was seemingly urging some point on him. A little later they re-entered Daly's together. At that time I thought nothing of the incident, nor indeed for long afterwards; in fact, it

is only in recent years that I have wondered what it was all about. I think that at the moment I assumed that it was in preparation for an enemy attack, but now I am inclined to think there must have been some very acute difference of opinion amongst the leaders, though what this could have been about I cannot surmise, in view of the fact that it was only noon on Easter Saturday.

During the evening some of the rank and file came along to do fatigue work, such as, loading the waggon, etc., and at about 6 p.m. Fitzpatrick and I were relieved from duty. I went over to the Jesuit Church for confession. On Easter Sunday morning I was at Mass at St. Michael's at 9 a.m. I think, and on my way home was with Jim Leddan, who had also been there. I could not help remarking what a surprise was in store for the people generally when we went into action at 7 that evening. I cannot recall what Leddan said, but I do know that he did not give me even the most distant hint that there might be a change in the plans. After breakfast I donned uniform and equipment, and went to the Hall. One of the first I spoke to was Clancy, and I made some such remark as I had made to Leddan that morning. To my amazement he told me that everything was "off". I can't remember any further conversation with him, but I noticed Steve Dineen standing over near the gate entrance and, recollecting our discussion of Good Friday, went over and said: "So everything is off". He said: "Who told you that?". I replied: "Seoirse"; and he retorted: "Don't mind him. It is not". I cannot recall if I had any further talk with Dineen then.

The march to Killonan took place, and it is worth remarking that this time the streets were lined by people

to see us pass, and that they seemed to regard us with interest and curiosity. Possibly this was in view of the news from Kerry and McNeill's counter order. On arrival we went into camp at Batt Laffan's farm, as per usual. I fancy it must have been sometime around 2 p.m. that someone - possibly Kivlehan - told me that the intended insurrection was definitely "off". Some time that evening it began to rain. I had got as far as staking my claim to a spot to sleep under the waggon, when it occurred to me that suffering as I was from the effects of a cold, I might be inviting an attack of pneumonia by camping out that night. I had a chat with Kivlehan, and he told me to see Colivet. I did so and received from him a positive assurance that everything was off. He then gave me leave to go home, and I promised to report next day. It would be about 7 p.m. when I left the Camp.

Next morning I went down town about 11 o'clock. In view of all the interest displayed in our parade on Sunday I was most anxious to learn whether there had been any leakage of information, or if the people generally suspected that there was any serious move on foot. I met with one or two groups of "sympathisers" and entered into chat with them, but as a result felt satisfied that they had not anticipated or suspected anything. I then went to Ryan's, tailors, 17 Shannon Street. Steve, one of the brothers, who was a cripple, and his sister were out-and-out supporters of the Irish Volunteers. Steve was a wonder for picking up information, and I said to myself that, if he had not gleaned any information, no one in Limerick would have done so. Anyway I could see that they had had no inkling of the project.

After collecting a few newspapers I went home, my idea being to cycle out to Killonan about noon. I had got as far as donning my uniform-breeches and leggings when - I think - the rain must have started again, and I determined to stay for dinner. I kept putting it off as, I said, there would be little use in going out and mucking around the sodden fields. About 5 o'clock I decided to walk out to meet the Battalion coming in the road. I did so, and had got as far as the Fair Green when I saw an advance party coming along. I was surprised to see them carrying their rifles at the ready and shouted out jokingly: "Why the hell are you marching like that?" One of them said: "You'll soon know. I had not even the least idea what he meant! To explain that, I should say that the street (Sexton Street) in which I lived was a very quiet residential one where house to house gossiping was practically unknown. Only three of our family remained in our house, my Mother (R.I.P.), who as an invalid had been confined to her room for some years, and my eldest sister (R.I.P.) who was a semi-invalid herself and rarely went out. But as a result when I went out to meet the Battalion, I did so in absolute ignorance that anything had happened in Dublin. At all events, when the Battalion came along, I marched with them to Headquarters. Little Barrington Street gave direct approach to the Hall, and School House Lane ran at right angles to that thoroughfare. Only some of the Battalion had got as far as Little Barrington Street when our Company (D) was turned out to face Barrington Street, and C. Company (I think) turned to face St. Joseph Street. I had just inquired the meaning of this when we were ordered to fall in, and were marched into Little Barrington Street. Before we had time to get into formation, Colivet gave the dismiss.

There seemed to be some confusion for a moment or two, and then the men began to disperse. A group of sympathisers had assembled there, and it was from one of them I learned for the first time that the Insurrection was on in Dublin and that the Volunteers had taken the G.P.O., etc. I chatted over the news with some of the men, and the general idea was that we were to be ready for a mobilisation at any moment.

The following day many of the Volunteers were in evidence around the town looking for news and questioning any of the officers they met. At about 11 a.m. I went up to Leddan's, but he was not there. There were three or four others present, but the only one I can recall is Michael Brennan. We were chatting away, and I remember Mick saying: "Phonse, while we are sitting here talking, can you realise that they are fighting in Dublin?". As Leddan did not turn up, we separated.

Now the following incident is as clear to my mind as if it happened only yesterday, but I cannot say whether it occurred on that Tuesday or the following day, but I am inclined to think it was the latter. I went up Thomas Street about noon. When I got near Leddan's door, I saw Mick Brennan and Seán Ó Murthile standing at it. The door was closed. As I joined them, Mick Brennan said: "Phonse, you are the very man we want. Colivet does not mean to do anything, and Paddy (Mick's brother) swears he will bring out the men in Meelick. How many men do you think would come out with us?" I said: "About sixty". Then we debated what we would do. Sean Murthile suggested that we should march to the Junction (Limerick). I objected that we would be walking into a trap, and proposed that we should cross over to Clare and fall back

from Meelick towards Galway. I added that the difficulty would be to get the guns across the Shannon, which of course was well-guarded by the British. Mick Brennan said that that could be arranged. Apparently some kind of conference had been going on in Leddan's, and at that moment Colivet opened the door and, addressing Brennan in a very stern manner, said: "Captain Brennan, you are not to move without my permission". He then closed the door and Mick Brennan asked where I was going. I told him I would go to Ryan's (Shannon Street). This I did and he came along very soon; gave me to understand that things were moving, and asked where he could find me at about 3 p.m. I said I was going home and would remain there until I got word from him. I never asked him what promises of support he got from other members of the Battalion. Anyway, he never called to my home that evening. Long afterwards I asked him why, and he explained that he had made several efforts to get in touch with Galway to find out what was happening there, but all the Clare roads were guarded, and he was turned back. Eventually he decided to return to Limerick, and was arrested at the Thomond Bridge.

I would like to say in conclusion that at the time I felt very bitter against Colivet and Clancy for not leading us into action, but after all those years I am inclined to think that, in view of what happened at the time, such as, Monteith's message by Whelan, The O'Rahilly's news of the disputes at Headquarters, etc., they really could not be blamed. My great

grievance against them is that at Easter Week the rank and file were completely ignored and that, when it came to a final decision, members of the Management Committee were allowed to vote, though they would have been non-combatants!

I have heard hundreds of discussions since then about the whole affair, but with the statements made in the course of such I have nothing to say. My personal impression is that Leddan would be swayed by Clancy, and that if these two agreed on a course to be adopted Colivet would not have set himself up against them. So my view is that, if Limerick was to blame for not acting, Clancy and Leddan should bear the brunt.

A few days after our release from gaol I chanced to meet Colivet and we went for a walk, during which we discussed events at length. When I argued that we should have gone into action, Colivet said: "What could we have done?" My reply was: "Well, we could have gone down in a blaze of glory like the men of Dublin." He then told me that, from all he had heard at the time, he had assumed that it would be a case of 1803 over again; that there would be something like a street riot, and that it would end at that, but that, had he realised that such a fight would be made, he would have ordered us into action.

I can only say that I believe he was quite sincere in that statement.

SIGNED

DATE:

Alphonsus J. O'Halloran
23rd December 1953
(Alphonsus J. O'Halloran)

WITNESS:

J.M. MacCarthy

Lt.-Col.

23rd December 1953.

(J.M. MacCarthy) Lt.-Col.

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