

ORIGINAL

BUREAU OF MILITARY HISTORY 1913-21

BURÓ STAIRÉ MILITÁIR 1913-21

No. W.S. 1070

ROINN



COSANTA.

BUREAU OF MILITARY HISTORY, 1913-21.

STATEMENT BY WITNESS.

DOCUMENT NO. W.S. 1,070.....

Witness

Thomas O'Connor,  
165 Seaman Avenue,  
New York City, 34 N.Y.,  
U.S.A.

Identity.

I.R.B. Courier on  
Trans-Atlantic Route, 1916- 1921.

Subject.

Transmission of code messages  
between Ireland and U.S.A. 1915-1921.

Conditions, if any, Stipulated by Witness.

Nil

File No. S. 35.....

Form B.S.M. 2

N. S. 1,070

ORIGINAL

BUREAU OF MILITARY HISTORY 1913-21
BUREAU STAIRS MILITARY 1913-21
No. W.S. 1070

1,070

STATEMENT BY MR. THOMAS O'CONNOR,  
165, Seaman Avenue, New York City, 34 N.Y.,  
U.S.A.

I have been associated with the separatist movement since my early teens - from the commencement of the century. I joined the I.R.B. in Liverpool in 1915. I was sworn in by Joe Gleeson, Pat Clinch and a man by the name of Craven, whose Christian name I cannot at the moment recollect. I belonged to the Liverpool Circle, the Centre of which was Joe Gleeson.

Through Seán T. O'Kelly, the President, I became acquainted with Tom Clare<sup>K</sup> and Seán McDermott, for whom I carried out any special duties assigned to me by these two gentlemen, the principal one being to keep open the lines of communication between Ireland and the United States. My contacts in the States were John Devoy, John T. Ryan and Joe McGarritty, the leaders of the Clan na Gael in the States.

I took any job that was going at the time on boats plying between Liverpool and America so that I could carry despatches between the two countries. I was not too concerned with the position which I held so long as it enabled me to do this particular work. I was aware during the years 1915 and 1916 that the prime object of the Clan movement in America and the Brotherhood in Ireland was an Insurrection in arms against Britain at an opportune moment, and my work on boats was solely concerned with this object in view.

Up to the time of the entry of the United States

into World War 1 the authorities there paid little attention to our activities, so that we were enabled to carry on with a reasonable degree of safety in the carrying of despatches between the two countries.

In regard to Casement's mission to Germany for the purchase of arms for the Volunteers, as far as I am aware Casement was not in the complete confidence of the Clan in America who always regarded him as a pacifist. Casement was not aware of the plans for, or the date fixed for the Rising of 1916, and it was only through knowledge obtained from a German Government official that he became aware of the project. As soon as he discovered this he made arrangements to return and actually did return to Ireland with a view to preventing the Rising taking place. Casement's mission, as I understood it at the time, was primarily the formation of an Irish Brigade from among the prisoners of war captured by the Germans and I am satisfied that Devoy regarded Casement as a man who was not in favour of physical force. I am aware that Casement was looked upon more in the light of a diplomat endeavouring to obtain favourable trade relations between Germany and Ireland when the Rising had been a success. In other words, he could be looked upon as an unrecognised Ambassador of a Republic about to be declared.

While the name of von Papen figures prominently in the later history of this particular period in the United States, I would point out that the real man behind the scenes in the German Embassy was a gentleman named von Skall who, with the usual German flair for method, filed all letters received from Devoy in connection with

the transport of arms from Germany to Ireland. Sometime in April, 1916 - I think it was about the 15th - the United States Secret Service having got wind of the matter, raided von Skall's office which was not a part of the German Embassy and discovered the correspondence which had passed between Devoy and him. The German Embassy was at the time using a radio station in Mexico for the transmission of messages between them and their Foreign Office in Berlin. All this correspondence, covering the arrangements for the transport of arms to support the Rising, was discovered and the American Government immediately got into touch with the British Foreign Office in London, giving them full details of the arrangements. The British Government, however, did not take the matter seriously and took no steps to counteract the moves from the German end until the "Aud", which was subsequently scuttled off Cobh, was actually on the high seas.

The original arrangement was that the arms should be landed at Limerick or Fenit between the 20th and 23rd April, 1916. On the 14th April, 1916, Philomena Plunkett delivered a message from the Military Council to Devoy, asking that the arms should not be landed until the 23rd April. On the 15th April Devoy handed a typewritten copy of this message to von Skall who wirelessly it via Mexico to Berlin. In the meantime the "Aud" was at sea and, not being equipped with wireless, she could not be contacted. I might mention that the "Aud" was a cargo boat, which was originally an English vessel belonging to the Wilson Line and which had fallen into the hands of the Germans in the early days of the War. No cargo boat in those days was

equipped with wireless - hence the failure to contact her. The Germans first suggested that a fleet of fishing vessels be provided by them for the purpose of shipping arms to Ireland. This arrangement did not meet with the approval of the Military Council who sent Philomena Plunkett to America with instructions that only one boat was to be used for the purpose. The Germans had also arranged that the landing should be effected at Fenit without reference either to the Clan in America or to the Military Council of the I.R.B.

I am not aware that at any time was it proposed to use German officers to officer the Volunteers in arms against the British.

All messages exchanged between the Clan na Gael in America and the Republican Brotherhood in Ireland were in code, or so worded as to be meaningless to other than those for whom they were intended.

Thomas Clarke and Seán McDermott used to stay in my father's house in Sheriff St. and it was there I was given the code and instructed in its use. I kept this code in a small notebook which measured approximately 3 inches by 2 inches and could be bought at the time for three a penny. I gave this notebook to John Devoy prior to the Rising, and explained to him the method to follow in coding and decoding messages exchanged between Ireland and America. On that occasion I gave him a coded message from Tom Clare<sup>K</sup> and Seán McDermott.

The message, I remember distinctly, opened with the words: "This code should not be divulged to any person other than a member of the Revolutionary Directory or the recognised agent of the German Embassy".

As soon as Devoy had decoded the message to the word "Embassy", he turned to me and said: "That is all, O'Connor. You may go now". He seemed to overlook the fact that I knew the code by heart and the contents of all messages from Ireland to the Clan were known to me.

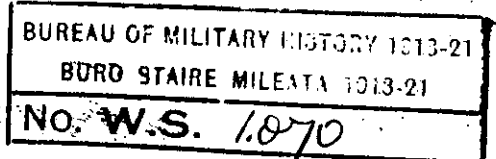
At the time of Devoy's death I made inquiries and had a search made of Devoy's papers in an effort to trace the notebook containing the code, but my search was fruitless. Devoy omits to make any reference to it in any of his publications.

I read Piaras Beaslai's recent articles in 'The Irish Independent' in which he referred to the code as a jumble of figures. This is not correct, as once learned it was easy to remember. It was built up of the figures 1,2,3,4 and 5 and excluded the figures 6,7,8,9 and 0 (zero). The latter figures when used, as undoubtedly they would be, were to be ignored, as they would only be included for the purpose of misleading those into whose hands a message might fall.

The code was as follows:

A.	B.	C.	D.	E.
11	12	13	14	15
<hr/>				
F.	G.	H.	I.	J.
21	22	23	24	25
<hr/>				
K.	L.	M.	N.	O.
31	32	33	34	35
<hr/>				
P.	Q.	R.	S.	T.
41	42	43	44	45
<hr/>				
U.	V.	W.	X.	Y.
51	52	53	54	55

The letter Z was left out.



QUESTIONNAIRE - MR. THOMAS O'CONNOR, 165 SPANGLER AVENUE,

NEW YORK CITY, 14 N.Y., U.S.A.

- 1(a) When did you first become associated with the Separatists Movement?
  - (b) When did you join the I.R.B., where and by whom were you sworn in? To what Circle did you belong and who was the Centre?
  - (c) When did you join the Irish Volunteers and to which Unit did you belong? Who were your Officers?
  - (d) When did you first join a Trans-Atlantic Shipping Company. were you instructed to do so by the Supreme Council and/or Military Council.
  - (e) If so, by whom were you detailed and what was the gist of the instructions given to you?
  - (f) What method did you adopt to safeguard the dispatches and/or money given into your custody?
  - (g) Were there any other members of the crew or crews engaged on this work? Are they still alive and if so, where do they live?
  - (h) What was the attitude of the American Secret Service to you and to the clan generally?
2. In the years 1914 and 1915 considerable correspondence was exchanged between Devoy in the States and Clarke, McDermott, Hogan and McNeill in Ireland on the question of arms aid for the Volunteers. Were you concerned in the carrying of these dispatches and were you made aware of the contents? Can you say if the said dispatches were written or in code?
3. What do you know of the clan plan to get arms from Germany and the contacts between Devoy and Von Papen, and Von Papen and Euno Meyer of the German Embassy?
4. Devoy was informed by the Military Council on the 5th February, 1916, that a meeting had been fixed for Easter Sunday, April 23rd. The Military Council requested that arrangement be made for the shipment of arms from Germany, same to be landed at Limerick or Venit between the 20th and 23rd April.
- Note: Casement was at this time in Germany arranging shipment. Can you say in what form this message was delivered to Devoy and what is your recollection of the matter? Was the message written or in code?
5. Devoy sent this message with a covering letter to Von Papen at the German Embassy for transmission by radio to Berlin. Have you any knowledge of this matter?

6. Philomena Plunkett, sister of Joseph Plunkett delivered a duplicate of the message of the 5th February on the 12th February together with details of the signalling arrangements from the arms ship to shore. What do you know of this matter?
7. From the 4th to the 14th March, 1916, Devoy was in constant touch with the German Embassy. He sent particulars of the arrangements he had made with the German Embassy to the Supreme Council on the 14th March, 1916. Were you bearer of this despatch and what do you know of the matter?
8. During this period Joseph Plunkett wrote to Casement in Berlin informing him of -
  - (a) the date of the rising,
  - (b) requesting that the arms be landed Tralee Bay at dawn on Easter Monday,
  - (c) requesting that German officers be sent to command the Volunteer units, and
  - (d) asking that a German submarine be sent for duty in Dublin Bay. Can you give any information in this connection.
9. On the 14th April, 1916, Philomena Plunkett delivered a message from the Military Council to Devoy asking that the arms should not be landed before the night of Sunday, 23rd April. On the following day, the 15th April, Devoy handed a typewritten copy of this message to Von Papen who wirelessly it to Berlin.
 

Note: The "Aud" had, however, left on the 9th April and as she was not equipped with wireless she could not be contacted. Can you throw any light on this matter?
10. On the 15th April the United States Secrets Service raided the German Embassy and captured the correspondences exchanged between Devoy and Von Papen and Von Papen and the German Government in Berlin. The United States Secrets Service immediately made known their discovery to the British Government in London. Have you any information on this matter?
11. What was the date of this last contact with Devoy prior to the rising, and on that occasion were you handed despatches and/or cash for delivery to the Military or Supreme Council, if so, were the said despatches verbal, written or in code. When did you reach Dublin and to whom did you deliver the said despatches?
12. It has been stated elsewhere that Devoy was informed by coded telegram sent from Tralee via the Valentia Wireless and Cable Station on Easter Monday that a rising had taken place in Dublin at 12 o'clock on the previous day, Easter Sunday. Devoy immediately called a Press conference to whom he gave the news. Owing to a delay in transmission and a difference in New York and Irish times Devoy was giving this



information to the Press at the actual time that the Rising on Easter Monday was taking place. The New York press immediately issued a special edition, a copy of which was bought by a British Counsellor Official in New York who telephoned the information to the British Embassy in Washington. The British Embassy immediately informed the Foreign Office in London and in actual fact the British Government got the first information of the Rising from the Representative in Washington and not from Dublin. Can you throw any light on this matter?

13. When did you re-join your unit prior to Easter Week and where were you engaged during the period?
14. Where were you interned and when were you released?
15. When did you resume your activity as a courier between Ireland and America subsequent to Easter Week?
16. When did you re-establish contact with Devoy and other leaders of the Clan? What was their outlook in regard to the apparent failure of the Rising, the executions and British policy generally?
17. You were arrested by the American Secret Service in 1917 and sentenced to a years imprisonment for being in possession of certain documents. What was the nature of these documents, how did they come into your possession and for whom were they intended? How did the American Secret Service come to arrest you, was there a leakage of information in this connection. Where were you imprisoned and did you serve your full sentence?
18. On the 15th August, 1919, you wrote to Devoy from 3700 South Park Avenue, Los Angeles, California, giving an account of your work with the American organisation "Friends of Irish Freedom". Your letter implies that the F.O.I.F. was apathetic and that membership of the different union branches had fallen off. Have you any thing further to add?
19. How were you engaged during the years 1920, 1921 and 1922? Give brief details of your activity as courier during these years and the contacts you made in Ireland and America.

