

W.S. 1.147

ORIGINAL

BUREAU OF MILITARY HISTORY 1913-21
BURO STAIRE MILEATA 1913-21
No. W.S. 1.147

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BUREAU OF MILITARY HISTORY, 1913-21.

STATEMENT BY WITNESS.

DOCUMENT NO. W.S. 1,147.....

Witness

Alphonsus Sweeney, M.I.A.A.,
76 Upper Georges Street,
Dun Laoghaire,
Co. Dublin.

Identity.

Second Lieutenant 'G' Company
3rd Battalion Dublin Brigade.

Subject.

- (a) Naas Company, Irish Volunteers,
Co. Kildare, 1916-1918.
- (b) 'G' Company 3rd Battalion Dublin Brigade,
1918-1922.

Conditions, if any, Stipulated by Witness.

Nil

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STATEMENT BY ALPHONSUS SWEENEY, M.I.A.A.,

76 Upper Georges Street,

Dunlaoghaire, Co. Dublin.

My earliest recollection of national affairs goes back to the time when I was a schoolboy attending the Christian Brothers' Schools in Naas. I clearly remember many visitors from Dublin whom from time to time, called on my uncle, the late Seamus O'Kelly, when he resided at Abbeyfield House, Naas, on the Canal bank. These included authors, artists, journalists, poets, business and professional people, and the conversation frequently turned on political topics. Nearly all the visitors were in agreement in their political outlook. Of course, books, authors old and new, social topics, birds, flower culture and everyday happenings came within the range of conversation. Among the visitors I remember having seen and heard in this way were J. W. Beirne and the late Mrs. O'Beirne, Seán McGarry, Arthur Griffith, the late Seamus O'Connell, literary critic, Padraic Colum, Padraic Ó Connaire, Dr. Grogan, Ballymore, now County M.O., Offaly, Maire Nic Suiligh, Alice Milligan, poetess, Seán O'Hegarty, London, Seán T. Ó Ceallaigh.

Mr. Harry Fleming, Civil Engineer, dropped in now and then for a chat which Seamus always appeared to relish, particularly, as he invariably threw work aside no matter how busy he might have been whenever Mr. Fleming made his appearance.

I early imbibed the gospel of Republicanism and, when the memorable year 1916 approached, I prided myself in holding rank as local despatch rider in the Volunteer organisation. In order to enhance the importance of this rank, I succeeded in getting possession of an

antiquated pistol that was more formidable in appearance than in use.

When news of the decision that the Rebellion was to take place at Easter 1916 arrived, I was entrusted with delivery of some of the despatches containing this announcement and, when the outbreak actually occurred, I no longer concealed my ponderous-looking gun, but, displaying it hanging from my belt, excitedly announced my intention of taking the road to Dublin. My excitement was quickly cooled by a threat of chastisement but I refused to surrender my pistol and put it away in the secret hiding-place in which I had kept it, "When not on duty". A few days later my enthusiasm received a further temporary check when, with my uncle, I was placed under arrest by a party of police under the late Mr. K. L. Supple, County Inspector, R.I.C., and Mr. McDonald, District Inspector. As what befell at this time is dealt with in the statement of my uncle Michael O'Kelly of this address, I pass on to a later period of the history of those years, merely adding that, after detention in the police and military barracks in Naas, the Curragh Military Prison and Richmond Barracks, Dublin, I was released from the latter place with a large number of other schoolboys, after about a fortnight's detention altogether. With the aftermath of the Rebellion and subsequent executions the old fighting spirit of our people revived and my next adventure into the domain of organised nationalism was with the Corps of Fianna hÉireann or National Boy Scouts which started in Naas in 1917. This was followed by the starting of the Naas (Seán Connolly) Sinn Féin Club.

At the time of the threat to extend the Conscription Act to Ireland, a meeting of the North Kildare Battalion, Irish Volunteers, was held at Prosperous, at which Dr. Ted Kelly attended on behalf of Headquarters, when an inventory was taken of all the areas available and a list made out of the strength of the Volunteer Companies in the

county. The delegates present at this meeting, as far as I remember, included Michael McCormack, Milltown, Tom Doran, Mile Hill, Kilcullen, Tom Dunne, Mainham, John Murphy, Newbridge, Tom Harris, Dick Harris and Jim Harris, Prosperous, J. Whyte and myself, Naas, Pat Dunne and Tom Domican, Kill, Tom Mangan and Paddy Colgan, Maynooth. Kilcock, Celbridge and some other districts in the extreme North-East of the county were also represented.

Paddy Colgan, Maynooth, was appointed Battalion Commandant and Tom Harris, Vice-Commandant. It was decided to put the battalion on a properly organised military basis, and arrangements were made for the organisation of new Companies. A system for lines of communication between the different Companies and for the sending and receiving of despatches between General Headquarters in Dublin and the South of Ireland was also devised. The method adopted for receiving and sending these despatches was as follows :- Despatches from Dublin arrived in Naas, were sent ^{on} to Newbridge and thence to Kildare and so on to the next centre according to destination. Those arriving from the South of Ireland came through Kilcullen to Naas and were sent on to Kill and from there to Rathcoole and on to the city. In Kilcullen they were taken charge of by Tom Doran and Mick Salmon, a well-known member of the Kildare All-Ireland Football team; while I was responsible for them in Naas, where we had half a dozen men told off for their conveyance to the next centre. Pat Dunne, Greenhills, took charge of their conveyance on their arrival in Kill, and from there they were sent, when coming from the South, to P. McLaughlin, Tailor, Rathcoole.

They arrived at all times of the day and sometimes at night. And, having regard to the fact that those engaged in their conveyance had to attend to their ordinary work during the day, it was at times

a bit trying to have them attended to as required. The time of their receipt and the time they were sent on had to be recorded on each despatch and, notwithstanding the difficulties mentioned, they were on the whole promptly dealt with.

Following the Battalion meeting at Prosperous, I paid a visit to Eadestown in accordance with the organisation scheme decided upon, and I was successful in organising a Company sixty strong, the officers of which were Pat Walsh, Kildeel and Andy Farrell, Beggar's End. During the summer of 1918 I went out there from Naas three times a week to drill the men and carry out manoeuvres, and in time the Company became proficient in military exercises.

At the time of the annual pilgrimage to Bodenstown in that year, the Company made a creditable turn-out when it marched to the historic churchyard to reaffirm allegiance to the cause espoused by Tone.

I had now made the acquaintance of Sergeant Maher, R.I.C. whom I found sympathised with the Republican movement and from him I obtained advice from time to time. At the time the German Plot was invented by the British Government an apparently important communication was sent out from Dublin Castle to the police stations of the country. The contents, however, could not be learned, but it was suspected that extensive raids for arms were about to be carried out, and I at once took steps to have a despatch sent to the different Volunteer Companies in the county warning them to see that all arms etc. were put away at once in places of safety.

Next day the "discovery" of the German Plot was announced and the arrest of Griffith and other leaders followed.

Sometime later in the year the policy of stopping Hunt Meets as a protest against the arrests and imprisonment of Irishmen in English prisons, without charge or trial, was at its height and a printed leaflet entitled "Fox Hunting or Freedom" was extensively circulated and distributed at Church doors after Mass on Sundays. T. Patterson, J. Whyte, P. Gill and myself undertook the work of distribution outside the Church of Our Lady & St. David in Naas. Following this, I received a report that warrants were out for our arrests for distributing this seditious literature. We were advised to "clear out" if we wished to avoid arrest. I decided to go to Dublin, and Sergeant Maher arranged to have a report made to the County Inspector R.I.C., that I had gone to Manchester.

Subsequently I went to business in Dublin, and it was then arranged for Seán Kavanagh, a comrade of mine and member of the Naas Volunteer Company, to carry on my work in Naas in co-operation with Sergeant Maher. The latter also had arranged for the communication of a report to the police in Dublin, that I had no connection whatever with political affairs. My place of business was near the Royal Hospital, Kilmainham, the headquarters of General Sir Neville Macready, Commander-in-Chief of the British Army in Ireland, and as there was no record against me I was free to go in and out of the Royal Hospital.

I joined "G" Company, 3rd Battalion, Dublin Brigade I.R.A., the O/C. of which was Captain Moore. The Company was 80 strong composed chiefly of assistants in the licensed trade and who nearly all came from the provinces. County Kildare men included in the Company were Michael McCormack, Milltown, Jack Murphy, Newbridge, Jack Mitchell, Naas, and myself.

During the fighting in 1920-'21, the Company operated chiefly in the Camden Street area known in Dublin as "The Dardanelles area". One of the best coups we carried out was the disarming of the "Red Caps" or military policemen stationed at College Green in July 1920. They were on guard in the precincts of the Old House of Parliament, and carried service revolvers and ammunition. Taken completely by surprise, at the command of "Hands up" as we suddenly covered them with our guns, they at once complied and were relieved of their arms and equipment. The haul made in this coup was a welcome addition to our supply of arms and ammunition.

On another occasion some of our Company met with a reverse inasmuch as they were included in a cycling corps of 40 men captured by a large British force while returning from the Dublin mountains where the corps had been engaged in manoeuvres. Our Company Commander, Captain Moore and Jack Mitchell were among those captured, all of whom were courtmartialled and sentenced to three years' penal servitude. They were sent to English jails, but when the general release took place in December, 1921, they were included in the amnesty, after having served about half their sentences. Myself and Michael McCormack only escaped inclusion in the haul made by the British on that occasion by reason of the fact that we had to attend a signalling instruction class that evening in Camden Street.

As time went on the need for medical supplies was much felt among the Active Service Units of the I.R.A. I discussed this need with Dr. Paddy Connaire, then a medical student and at present Medical Officer of Carrickbyrne, Co. Wexford. The doctor, a cousin of the famous Irish scholar and writer the late Padraic Ó Connaire, was heart and soul with the Republican struggle. After several such discussions, we decided on a plan by which medical supplies might be obtained.

We succeeded in getting into touch with one of the staff in King George V. Hospital who was willing to sell sufficient supplies from the medical stores there. Following negotiations we made an arrangement with the Red Cross attendant to enter the hospital and carry off the supplies. This plan, I may add, was unofficial as we decided to carry it out without consulting General Headquarters. Accordingly in the month of April, 1921, we drove in a motor to the Hospital and at the entrance we were stopped and questioned by the military policeman on duty there. The "doctor" was able to satisfy him that he was a medical student and that his visit was connected with professional business. We were then allowed to pass in, and we were not long in discovering the attendant we were seeking. He had everything in readiness and the supplies, including medicine, lint and bandages, were promptly transferred to the motor. We then resumed our seats in the car, drove to the entrance, and were allowed to pass out without question. The plan was, therefore, successful in every respect.

While all these events were occurring I paid close attention to the comings and goings of General McCready, and familiarised myself as well as I could with his movements. I made reports on these from time to time to our Intelligence Department.

I also formulated plans for the blowing up of stores near the Kingsbridge, containing a large number of aeroplanes and other warlike materials. These I submitted to headquarters and they were approved. The operation was not carried out, however, for the reason that it was found that these stores furnished useful supplies of brass employed in the manufacture of bombs for the I.R.A. It was, accordingly, called off at the last moment.

Another project that "G" Company had on hands was the contemplated destruction of three wagons of military supplies in the railway yard at Kingsbridge terminus. Three times the Company was mobilised for this purpose, and on each occasion circumstances arose to prevent the carrying out of the project. This was in 1921 when several railway employees were dismissed for refusing to handle the contents of the wagon. The wagons were, of course, strongly guarded by the British, but eventually the job was completed by the University I.R.A. Company.

I was able to find a safe underground hiding place where I was at business for storing arms and bombs used in ambushes. The ammunition was supplied regularly twice a week in leathern bags and came from the Royal barracks, now named Collins barracks. Some of the British soldiers there, who had access to the munitions stores, were paid for supplying the ammunition.

On the day before the Truce in June, 1921, "G" Company, on mobilisation, numbered 60 all told. Nearly a dozen of the original Company had been killed or wounded, while others had been arrested and sentenced to long terms of imprisonment.

As is now generally known the biggest offensive yet contemplated by the Dublin Brigade was called off only at the last moment by a countermanding order following opening of negotiations for a Truce. The entire Brigade was called out and the men actually were at their posts when the countermanding order arrived. "G" Company responded to the mobilisation order to a man. The mobilisation was carried out under the guise of a football match in the Phoenix Park at 3 o'clock in the afternoon. Instructions were then issued that the Company was to assemble again at 7 p.m. and take up positions extending from the northern end of Grafton Street to Stephen's Green. The general orders

were that at a given signal an immediate and simultaneous attack was to be made on all British military and Black & Tans who were to be shot down at sight. Under no circumstances were we to take prisoners, or to surrender. It was understood that similar orders had been issued to the British in case of attack.

The members of "G" Company, fully armed, were punctually at their posts, and awaited the signal for the attack to begin. Sections of the Brigade had also been told off to attack Dublin Castle, Military Barracks, Police Stations and other Government posts. As we were momentarily expecting the signal, word arrived that negotiations for a truce had been opened, and that the general attack had been called off pending the result. The men at the different posts were dismissed, and so came to an abrupt stop at the last moment preparations for an operation which, if carried out completely, was well calculated to be the most sensational and sanguinary since the Rebellion of 1916. The following day the Truce was announced.

Our Company Commander on that occasion was Captain Leo O'Brien who had been appointed in succession to Captain Moore then serving his sentence of three years in an English prison following the capture of the cycling corps some time previous. Captain Moore, whose health had broken down under the strain of those years of fighting and imprisonment, never recovered his former vigour. He lingered on until 1928 when he passed away to the great sorrow of men in all ranks of the I.R.A. who were acquainted with his steadfastness of purpose, and fidelity to the cause in whose service he had sacrificed his health, and ultimately his life. The sorrow of the men of his old Company for the loss of this brave leader and comrade found expression in the erection of a memorial over his grave in Glasnevin cemetery.

I should have added that when the attack on the eve of the Truce was called off, the men of our Company were warned not to cross the city on their way home, armed, as they were liable to be held up and searched by Crown Forces. I made my way to a house in Baggot Street tenanted by Mrs. Nugent, a County Kildare woman, who is a native of Ballymore Eustace, where her family was well known and respected in years gone by. Members of the I.R.A. and men 'on the run' were always sure of a warm welcome from Mrs. Nugent and her family. Her house was, furthermore, a safe and secure dumping place for arms and ammunition after the carrying out of active service operations against the enemy.

I was not disappointed on this occasion either at the hospitality of Mrs. Nugent and the welcome I received. I later left the house and returned without further incident to my business place.

The events that followed the acceptance of the Free State by the delegation that went to London after the negotiations between De Valera and Lloyd George had broken down, belong to another period made up of separate chapters of the struggle for Republican Independence.

These were even of a more strenuous and exacting character than those that preceded the setting up of the Free State, and the time is not yet ripe or opportune, perhaps, for giving publicity to details of the internecine strife that divided the country into two camps.

The particulars included in the foregoing narrative outline some of the happenings with which I was associated in Kildare and Dublin.

Signed: Alphonsus Sweeney
Date: April 25th 1955

(Alphonsus Sweeney)

April 25th 1955.

Witness: M. F. Ryan Comd't.

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