ROINN COSANTA.

BUREAU OF MILITARY HISTORY, 1913-21.

STATEMENT BY WITNESS.

DOCUMENT NO. W.S. 1,157

Witness

Patrick Ronan,
Ferns,
Co. Wexford.

Identity.

Adjutant 3rd Battalion,
North Wexford Brigade.

Subject.

National activities, North Wexford,
1916-1921.

Conditions, if any, Stipulated by Witness.

Nil

File No. S.1347

Form B S M 2

ORIGINAL

W.S. 1,157

SECOND
STATEMENT BY MR. PATRICK RONAN,

Ferns, Co. Wexford.

What prisoners remained in Frongoch after the summer releases were released in time to be home for Christmas. When we came home we noticed a big change in the attitude of the people towards us. After Easter Week we were shunned, but now we were received with open arms and looked upon as heroes. Such a difference in a few months!

We kept quiet for a while in order to feel our way, but we met continually and here in Ferns where the I.R.B. was strong there was no difficulty in keeping together. During 1917 we drilled, mostly in quiet places, and things were easy at that time. Then came 1918 and things began to liven up. We then drilled in public and a conscription act was passed. Our ranks then swelled to huge dimensions, but when the menace had passed away we were reduced to our original numbers again.

During 1917 and 1918 the political situation was developing. Sinn Féin Clubs were being formed in nearly every parish. The Roscommon election, where the Sinn Féin candidate - Count Plunkett - was elected, and then Longford and Kilkenny where the results were the same, gave a great fillip to the organisation, which was perfected and made into the most wonderful election machine the country had even seen. A general election came towards the end of 1918 and Sinn Féin had candidates in every constituency. The machine then swung into action. Already the voters' register had been seen to and every available person likely

to vote Sinn Féin was on it. This was seen to by the clubs and now they were able to muster every possible vote. No voter was left uncanvassed so perfect was the job done. At this time only householders had votes, and they were usually people of over 40 years or so who were very conservative and who would be likely to vote for a party who gave stability, so it would be remarkable if this organisation of youths would be able to get very far at the polls. The Irish Party was then in power in this country and was composed of men who usually had some stake in the country and had been there for a very long time and who had won some reforms, especially the abolition of the landlords, and had secured the farmer as owner of his land. Here comes a new untried organisation of young people with revolutionary methods; people who, if elected, would not attend the Parliament at Westminister and who had a large mixture of youths who believed in fighting the British Army, which was then one of the most powerful armies in the world, fresh from the victories of France where they had helped to defeat the German Army which was the greatest in the world. The British then had 4,000,000 soldiers and here was a mere handful of men who thought of fighting them with a few shotguns and rifles. If Sinn Féin candidates were elected would this happen? Of course, the whole thing looked to be sheer madness. If they did not fight then those elected would not take their seats at Westminster where the laws were made and where something could be said. What good were they going to do by staying at home? These were the things that faced this new organisation. Could they hope to win? North Wexford had as its representative in the British Parliament Sir Thomas Esmonde. The Esmonde family belonged to the landed gentry and were Catholics. Sir Thomas was

a kinsman of Esmonde Ryan, the 1798 leader. The family had always been national and was very influential. Could Esmonde be beaten? That was the question, and a very big one, too. Could a candidate be got in North Wexford to win this constituency? It could only be done by putting somebody against Esmonde who belonged to the same class, but Sinn Féin had no such one in this area. A convention was held and proved abortive. Then another one was held and this time one of the aristocracy was selected. He was Roger Mary Sweetman of Derrybawn House, Glendalough, Co. Wicklow. The Sweetmans were an influential family in Co. Wexford, though this member of the family was from Wicklow. Strange a Wexfordman capable of winning the seat could not be found here, and Wicklow, where the Sweetmans lived, was in the same plight, so the latter selected Seán Etchingham, Courtown Harbour, Gorey, who had been sentenced to death for his part in the Rising of Easter Week. Both selections were good, as both candidates were elected by huge majorities.

Then Dáil Éireann was set up and a Republic declared. The army became the army of the Republic and took its orders from the Minister of Defence. Sinn Féin took over the ruling of the country. They had an army; a police force was set up and each parish had a parish court which dispensed justice in a moral and commonsense way. The British Army and the Royal Irish Constabulary were here, too, ruling the country from Dublin Castle on behalf of the British. Under these circumstances there was bound to be clashes. The R.I.C. got busier as time went on. Sinn Féin collections were banned and it was made a crime to collect money without a permit from the R.I.C.

There was a section of Volunteers at this time in Kilrush and a Sinn Féin Club too. The latter decided to have a collection outside the chapel gates at each Mass on a particular Sunday. The R.I.C. were there and warned us that should we persist we were liable to be arrested. Nevertheless the collection was carried out. Six men carried it out and a few days later three of them were arrested, namely Anthony Ryan, Knockamere, and his workman, John Bailey, also Joseph Doyle, Raheen, Strahart.
It was a clever move on behalf of the R.I.C. They thought they had the weakest, as Ryan was the only son of a widow and to arrest him and his workman left nobody to work his 10 acre farm. It appeared that they would be likely to sign bail bonds to keep the peace. Doyle was the son of a very large farmer and it was thought they would do likewise and save their son from going to jail. The trial took place in Bunclody and all three refused to recognise the court. They were bound to the peace for twelve months and had to get two solvent sureties or go to Waterford jail for one month. They refused to sign bail bonds and were removed to Waterford for the month. The other three were not arrested as it was well known they would not give in. By arresting those who were thought to be the weakest it was hoped they would give in and the Sinn Féin organisation would be defeated in that area, but the R.I.C. were wrong.

In 1920 the military situation began to liven up and each day had its own happenings. The mails were raided for information. The rate books were taken from the collectors who recognised the British and others appointed who collected them on behalf of Dáil Éireann. Early in 1920 the R.I.C. evacuated the country barracks

for fear of attack and concentrated in the towns. In May 1920 all the empty barracks were burned. The Ferns Company burned Clonevan and Ballycanew barracks. Black and Tans were now arriving. One was stationed here. An attempt to shoot him failed, as he had a girl with him and it was not possible to shoot him without shooting the girl too. He was removed shortly after and another sent in his place. The latter shot a man named James Dunne at Dunbar's Corner one night. There were a few Volunteers around and the revolver was taken from him. He got to the barracks and was removed to another area.

All arms in the county, principally shotguns, were taken up by the I.R.A.

In the summer of 1920 an attack was contemplated on Ferns R.I.C. barracks. It would be very difficult to take as it stood alone in an open space. The windows were steel-shuttered;all around the door was barbed wire and the door had a large chain inside similar to those used in banks and the door could only open about six inches. There was a valley in the roof which would be ideal place for throwing the home-made bombs we had into. If they did not explode at once it would not matter as they might go off later. The valley was covered by netting wire so that nothing could stay in it, and if a bomb exploded when it hit the wire it would not do any damage. We had a few sets of grappling irons with hooks made. These were to be made fast to the end of ropes and could be thrown on to this netted structure from behind a wall in the schoolyard, and the wire could then be pulled off and bombs, together with bottles of petrol which would break when they landed in the valley, could be used with devastating effect.

All plans were well laid, but just before it was to take place one of the Volunteers told his girl he could not meet her on Sunday night as he was going to Ferns to take part in an attack on the barrack there. So she told it to others and the attack had to be abandoned. Clonroche barracks was attacked instead and all the bombs were used in the attack. Though it lasted several hours the attack failed. This, their first big engagement, disheartened the North Wexford Brigade. However, the making of mines and bombs started again. It was difficult to get materials but what could be got was availed of.

Things were very hot in the summer of 1920. Attacks on barracks, Auxiliaries, shooting of spies, etc. went on apace. District Inspector Lee Wilson of Gorey was shot dead. The Ferns Company had a hand in it.

On Sunday, 20th November, 1920, a large number of spies who had been specially sent over from England were executed in Dublin. Wholesale arrests took place immediately. I was arrested on 21st November by the R.I.C. and conveyed to R.I.C. barracks Enniscorthy. John Kavanagh, John O'Reilly and William Kavanagh of Ferns and James Quinn of Camolin Park were arrested the same day but were brought to the Courthouse, which was being used as a military barracks by a detachment of the Devonshire Regiment under the command of Lieutenant Yeo. I spent the first night in the R.I.C. barracks and was removed to the Courthouse the next day. When I saw the other four prisoners I did not know then they had been so badly beaten. Their faces were in pulp. There had been a celebration the night before as a Lieutenant Andrew was going away. Yeo was also away and the place was then in

charge of a Lieutenant Sparks. Each prisoner was taken out each morning and given a bath from the tap and scrubbed with an ordinary scrubbing brush until there was very little skin left on his back. . This operation took a long time as the tap was only a half inch and the Courthouse is on a high level. It usually took about five minutes for a bucket to fill and then it was thrown on the victim who stood in the open yard. When the soldiers got tired or too cold to stay any longer, the prisoner was allowed to go back to his cell between two files of soldiers, each of which was armed with a soldier'scane which had a brass ferrule on the end. As he passed each soldier he was given a blow of this as hard as the soldier could strike. Some of the prisoners were felled to the ground. Then during the day Yeo would bring out each prisoner and question him with a revolver stuck to his head. If he would not give the answer that was wanted to the question, there was a soldier on each side of him and he would get a very severe box in the ear and the soldier at the opposite side would give him another to straighten him up again. Then he was ordered to be brought out again the next morning for his bath, and this went on from day to day. Some nights the soldiers would come into the cells and beat up all prisoners. When one was there for a while and the ordinary soldier, who very often was not a bad fellow, got to know him, he was let away as lightly as possible, but when Yeo was present they had to do their job. Usually he was not present at the bathing process and after about a week the prisoner would become familiar with the soldiers and it would not then be too bad. One would be brought out and a lot of shouting done to make it appear to Yeo that business was going strong. Yeo allowed no visitors

and prisoners were not supplied with food or bedclothes. If they were unable to secure these from outside they might go without, but nobody had to as there were any amount of friends. Yeo was a parson's son and he usually spoke in parables and was a great hand to quote scripture. He always looked to the ground when questioning. He could not look one in the face and I found that to stare him in the face had a terrible effect on him and the questioning would be cut short. One who was able to do this was not questioned very often. I was only questioned twice myself in four months. He could not bear staring.

Occasionally Yeo went away for a week or so and then the prisoners had a great time. All visitors were allowed in at all hours and they brought in whatever they liked short of arms. They were let through with intoxicating liquor even. Of course the soldiers expected their share. The soldiers often brought it in themselves to the prisoners. There would then be a Lieutenant Mitchell in charge, who was a thorough gentleman and who never interfered nor would he allow a soldier to interfere with a prisoner.

I saw prisoners beaten until they were senseless. The first question one was asked - was he a member of the murder gang? If he said he wasn't he got a few boxes in the ears, but if he said he was, which nobody was fool enough to do, he would certainly be murdered. This went on daily and nightly, too. Yeo was likely to come into the cells at any time and put prisoners through it until he was tired. Each prisoner questioned got a good beating and a cold bath next morning with a good scrubbing. That was usual every day, and days of frost or when the snow was on the ground were never let pass without their

quota of baths.

The prisoners also had to work in keeping the place clean. I was one day scrubbing a floor with another prisoner, T.D. Sinnott of Enniscorthy, who was Chairman of Enniscorthy Board of Guardians, of which body I was a member. A Sergeant came along and jeered us. He said it was a job fit for the like of us. Turning to T.D. he said: "What a blighter to be Chairman of the Board of Guardians; if I were an Irishman I suppose they would make me a Member of Parliament", meaning his education and intelligence were so much superior. T.D. was at this time a teacher. Later he became first and only secretary of Co. Wexford Board of Health and later became Wexford's first County Manager, and no better or more popular Manager ever sat in the Managerial chair.

After being incarcerated in the Courthouse for some time prisoners were removed to Waterford Gaol. It was about four months before I was removed. What a change then. No atrocities committed on prisoners here. The warders were quite nice. They were all Irishmen. No trouble getting out any letters you wanted to.

After this we were removed to Kilworth Camp in Co. Cork. This was in charge of military but, on the whole, they were all right. We were allowed to manage our own affairs and the soldiers seldom came near us except on business. We would not stand to attention in the evenings for the playing of the English National Anthem - "God Save the King". We were warned that if we were noticed moving or not standing properly to attention we were liable to be shot. So we always went into the huts during the performance. When the truce came on 11th July they ceased

moving prisoners from here, and there was then about 60 left and we occupied three huts. We were there for some time and we often discussed how we might escape. Eventually we decided to make a tunnel out under the barbed wire and into a store outside. The tunnel would need to be about 40 feet long to get us into the store. We were able to secure information as to the position in the store from some tradesmen who were coming in to do some repairs to the huts and we were able to get some pliers to cut the barbed wire which was outside the store. The start of the tunnel was delayed considerably owing to the fact that we had not any place to put the clay we would excavate. The place was very small and we could not put it in the ashpit. If we did, the quantity would need to be small. There was no place outside the huts we could dump it as the ground was only about a quarter of an acre outside the huts and all was in full view of the soldiers. We could put a small amount under the huts which were raised above the ground, but it could only be a small amount as it might be noticed. So what were we to do with it. Well,, where there's a will there's a way, and there must be some way here, too. All our brains were worked to solve the problem and eventually John J. O'Reilly of Ferns hit on the idea. There were five huts and each one was lined inside with boards. Take out a top board and let the clay fall down until the space was filled. Do this all around the hut and we could get rid of a considerable amount in one hut. So the work started. We procured a small saw. With this an aperture two feet square was cut in the floor of one hut which went down to the ground at one end. The hole was underneath my bed and the door was made to fit exactly and could be put back in a couple of seconds if any of the soldiers were coming in, which they often did, but

the gate, which was only 30 feet from the hut, was always under observation. Soldiers and officers, too, often stood within a yard of the tunnel but never discovered it. The tunnel was made with fire pokers and had to be done noiselessly, as it passed out under the path where the sentry was on his beat. The inside was about 18 inches. It was necessary to make it as small as possible on account of the difficulty of disposing of the clay. It was propped as we went along. In fact, the two sides and the top were lined with wood procured from old boxes got in the canteen with which we were supposed to be lighting fires. When we got in some distance the air got foul and we could only keep a candle, which was the light we had, burning for a few minutes. Then we would have to come up and stay up for some considerable time before anybody else could go down, and then it would only be for a couple of minutes. When a soldier came in and it had to be shut down you would have to stand at the exit or you would collapse and die for want of oxygen, but soldiers were got rid of as quickly as possible. Some means was found to get them out of the hut quickly. When we had got about halfway there was a day's rain and the air was much better then. The water seeping in seemed to bring oxygen with it, but then we had the tunnel full each morning and had to take it out before work started and the whole place below was in guzzle and we had to lie in water while working. Work was slower now than before, but a couple of feet was taken out each day. It was difficult to keep the floor of the hut dry, so we used to scrub it nearly every day so that the water would not be noticed. The hut was lined completely with clay, so what then? We put it into bags, about two bags held each day's work, and removed it

in the evenings in small quantities and started lining another hut. We would all have a march round the small compound and when we were passing by the hut in a cluster the clay would be brought out underneath somebody's arm and slipped into the adjoining hut until it was all safe. By this means the soldiers did not see it being removed. Eventually we had got within three feet of our destination and the night for the escape had been fixed. We were all in bed and at eleven o'clock the soldiers came in and ordered us to get out of bed and get dressed. We wondered had they discovered the tunnels, but no, we were being removed to Spike Island. So we were bundled into lorries and handcuffed in pairs, but only the occupants of the first hut were taken away that night. There was still two other huts occupied, so the next day work went on feverishly to finish the tunnel and it had reached the shed by night. Prisoners were counted at 10 o'clock. When the count was over they started to get out. It was very slow as some big men got stuck and had to come back, which meant a delay. At eleven o'clock the soldiers came in to take away the occupants of another hut but there wasn't any left. Some were in the tunnel when they came in, so when a number were missed the barbed wire was examined all around the camp and no opening was found. They then looked for a tunnel and found it. This was midnight and the escapees had an hour of a start. There being a good sprinkling of Corkmen, and some of them locals, they were able to guide those from Kilkenny and Wexford to safety. Some of them told me afterwards that they were at one side of a ditch and the soldiers at the other, but none was recaptured.

I was at this time in Spike Island. A desolate

place! It was a fortress with walls about 20 feet high and as thick all around it. You were the same as if you were down in a hole. Only the sky could be seen and the top of the spire of Cobh Cathedral. The buildings were old. It had been used by the British (previous to being occupied by us) as a military hospital for soldiers suffering from venereal disease, but was considered good enough for Irish prisoners. It was run on the usual style of internment camp. We had our own officers and were responsible for the cleanliness of the place. We could mix together all day and were allowed parcels and letters.

All went well for a time. There was an inspection each day by the British officers and a count was taken at the same time. In September 1921 the military found they could not take a proper count. There were a number of places in the old buildings where a man could hide, and some of the prisoners went hiding each day. This went on until October. In order to go to Mass we had to pass out through a gateway to where the church was situated, so it had been decided to count us going out through the gate and if there was anybody missing a thorough search was to have been made. We were ordered to go out this gate in single file, but we refused to pass out unless we could go in whatever formation we wished, so we did not go at all. We then barricaded the doors of each room and when the soldiers came in with the dinner they failed to gain an entrance, so they went outside again and did not return. The windows of each room had bars on them. We had succeeded in wrenching out some of the bars and were hard at work tearing up the floors with them. In the upstairs portion of the building we just left three or four boards intact so that we could go from room to room. The

destruction went as quietly as possible all day, so that by sundown the place was a shambles. When the clock struck the first stroke of six all the windows, and there were hundreds of them, were smashed. The mighty crash of all the glass together was terrific. You would think a bomb had been dropped. All the electric wires were torn down, too, so when dark would come all would be in darkness. The soldiers hastily ran some wires around the place and hooked them on to anything that was available and a huge searchlight was brought into play. Eventually we saw a large number of soldiers being lined up at the main gate. The guard had already been quadrupled by bringing out every available soldier. The ones now at the gate had been brought from Cork. At length they started to march in and we noticed they were armed with sticks and iron bars. They started to burst in the barricades from the outside after asking us to let them in. They fought outside and we fought inside, but the soldiers gained admittance after about an hour. They were furious by then and the sticks and iron bars were used freely, but it was not all one-sided. We had sticks and iron bars, too. The battle which was a running one, lasted for about an hour, and there were a large number of casualties on both sides. Prisoners and soldiers were lying in heaps. Some soldiers were rendering first-aid, so the battle gradually died down and then the soldiers were withdrawn.

We were then moved out into a moat which surrounded the fortress and put on bread and water. We had no bedclothes of any description and had to lie down by a wall at night. It being October the nights were very cold and it was raining some of the time as well. We refused the bread and water and went on hunger-strike at once. The

second night we were there a shot was fired and it took the great toe off a prisoner named Mulhall from Kilkenny. The third day we were in this moat a number of men collapsed from the cold and hunger. As we were getting weak we were unable to walk enough to keep up the circulation and we all felt that we would collapse that night when it got cold. The military must have thought this, too, as we were marched back again to the inside before night and given our ordinary food. The place was now very cold and draughty, as there were no doors or windows and all the upstairs portion was about half gone too. It was heaven though when compared with the moat, and we all got bedclothes, too. Here we remained for some time. There was an enquiry conducted later after an inspection taking place by officers of the garrison and the I.R.A. The Adjutant was blamed for the trouble as he did not let us go to Mass in the manner we wished on the Sunday the place was wrecked.

Spike Island being a fortress it was considered a very safe prison and it was thought an escape from it was not possible. The prison had a wall 25 feet high and as thick or thicker, then a moat, then another wall and a barbed wire fence outside of all. There were searchlights on top of the wall which played all around during the night. A patrol boat was travelling around the island all night, so there was not much chance of getting away. Even if it was possible to outdo all the above, one would still be on the island with a couple of miles of very rough sea between it and the mainland. The prisoners concluded that if even one man could escape, it would be one of the greatest escapes of all time, so it was decided to have a go. The action of the searchlights was watched for

several nights and it was noticed that they slacked off a little about 2 or 3 a.m., and if one could get out to the island there might be a chance as we knew the military had a few boats to take them across to the mainland, and it might be possible to escape the patrol boat and the searchlights if we could get as far as where the boats were anchored. There was a passage-way underneath the wall into the moat. It was closed up right through with stones. We started to remove those stones each night and the broken floors on the ground became very useful now to dump them under. The front was closed up with stones again before morning, so you would not notice anything unusual. Hundreds of tons had to be removed, but eventually the job was finished. It was decided that a boatload would try to get out on the night of 10th November, 1921. Oars had been made from flooring boards and a ladder of the same material to get across the outer wall. The men to go were Bill Quirke, Moss Twomey, Dick Barrett, Henry O'Mahony, Paddy Buckley, Tom Crofts and Dick Eddy, who knew all that was to be known about boats. About midnight we bade farewell to these men and wished them God speed. It was a good night and was stormy, just the kind of night that the soldiers would be likely to take matters easy. All was quiet during the night and morning. We noticed no hustle with the soldiers, so we took it that all was well. It was not until the count next day that anything was noticed. We were all lined up for count, but most of the officers were missing. The soldiers thought it was a trick that was being played on them and they made a thorough search of all the buildings, but to no avail. They then examined the outlet under the wall and it only had a few stones in front. Then they searched the island

and they found that one of the boats was missing. We learned afterwards that the oar locks were taken away from the boats at night as well as the oars, so improvised ones were made from furze that grew on the island. Another inquiry was held, so the Adjutant was removed this time. We remained on Spike Island for some time afterwards and were removed some time afterwards during the night on a train to Maryborough Jail. We were hand-cuffed in pairs. It was daylight when we arrived in Maryborough so we were a sight marching through the streets. The prison was rather small for the number of prisoners, so we were placed with two in each cell and the doors had to be left open at night. It was not a place to improve one's health. The exercise ground was small, too. Unlike Spike Island we could see the town and the countryside. We were not long there when the Treaty was signed. There was no jubilation over it. The prisoners felt very disappointed that this should be the end to all. An oath of allegiance to an English King! That was the big objection. There were other things, too, especially that the country was being partitioned. We all felt that the same had happened as had happened to all statesmen who went to London and dined and wined with the British. Lloyd George had tricked the world's greatest in 1918 after the war, so why not the Irish?

Signed: Patrick Ronan
(Patrick Ronan)

Date: 14th April 1955.
14th April 1955.

Witness: Sean Brennan Lieut-Col.
(Sean Brennan) Lieut.-Col.