

W. S. 928

ORIGINAL

BUREAU OF MILITARY HISTORY 1013-21

BURO STAIRE MILITAIR 1013-21

No. W.S. 928

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BUREAU OF MILITARY HISTORY, 1913-21.

STATEMENT BY WITNESS.

DOCUMENT NO. W.S. 928

Witness

John Shields,
Benburb,
Co. Tyrone.

Identity.

Head Centre I.R.B., Co. Tyrone, 1917;
O/C. Tyrone Brigade, 1917-1919;
O/C. Benburb Company, 1920-1921.

Subject.

Reorganisation of Irish Volunteers, 1917,
and national activities, Co. Tyrone, 1917-24.
Living conditions on Prison Ship "Argenta".

Conditions, if any, Stipulated by Witness.

Nil

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ORIGINAL

BUREAU OF MILITARY HISTORY 1913-21

BURD STAIRS MILITARY 1913-21

No. W.S. 928

STATEMENT of Mr. Jack Shields,

Benburb, County Tyrone.

After the Easter Week Rising in 1916 the pre-1916 organisation of the Volunteers lapsed to a great extent. Benburb Company, however, kept together and met occasionally. There was, however, no official organisation in existence, Benburb Company being sort of isolated. The I.R.B. organisation was in practically the same condition. A number of men in the Benburb circle met together and discussed matters of importance on these occasions.

About Easter 1917 I was made aware of a reorganisation meeting to be held in Dublin. I attended this meeting which was held in Fleming's Hotel, Gardiner Street. Cathal Brugha was in the chair at this meeting, and three northern representatives were present - Liam Gaynor, Joe O'Doherty and myself. This meeting was a sort of reorganisation meeting or a convention of representatives from different parts of the country. The purpose of it was to have a general reorganisation of the Volunteers. I cannot now remember the names of any of the other delegates who attended this meeting. I don't think, looking back at it, that I knew many there. This meeting may have been summoned with the idea of creating a provisional executive to take charge of the reorganising of the Irish Volunteers. I remember distinctly that one of the principal items discussed was how to start the reorganisation work, and the question of the availability of arms and what had happened to the pre-1916 arms was also mentioned. It was generally agreed that each person at this meeting was to return

to his own area, approach all the old pre-1916 Volunteers and get them linked up again in the Volunteer organisation.

The next meeting I attended was in June 1917. This meeting was held in Carrickmore, Co. Tyrone: Liam Gaynor of Belfast attended. With the exception of Gaynor, all the other delegates attending this meeting were Tyrone men. The object of the meeting was the question of the reorganising of a County Tyrone Brigade of the Volunteers, and plans for this object were drawn up. In addition to Volunteers attending this meeting, all the Tyrone circles of the I.R.B. were summoned to attend and many did attend. Tyrone at this period was different from Armagh and most of the other northern counties, insofar as I.R.B. matters were concerned. The I.R.B. had been very well organised in all parts of Co. Tyrone, and it was felt in Republican circles by the men who were responsible for the reorganising of the Volunteers that this work could best be done through I.R.B. channels. After some discussion at this meeting it was decided that the I.R.B. be instructed to take over the organising of Volunteer Companies in all their local circle areas. I was appointed to act as officer commanding the new Co. Tyrone Brigade at this meeting. It was also decided that the Co. Tyrone Brigade would embrace all of Co. Tyrone. I would also like to mention, in connection with the meeting, that if Dr. Patrick McCartan was then available to take up the duties of Brigade O/C. of the Tyrone Brigade, I would not have opposed him.

The work of organising of the old pre-1916 Companies of the Volunteers was got in hands after this meeting and progress was later reported from all over the County.

A Battalion organisation was got together in the Benburb and surrounding district area in County Tyrone.

The battalion was known as Dungannon battalion. At the moment I cannot remember who was appointed the first O/C. of this Battalion.

The next meeting which I attended in connection with the reorganising of Republican forces was in a private house in Belfast. Liam Gaynor was also present at this meeting. A representative from General Headquarters in Dublin named Murphy presided at the meeting. There were also present representatives from the counties of Armagh, Tyrone, Derry and Belfast city. Jim McCullough of Armagh travelled with me to it. At this meeting, both Irish Volunteer and I.R.B. matters were dealt with. Before the meeting broke up, this Mr. Murphy from Dublin presided at an election for the appointment of an Irish Republican Brotherhood head centre for the province of Ulster. Liam Gaynor was elected to this position at a ballot taken of the I.R.B. delegates present at the meeting.

The system of election of the head centre for Ulster which was adopted was that each delegate eligible to vote get a sheet of paper on which he wrote the name of the person he favoured. These papers were checked and the man receiving the majority of votes was declared elected. In the case of this election, however, there must have been a tie between two men or some mistake made in the papers as a second ballot was taken at which Gaynor's election was declared.

After this, I attended other meetings in Belfast. Some of these were meetings of the Ulster Council of the I.R.B. and were held for the purpose of having discussions on the progress of the Volunteer organisation and on the matter of arranging safe lines of communications from Belfast through the various north-eastern and north-western

areas. The dispatch routes which were organised at these meetings and the various depots for dispatches then arranged worked satisfactorily and safely all through the period of the Tan war and on after the Truce of 1921. Dispatch routes were opened from Belfast through Lurgan, Armagh South, Blackwatertown, Dungannon, Sixmilecross on to Omagh, Derry City, taking in Strabane and Newtownstewart.

The route we organised for Dublin dispatches went by Clogher, Monaghan, Carrickmacross, etc.

Another matter that received very close attention at meetings of the Ulster Council of the I.R.B. was the question of controlling the Volunteer organisation. In those early days the I.R.B. believed that members of their organisation should occupy all the important positions as officers in the Volunteer organisation.

Another matter that was discussed at these early meetings was the question of arming the Volunteers and the location and safe custody of all the arms that were in the Volunteers' possessions pre-1916.

There was a matter of some importance which came to my knowledge in or about 1917 and was a cause of concern for those interested in the organising of the Volunteer movement. In County Monaghan trouble of a personal nature developed between Owen O'Duffy and Dr. Con Ward. Both of these men were ambitious and each wanted to be boss. Seamus Dobbyn of Belfast who, at this time, was acting in an organising capacity in the North in both Volunteer and I.R.B. circles, told me a little about this Monaghan trouble. I had some personal contact with O'Duffy at this time as he got the lines of communication going in County Monaghan. O'Duffy, in connection with this arrangement of dispatch lines, cycled down to Benburb and he and I fixed it up.

After this meeting with O'Duffy I had occasion to go to a Brigade meeting in Omagh. I cycled with O'Duffy to Dungannon on my way to the Brigade meeting where he branched off south. My meeting and discussion with O'Duffy delayed me and when I arrived in Omagh I found that all the delegates of the Brigade meeting had left Omagh as they considered it dangerous to hold their Brigade meetings there.

I was given a message by a little girl which requested me to go to Sixmilecross. I went to Sixmilecross and there I met the other delegates and we held the Brigade meeting. This meeting at Sixmilecross dealt with the reorganisation of the old pre-1916 Companies, the arms available in the hands of the Volunteers and location of other arms that could be got by raiding for them. At this time, there was no battalion organisation in existence. All the Companies reported direct to the Brigade staff.

About September, 1917, I got a request to meet a representative of General Headquarters in Blackwatertown and also to call a meeting of my own Brigade that evening, one meeting to be held in Dungannon for all the Companies in the half of County Tyrone bordering Dungannon, and another meeting at Sixmilecross for the remaining Companies in the Brigade. I met this representative from G.H.Q. in a house belonging to Charlie McGleenan outside Blackwatertown. This G.H.Q. representative proved to be Seán Ó Murthuile. We then went to Dungannon for the meeting of the Company Captains in the Dungannon area. All the Company Captains attended, and Ó Murthuile congratulated me on the efficient manner in which the mobilisation of the officers was carried out at such short notice. After this meeting, and later on that evening, we proceeded to Sixmilecross which lies about 20 miles from Dungannon. We proceeded to Hugh Rogers' house at Sixmilecross. When we arrived there, Ó Murthuile inquired if Rogers had

received a dispatch from me that day. Rogers said yes, and Ó Murthuile said that was alright. Ó Murthuile then left for Dublin. After he left for Dublin, I held a meeting of all the Company Captains in the Sixmilecross side of the County.

Ó Murthuile's visit to County Tyrone was for the purpose of inspecting the officers and getting information to make a report on the state of the organisation. During his time with me I supplied him with a full verbal report on all matters concerning both the Volunteers and the I.R.B. At this time, I was head centre for County Tyrone in the I.R.B. organisation. I had been head centre from 1916 up to the time of my arrest in 1919.

As I have already mentioned, I attended the meetings of the Ulster Council of the I.R.B. in Belfast. Seamus Dobbyn, who was then I.R.B. organiser for Ulster and a representative of the G.H.Q. of the Irish Volunteers, called on me regularly and received reports on the state of both the I.R.B. and the Irish Volunteer organisation.

Shortly after the reorganisation of the Volunteers we carried out a few raids for arms. I cannot now remember how many raids were carried out. There was one raid which proved successful. We got information that a Mr. Coote, a Unionist Member of Parliament, had some arms in his residence. Old Willie John Kelly came to me to get permission to carry out a raid. I gave this permission. The Sixmilecross men took a car to Coote's residence and raided for the arms. They got five or six rifles, as far as I can remember, in this raid.

When we had all the places in which Volunteer Companies and I.R.B. Circles existed before 1916 reorganised, we tackled areas in which there were no previous organisa-

tions. I remember starting Circles of the I.R.B. in Moy, Clonmore and Tullyallen.

Previous to 1916 I had organised Circles in County Armagh in areas such as Blackwatertown where I appointed John Garvey the Centre. Before 1916 John Garvey attended meetings of the County Tyrone Head Centres of the I.R.B. After 1916 the organisation of the I.R.B. was divided strictly into counties. I took responsibility, however, for linking up some of the North Armagh Circles with the Ulster Council of the I.R.B. County Armagh Circles formed their own head Centre for the County about 1917 and James McCulloch became their Head. Later on, Séamus Connolly replaced McCulloch as Head Centre for County Armagh.

There were various meetings, organised by the I.R.B. held in Belfast during the year 1918. To several of these meetings, Company Captains from the County Tyrone were summoned. Liam Gaynor called all these meetings. As evidence that more than County Tyrone officers attended the meetings, I saw Séamus Connolly and Seán O'Reilly, both from Armagh City, at at least one of the meetings.

At one of these meetings I arranged with Joe Mallon of Coalisland to take arms and ammunition, which I was offered in Belfast, from Belfast to County Tyrone. In connection with this matter of getting arms I was put in touch with Seán Cusack who made the final arrangements in the matter. The arrangement was that Mallon and I would go home and return with a car for the arms. We got rifles and ammunition and probably small arms. I am at the moment vague about the various types of weapons and the number which we got. It was Mallon who took charge of the stuff and when he got the car loaded he set off home with them.

I did not receive any of the arms that Mallon took with him. At the time of Mallon's departure from Belfast with the arms, I was told of a meeting which was being held and I was advised to stay for it in Belfast. I accompanied Seán Gaynor to the meeting and after it was over I remained that night with Gaynor.

About the year 1918 I remember getting instructions through I.R.B. circles from Dublin not to form any more Companies of the Volunteers. The reason given was that Headquarters at this time were getting so many applications for the formation of new Companies that it would be impossible for them to give any attention to the personnel or the control of those new Companies. These instructions contained the advice that for the time being intending recruits were to join existing local Companies.

Early in 1918 discussions took place at one of those meetings in Belfast about Dungannon area. This area being so big the existing organisation of the I.R.A. was much too unwieldy to be worked properly, so I suggested that in the absence of the Company being divided, a whole-time man should be appointed from either Dublin or Belfast to give his undivided attention to matters of organisation.

Raids by Crown Forces and arrests were taking place at this time and the disorganisation caused by Crown Force activities was upsetting the lines of dispatches and ways of communication then established, so the carrying of dispatches and their delivery became most uncertain and erratic.

I knew that at this time Headquarters in Dublin were working on a plan to divide the county into two or three parts. During this time the Conscription question became acute and the question of organising an all-out

opposition to the enforcement of conscription by the British became an urgent question for the Irish Volunteers all over the place. The carrying out of any reorganisation at this time was deferred until the conscription menace had blown over. When the conscription menace had passed, the battalions which had been organised previously got instructions that they should carry on independently within the county wide Brigade area, and keep in touch with each other. This situation of each battalion carrying on to some extent independently was a result of the partial breakdown of our dispatch and communication systems. It did not visualise the immediate breaking up of the existing Brigade organisation which, to some extent, had become ineffective.

In the spring of 1918 at some of the meetings held in Belfast during the early months of that year the question of fighting conscription was discussed and the matter of drawing up plans was gone into. These meetings, as I have said, were attended by Company Captains and each officer was expected to know exactly what he should do in certain eventualities. After their briefing in Belfast these Company officers were to face the danger of conscription within their Company areas and carry out the plans outlined without awaiting any orders to do so from G. H. Q. In connection with the conscription danger, each Company of the Volunteers was to get possession of all the available arms within the Company area. No attacks were to be made on Crown Forces and the Volunteers were to act in a purely defensive manner. But if the British made any attempt to conscript Irishmen into the Army, while engaged in these attempts, they should be attacked with arms.

At the time these meetings were held in connection with the conscription danger, I got orders to summon the Company officers to Belfast for the meetings. I had to issue the instructions, to attend the meetings, to each officer by dispatch and these dispatches, notwithstanding the partial breakdown that had occurred in the communication system, arrived at their destination and all the officers summoned attended the meetings. I was against bringing so many officers to Belfast at this time. I wanted one of the responsible Belfast officers to be sent to County Tyrone and there to hold officers' meetings locally.

As I have already stated, it was the I.R.B. that controlled the Volunteer organisation to a great extent at this time. In I.R.B. circles, Dublin only dealt with matters of this sort through the Ulster Divisional organisation of the I.R.B. and any orders issued by the Belfast Divisional I.R.B. crowd had to be obeyed by all I.R.B. members within their jurisdiction. I want to emphasise that at this period in County Tyrone, the whole directional policy of the Volunteer movement was carried out through I.R.B. channels. In early 1918, with the exception of one officer, all the Volunteer officers of the County were members of the I.R.B.

In early 1919, a set of instructions were issued by the I.R.B. and sanctioned by the Irish Volunteer Executive for the reorganisation of the Irish Army under Dáil Éireann, which was then established. These instructions were lengthy, detailed and covered several pages of foolscap. As Brigade O/C., I received a copy. I cannot remember the details contained in these instructions, as I was arrested some short time after they were issued to me. My arrest occurred on the 12th September,

1919. I was taken to Benburb R. I. C. barracks by the R. I. C. who had raided my place and made a prisoner of me. A young man, a neighbour of mine, came over to the barracks that day with some things he thought I might require whilst a prisoner. The police in the barracks, through a mistake or intentionally, allowed the young man to come into the 'black hole' in which I was confined. This admittance of my friend into the 'black hole' afforded an opportunity for me to tell him about the G.H.Q. papers and where I had concealed them in the house at home. I told him to have them removed as they were most important and secret documents and it would be disastrous if they were captured by the British. The young man went back to my home, collected the documents but unfortunately he destroyed them. I never saw the documents again. There should be copies of the lost documents in existence as I expect that every senior Brigade officer in the country was furnished with a copy. The only thing I can state now in connection with these documents was that they dealt, from the Irish Republican Brotherhood angle, with the matter raised by the appointment by Dáil Éireann of a Minister for Defence, and the consequent question of who was to control the Army of the Republic, whether it should be the Government of the Republic or the Irish Volunteer Executive, who had been in existence from October 1917 as the controlling executive to which the Headquarters of the Army were responsible.

After my arrest I was, as I already stated, taken to Benburb R. I. C. barracks. No charge was preferred against me in Benburb and on the day following my arrest I was removed by the R. I. C. to Belfast prison. As a matter of interest, the two motor cars that conveyed me and my escort from Benburb to Belfast were the property of James Trodden, a sincere Republican who had a hackney

car business in Armagh City. When the police hired the cars for this journey Trodden did not know the use his cars were being put to. That was the last time that Trodden allowed the police to use his motor cars.

I was six weeks in Belfast prison when I was taken before a courtmartial composed of British military officers. I was charged with being in possession of arms and ammunition found by the police when raiding my house on the morning of my arrest - they found a small loaded revolver hidden in the house. This find formed the basis of the charge against me. At my courtmartial I did not recognise the jurisdiction of the Court and I was found guilty of the charge. Afterwards, when the courtmartial sentence was promulgated, I was informed that I had got nine months' hard labour.

I was kept in Belfast prison from the time the sentence was announced to me up to about April 1920. I was then removed to Derry gaol. On my arrival in Derry I met Noel Lemass of Dublin who was also a sentenced prisoner. I was released from Derry on the 15th July 1920 on the expiration of my sentence.

After my release from Derry I spent a short time visiting and staying with some friends and then I returned to my home.

After my arrest Frank Dorris was appointed to replace me as Brigade O/C. Dorris was later arrested about May 1920. I remember seeing him shortly after his arrest in Derry gaol. Dorris got a note to me after he arrived in Derry, inquiring if I could get a dispatch out for him. I told him that I could. He then wrote a note to Albert Tally, Galbally, asking Tally to take charge of the Brigade as Brigade O/C. This note reached

Tally and he took charge of the Brigade and was in charge of it when I returned home from Derry prison. When I arrived home I found that the organisation of the County Tyrone Brigade was practically broken up. The Crown Forces which included the British military, police and 'B' Specials, were very active all over the Brigade area. Charles Daly had come to Tyrone from G.H.Q. as an organiser and his first activities were attempts he made to form Active Service Units in different parts of the county.

After my release I was attached to Benburb Company as a Volunteer. Benburb Company area is 8 miles from Dungannon and the direct road through to Dungannon contained a most hostile Unionist population; the district between Benburb and Dungannon being so hostile meant a practical isolation of our area from Battalion Headquarters which was situated in Dungannon town.

During the latter months of 1920 the Benburb Company carried out various raids for arms on Unionists' houses. We raided 7 or 8 unionists' houses in Brantry Area. These houses were the property of unionists. One of the houses raided was occupied by the gamekeeper on the Caledon estate. Attached to the gamekeeper's house was the local Orange Lodge. When we arrived on the scene to raid the gamekeeper's house we found that a number of young men, 7 or 8 in all, were in the Grange Hall engaged at what we subsequently found to be a band practice. We entered the Orange Hall first with revolvers in our hands and held up the young men. We searched them and got two revolvers on them. On the raid on the gamekeeper's house which we next carried out we got a few shotguns and ammunition.

On another raid for arms at a place called Drummond,

which occurred in the winter of 1920, we came under a rather heavy fire from the inmates of the house we were attempting to raid. In preparing for this raid, which was on a house situated in a unionist and hostile area, we applied for and got some extra men from Charlemont area to reinforce the Benburb Company. We had information that a quantity of arms was kept in a particular house which was situated quite close to an Orange Hall. On the night of the raid we first surrounded the selected house and, when in the act of rushing it, heavy rifle fire was directed on us from the direction of the Orange Hall which was between 300 and 400 yards distant. This hall had been used as a mobilisation centre by the 'B' men and it appears that a number of 'B' men were actually in the hall when we arrived to raid the nearby house. These 'B' men in the Orange Hall had mobilised there somewhat earlier than was their usual practice and their presence in the hall so early created a surprise item for us. We had, however, taken the precaution to place a number of men as an outpost between the Orange Hall and the house we were raiding. This precaution of ours saved us from being caught in a very well planned trap. If all our forces had been placed in position around the house selected for the raid, the men in the Orange Hall would have got control of our way of escape from the house we were planning to raid. As soon as our men placed nearest the house attempted to approach nearer to it, fire was opened on them by the inmates of the house. And immediately this fire started, the 'B' men in the Orange Hall came into action with very heavy rifle fire. I was in charge of the men, placed as an outpost between the Orange Hall and the house we were raiding. When the 'B' men started their heavy fire in our direction we made a vigorous reply to it. As we occupied a fairly safe position, we

were able to nullify the 'B' men's fire and prevent them taking advantage of the surprise which would otherwise have resulted had we not been there as an outpost. Our action on this night enabled all the attackers on the house to effect a retreat from the vicinity when their efforts to enter the house proved abortive. The history of this event goes to prove that a little laxity in our planning and delay in starting walked us into a situation which, if not planned by the enemy, had all the appearance of being planned.

In a raid on a train for mails, amongst letters seized and censored were some addressed to military and police at their military and police posts and communications from those posts. In one letter was matter concerning an application made by a Captain Greer of The Grange, Moy, for a permit to keep six firearms, rifles and shotguns, then in his possession. We got a dispatch informing us of the capture of this letter from our headquarters in Dungannon, with instructions to raid Captain Greer's house for the arms. We made immediate preparations for the raid and carried it out to discover that the arms had been removed before the raid took place. Mrs. Greer, Captain Greer's wife, who met us at the door of their residence, informed us on our arrival that the police had removed the arms. She stated that she would have handed them over to us had the arms been there. We did not believe that the lady was telling us the truth, as we thought she might be trying to induce us not to raid the premises. We searched the house and found that the arms were gone.

It appears that when the police heard of the raid on the train and knew that Captain Greer's application for the permit to keep the arms had been captured, they at once called on Captain Greer and lifted the weapons.

Attack on Benburb Barracks.

Early in July, 1921, we received orders from our Brigade Headquarters to carry out an attack on Benburb Barracks. We carried out this attack on the night of the 5/6th July, 1921.

The purpose of the attack was to cause a diversion in connection with a big raid that was being carried out on a train which was planned to take place between Pomeroy and Donaghmore or some place near there.

We carried out the attack at Benburb as ordered. We had received strict orders about the time the attack was to commence. I think the time mentioned was about 11 p.m. The hold-up of the train was timed to take place about an hour later. All the men mobilised for this attack were members of Benburb Company. Seven or eight men were engaged in the actual firing on the barracks and the other armed members of the Company were placed in positions to protect our rear from counter attack by the local 'B' men. We opened fire on the barracks and maintained the fire for about 30 minutes. In reply to our attack, the police sent up Verey lights and returned the fire. With the large 'B' men strength in the local district, getting away safely from this attack on the barracks presented danger to all those taking part and was carefully planned. No difficulties developed for us either during the time the attack was on, or on getting away from the barracks later. This attack had no pretensions to any other effect than to engage the attention of the barrack garrison and the local 'B' men units and it served this purpose well.

Some days later I saw the remains of the train on the railway line where it was burned after the mails were taken from it. The appearance of the train suggested

that the train's destruction was a complete success. In connection with this destruction of the train, it seemed strange at the time that we were the only unit that was asked to co-operate in a diversionary attack by attacking a barracks. I heard afterwards the explanation that Charlie Daly stated that he did not favour asking any I. R. A. Companies to undertake activities when he felt that they could not be relied on or able to carry out their orders.

My Arrest.

On the night of the 7th July, 1921, a party of R. I. C. and Special Constabulary in two or three motor tenders commenced to search all likely houses in Benburb area in order to capture me. On this night I was staying in a house belonging to people who were Catholics, but unfriendly to the Republican Movement. It was the most unlikely house for the police or 'B' men to raid as the political opinions of the owners were well known and I believed I had little to fear that the place would be raided. The house, however, was surrounded by the R. I. C. and a thorough search made of the premises. I was found in the search and arrested. After my capture, I was brought to Dungannon R. I. C. barracks and kept there for a few hours. I remember a police officer came to me in Dungannon and informed me that he was in charge of the escort to take me from Dungannon. He told me that if I would give an undertaking not to attempt to escape, he would not handcuff me on my way to the train. I informed him that I would give him no such undertaking and that I would also refuse to walk to the railway station. The walk from the R. I. C. Barracks to the Railway Station would entail walking from one side of the town to the other side through the principal business streets, and

I did not fancy appearing an acquiescent prisoner to my Unionist acquaintances. I was then informed that I would not be removed.

About three hours later three motor tenders pulled up outside the barracks and I was placed in the centre tender with an armed escort of police and Specials. One of the other tenders of armed men preceded our tender and the other tender took up the rear. We proceeded to Carrickmore station. I was then put on a train for Derry City where, on arrival, I was handed over to the Military Authorities at Derry Military Barracks.

A day or two before my arrival in Derry Military Barracks, Charlie McGuinness, who later became well known in this country and wrote a book on his adventures abroad, effected his escape from the military barracks through a hut that adjoined the detention barracks where he was a prisoner. McGuinness's escape made the condition and treatment of prisoners in the detention barracks rather severe, as all prisoners were handcuffed in pairs each night in a manner that was uncomfortable and made rest or sleep difficult.

On my arrival in the military barracks I was placed in a detention hut the first night and then I was removed to a detention cell. There were other Republican prisoners in these detention cells when I arrived there.

The conditions in the cells as far as food was concerned were bad. I and another chap named McKenna, whom I knew beforehand, were put together in one of the cells and we did not get enough food for even one person. Some days after, all of the detention prisoners in both hut and cells were brought out for an inspection by an officer. This officer addressed us and stated that we all looked well,

which was a compliment to our treatment as prisoners. I then spoke up and informed him that I and McKenna were being subjected to slow starvation, and that we required a lot more food if we were to survive the treatment for even a short time. As the prisoners in the hut at this time were getting lashings of food, some of them resented my complaint, as they thought it was undeserved. The result, however, as far as McKenna and I were concerned, had the desired effect and from that onwards we received more food. About three weeks later five of us were changed to the military barracks, Belfast. On our arrival there we were put into a large hut in the barrack square, which was surrounded by barbed wire entanglements.

Sometime in August 1921 the hut on the Square was cleared out and about 13 of us who were in occupation were removed to No. 2 Camp, Ballykinlar, for internment.

My stay in Ballykinlar was a period of great discomfort and my memory of the place causes no pleasant feelings. Nearly all the inmates of this camp were southerners and had little to do with my feelings about the place. I think there were only about five others of the internees from County Tyrone and a small number from other northern counties. One of the men I met there and became intimate with was a Mr. Quigley who had been a County Surveyor in County Meath. This man was all-powerful physique, about 6' 7" in height and extremely muscular. He told me of his previous adventurous career in which he joined the French Foreign Legion in his youth and of his escape from them by jumping into the sea when travelling by boat, and after a dangerous and long swim, succeeded in reaching land, from where he made his getaway. Another story he told me about was his adventure the day of the Ashbourne fight in Easter

Week 1916. On that day he was going about his official work and was riding a motor bicycle and before he knew what was happening, he found himself in the ambush position and under fire. When he realised what was happening, he got in with the Republican Forces and gave them whatever help he could.

I was released from Ballykinlar at the General Release in December 1921.

When I returned home I found that the Benburb Company was transferred from the Tyrone Brigade to the 4th Northern Division and that Charlie McGlennon was made new Battalion O/C. Charlie was O/C. of the Blackwatertown Battalion.

From December onwards to about May 1922, the local activities of the Volunteers were confined to training, arming and equipping and the manufacture of hand-grenades and land mines for use if and when the Truce ended.

In spring of 1922 we got a consignment of rifles from Dundalk military barracks. This consignment of rifles, other weapons and equipment, together with a large quantity of ammunition, was intended to equip the local Volunteers to take part in a general attack on British Forces then occupying Northern Ireland, - the six north-eastern counties.

If we got any information about this planned attack, it is very vague in my mind at the moment. All our activities about the time that these arms were handed over to us pointed to an early intention to stage an all-out attack on British Forces in the North on a large scale.

On the 22nd May 1922 a sudden large-scale swoop was made by the British Forces from all their barracks and strong points in the six-county area in order to round-up

and capture all active members of the Irish Republican Army and their Sinn Féin supporters. In the Benburb Company area myself and John Hughes were the only Volunteers captured. Other local companies fared much worse.

Hughes and I were taken to Clogher Specials' Barracks for a week or so and we then were removed to Belfast prison. After a short period in Belfast we were removed to the Argenta.

Conditions on the Prison Ship ARGENTA.

The Argenta was a steamship which was manufactured during the 1914-1918 war in the United States of America as a utility cargo vessel. Her shell was made of wood. All the under-deck space in this vessel was converted into iron cages in which the prisoners were confined. In my cage, which was known as "P.2", 45 men were accommodated. This was an average-sized cage. Some were slightly larger and some smaller. The cooking arrangements on the Argenta were carried out in the ship's galley on the aft deck. The Governor of the Argenta, who was a civilian, had quarters in the ship Captain's quarters. All warders on the boat were members of His Majesty's Prison Service and had their accommodation on the fore part of the ship under deck. The armed Special Constabulary who maintained an armed guard all over the boat had their living accommodation also in the fore part of the vessel. As far as I can estimate now, there were about 300 men interned on the Argenta. The Argenta was located in Belfast Lough and was moored to buoys a short distance from shore, and on the seaway leading in and out of the Port of Belfast.

The purchase of this old unseaworthy hulk for conversion into a prison was in itself a most inhuman

method of dealing with State prisoners. The vessel in the position in which it was moored was in constant danger night and day of being rammed by other shipping passing in and out to the Port of Belfast. There were many experienced men on the Argenta who were of the opinion that there was a constant danger to everyone on board of being involved in an accident of this sort. The warders and prison officials who were on the boat were as aware as we were of the danger of our position. Apparently, the Northern authorities, with the approval of the British Government, had so little interest in our survival or the danger of our position whilst prisoners on the Argenta that the risk we were running caused them no worry. Had an accident happened, locked as we were in cages, our chances of survival were improbable.

Leaving out the constant danger of our position on this vessel, life on the Argenta was no 'bed of roses'. If we desired exercise we had to go on deck as there was no room behind decks. Owing to the cramped conditions on deck, a prisoner's exercise there was a matter of crowded congested walking around when the weather was good. There was no space on deck for playing any games. When the weather was inclement or stormy a person could not comfortably appear on deck.

The under-deck conditions in the cages were so congested and we were so crowded into such a small space that there was not room for either chairs, tables or lockers. And none of this type of furniture was supplied to us. We had to sleep in swing hammocks, one hammock suspended over another. Our food had to be taken sitting on the floor of the cage which could not accommodate all the prisoners, or sitting in our hammocks. We were supplied with knives and forks for all meals.

The sanitary arrangements on the Argenta were most primitive. An open latrine was constructed underneath the bridge at the end of the cages in the form of a wooden trough in which the sea-water could wash and evacuate the droppings with the roll of the vessel. This latrine being situated, as I have said before, at the end of the cages was most convenient of access but rather too close to us for sensitive noses. The smell from this latrine and the smell from what was called bilge water made life uncomfortable and unhealthy for every person who was unfortunate enough to have to live on the boat. Owing to faulty workmanship, some of the latrine matter got into the space occupied by the bilge water. The congested sleeping and living conditions, coupled with the lack of privacy, in time tested the tempers of even the most placid and made life so uncomfortable generally that it was a marvel the men survived so long under such living conditions.

On our first arrival there, no provisions had been made for a chapel to celebrate Mass in. On the first Sunday we were there we had to arrange two bread-hampers in such a manner as to form a crude altar during Mass. A prisoner had to hold the Mass Book to prevent it being knocked about by the roll of the ship. A few of us had to hold the lighted candles used at Mass behind our coats to prevent them being blown out by the wind. This first Mass on the Argenta was celebrated on the deck and I have a clear impression of the scene even now in my mind.

Later on the interness, without any encouragement or help from the Argenta authorities, made accommodation for the celebrating of Mass in one of the cages under-decks. This arrangement was the best we could possibly make as all the prisoners could assist at Mass in their individual cages and the men whose cage was being used for

the Mass could get cramped and congested positions in the passages surrounding the cages.

From the time I went on to the Argenta in June 1922 up to December 1923 when I was removed from the Argenta to Larne workhouse there were very few releases of prisoners; this, notwithstanding the fact that a commission had been set up to allow the internees an opportunity to prove their innocence. A small number of men had appeared before this commission. Many of these men who went before the Commission had been wrongly arrested in the first instance and never were associated with or had rendered any assistance to the Republican Movement. That these men appeared before their commission, which was boycotted by the general body of the prisoners, produced resentment amongst those of us who had been active in the Republican cause. These feelings of resentment against them caused them to be confined in one cage as a safety precaution.

Another fact which tended to complicate life on the boat was that a number of men from Northern Ireland had been down south from the start of the Civil War and had taken part in that conflict on one or the other side and after the cessation of warfare in the South, many of these returned to the North from about April 1923 onwards. On their arrival in the North a number of these men were picked up by the Northern authorities and some were sent on to the Argenta. Before those men arrived, the Civil strife in the south had caused many bitter disturbances amongst internees on the Argenta. Many of the men had taken sides for or against the Treaty, and differences of opinion and disputes on this question caused bitter arguments. This bitterness was much increased and renewed by the arrival of those Civil War participants from both sides amongst us. These men, immediately on their arrival

on the boat, started a bitter vendetta against each other. In fact, getting together on the boat afforded an opportunity for them for continuing their previous Civil War fight. To add fuel to this unfortunate position, these new elements attracted partisans to their different sides and many miniature battles royal took place from time to time.

A hunger strike took place on the Argenta about October-November, 1923. When the hunger strike was under way for four or five days, all those participating in the strike were removed to Belfast prison. Not being on strike I was retained on the boat. In all, I think about 100 men went on strike and were taken to Belfast. When the hunger-strikers were removed we were, after a few weeks, removed to Larne Workhouse. Later on, some of the hunger-strikers who had broken their strike were returned to the boat, and some others of the strikers were sent to Derry gaol after the strike had finally collapsed.

Eamon Rice, who was later T.D. for Monaghan and has been dead for some years (May he rest in Peace), was along with me on the boat and removed with me to Larne Workhouse. Rice and I were particularly good friends up to the time of his death.

To give some idea of the discomforts of Larne Workhouse, I was put into a typical room on the top floor of the Workhouse, and with me in the room amongst 16 others were Eamon Rice and Eddie Keane from near Omagh. There was a window on the middle of the room in which the glass was broken. We all were forced to lie on the floor on mattresses as no bedsteads had been issued to us. Rice was nearest the gable window. I was lying next to him and Keane was lying in line next to me. I woke up one morning to find that it was snowing outside and I

realised this when I saw that Rice's feet were covered with snow which had blown in through the unglazed window. I was covered with the snow up to about my knees and Keane was completely covered by the snow. When Keane wakened up he looked around him and when he realised that his bedclothes were completely covered with snow, he glanced over at us and said, "My God, this is terrible". He then covered his head in the bedclothes and went to sleep again. Eamon Rice's commentary on this was that his brother's cows were better looked after than we were.

Plans for escape from Larne Workhouse.

Pat McCormack from the Glens of Antrim was also a prisoner with me in Larne Workhouse. Shortly after our arrival in Larne the prisoners, who had given undertakings or had entered on bail bonds amounting to £10, were being released. Those released continued in an accelerated form for some time until all the weaklings were weeded out and only the staunchest of the Republicans remained. When all those who had accepted their release conditions had departed, Pat McCormack started to think out a plan of escape from the Workhouse. He brought a number of us in on this planning business and our joint efforts produced a plan which was based on the sinking of a tunnel from inside the Workhouse under the Workhouse gable and underneath the sentry's walk outside the Workhouse making its exit on the outside of a barbed wire fence which surrounds all the Workhouse premises. McCormack took charge of the work and put me in charge of the actual making of the tunnel. Our main trouble there was to dispose of the clay and rubble which we had to remove from the tunnel workings. The plan I adopted for this was to excavate a large cavity underneath the Workhouse floor where the clay was both dry and sandy. We packed the clay from this cavity first

between the floor of the second storey and the ceiling of the ground floor, and then between the floors and ceilings of the other upstairs rooms. The dining room we used for meals was outside the main Workhouse building and when we had all the available spaces between floors and ceilings of all rooms inside filled with clay we had still surplus clay which we must dispose of. We did this by using an old maternity quarters which had been boarded off from the rest of the Workhouse. This last space proved more than ample accommodation for our surplus clay. The tunnel was then commenced from the cavity we had excavated under the ground floor and all the clay and rubble that came from the tunnel could be placed in this cavity and the working on the tunnel could be carried on without any danger of being detected by the warders and guards who were watching our movements.

After the tunnel proper was commenced Pat McCormack got information from the prison authorities that he was being released. He then appointed me in full charge of the tunnel and he told me that he had received information from outside sources that a boat was to be available near the Workhouse to remove all the prisoners by sea to Dublin if we succeeded in escaping. He also told me that he would get in touch with me as soon as he had any further instructions from the outside people. The work on the tunnel continued after Pat's departure and everything was going grand for about 10 to 14 days, when I was told one day to pack up as I had been recommended for release myself.

Sammy O'Neill, a native of Belfast, was one of the men released with me from Larne Workhouse. It was my intention to give Sammy full particulars of how matters stood in the Workhouse for relaying to McCormack, as I

believed O'Neill had a better chance of getting in touch with McCormack than I would have after I returned home. However, when we arrived in Belfast by train O'Neill insisted that I and a few others released with us should go home with him to his house in Belfast. We did this and on arrival in O'Neill's place I unexpectedly met Pat McCormack who was then in O'Neill's house. I gave Pat full instructions about who to get in touch with in the Workhouse, and I gave him a clear idea of how far we had progressed with the tunnel and my estimate of the time it would take under favourable conditions to complete the work. It was during this conversation that Pat told me the full details of the plans that were made to purchase a boat and have it available in Larne Harbour for getting the prisoners away.

Shortly after my release from Larne, all the remaining prisoners were released and the necessity for tunnelling came to an end.

I was released on the 13th November, 1924.

As an indication of the strain and the sacrifices which imprisonment by the Government of Northern Ireland had on Six County Republicans and on their near relatives who were allowed to remain at home during the 1922-1924 period, I will give the experiences of one internee who was with me in Larne Workhouse and the economic forces which were let loose against his wife and family.

This man's family lived in a small Tyrone town where he worked at his profession before his arrest. His father and his grandfather had been noted and leading Nationalists with the idea that the ultimate freedom of Ireland from foreign domination could only be accomplished by the use of arms.

When this man was arrested, his wife and family were deprived of their breadwinner and, not alone that, but a prosecution and to add to their troubles a boycott against them was initiated by the Unionist section of the population, which represented about 55% of the people of their little town.

The attitude of the local Unionists was bad enough, but, later, when the Nationalist population became cowed and dispirited by the activities of the Special Constabulary in raiding their houses, threatening them and halting and questioning them when engaged in the ordinary everyday work that they, the Nationalists, in order to curry favour with their Orange neighbours, started to copy the Orange section by boycotting this unfortunate wife and family. The poor wife, embarrassed by her attempt to provide the ways and means of day by day existence and determined to suffer on without giving her interned husband any indication of the desperate straits they were living in, found that even the local Roman Catholic clergymen, who had once been so friendly with herself and her husband and family, had now cut adrift from her and treated her and her family as outcasts. This was indeed the last straw and she, on the verge of a nervous breakdown, asked for an interview with her husband in Larne Workhouse, which she was granted. I saw the poor man on his way to this interview, delighted to have an opportunity of seeing and speaking to his wife. I saw him again when he came back from the interview, and I never saw such a change in any man in a short period. I asked him was there anything serious the matter, and he told me that there was. He gave me an outline of what his wife and family had gone through, and then he exclaimed, "I have had to sign the form " (promising good future behaviour)...."I have renounced all I have

fought and suffered for: I have eaten dirt".

This is all that I would like to say. I have tried to give as factual an account as possible after so many years of what I have gone through, and the impressions which remain of my prison life. I regret that so much of my time from 1916 onwards was spent in prisons and in internment camps. I feel that had I been at liberty during the time I was locked up, I could have done more to help in the fight for freedom.

Signed Jack Shields
Jack Shields

Date 9/3/54
9/3/54.

Witness John McCoy
John McCoy

