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BUREAU OF MILITARY HISTORY 1913-21

BURO STAIRÉ MILEATA 1913-21

No. W.S. 1,176

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BUREAU OF MILITARY HISTORY, 1913-21

STATEMENT BY WITNESS.

DOCUMENT NO. W.S. 1,176

Witness

Mark Kenna,  
94 Blarney Park,  
Kimmage,  
Dublin.

Identity.

Second Lieutenant and later Lieutenant  
Churchill-Spa Company Irish Volunteers,  
Co. Kerry, 1914 - .

Subject.

Churchill-Spa Company Irish Volunteers,  
Co. Kerry, 1914-1921.

Conditions, if any, Stipulated by Witness.

Nil

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STATEMENT BY MR. MARK J. KENNEDY

94 Blarney Park, Kimmage, Dublin

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Early in 1914, Tom Walsh, John Moore, Jerry Brosnan, Jerry O'Sullivan and I organised the Churchill-Spa Company of the Irish Volunteers. The company area included Fenit, Kilfenora, Barrow and Lisodigue. Approximately our strength would be, in the first instance, between 50 and 60. The company officers at the time were Tom Walsh, John Moore, Jerry O'Sullivan and myself. An honorary officer of the company was St. John Henry Donovan of Seafield House. Our first training officer was an ex-British soldier named Dan Martin. He continued training us until the outbreak of World War I, when he was called up off the Reserve. Our next instructor was also an ex-British soldier who was not a reservist. His name was Paddy McCarthy. In about 1915 he joined the British army and went off.

When the split in the Volunteers occurred in September 1914, our company remained loyal to the provisional committee. In or about this time St. John Henry Donovan was in London and he appeared in the public gallery in the House of Commons wearing Volunteer officer's uniform. This created a mild sensation and was commented on in the Irish papers.

About the middle of 1915 when Paddy McCarthy rejoined the British army and went away to France, we, the officers, had sufficient training and with the use of manuals continued training the company. In addition to the ordinary drilling, instruction in the use of arms, etc., we held field exercises and manoeuvres of various kinds. As part of the training, it was arranged that companies from the country districts, including Ardfert, Abbeydorney and our company should attack Tralee Town which would be defended by the Tralee companies.

We surprised the defenders and captured the town. We continued exercises, drilling, etc. until the 1916 period. We had then very little arms, just a few double-barrel shotguns.

Coming towards 1916 we collected all the arms possible. We obtained about two revolvers.

Early in 1916, there came to Fenit from Dublin William P. Partridge, a Labour organiser. His mission there was to organise the Dock workers in Fenit. He formed a branch of the Transport Workers' Union and, during his time there, he addressed anti-recruiting meetings. At the time the anti-recruiting campaign was pretty hot. Partridge remained in the area until the news broke out that Casement was arrested and the last seen of him was performing the Stations of the Cross in Tralee on Good Friday. The next account of him was of his having taken part in the Rising with the Citizen Army in Dublin. He was afterwards interned in Frongoch and he died a short time after his release.

It is my opinion that Partridge was sent down by James Connolly not only to organise the Transport Workers' Union but to ensure that the discharge of the arms from the 'Aud' would be carried out efficiently and without a hitch.

On Holy Thursday 1916, I went back to Fenit and, when I reached there, I noticed there was a good deal of activity around the Coastguard Station watching the movements of a ship which was lying off the Maharees, little rocky islands at the entrance to Tralee Bay. I believe myself this was the 'Aud'.

On Good Friday morning there was a good deal of police and naval activity in Fenit and it was rumoured that a boat had come in at Currahane Strand near Ardfert. Jack Gildea, who was a son of the R.I.C. sergeant in Fenit, told me that his father and Captain Holmes (the Naval Base officer in Fenit) had gone down to Ardfert to examine and identify the boat which had come in. There were three concerned in the landing:

Casement, Monteith and Bailey. They landed at Currahane Strand in a collapsible boat from a German submarine. Casement walked up to this little fort near McKenna's house and on his way up from the strand the servant girl in McKenna's (Mary Gorman) noticed him as a stranger. He came into the Fort where he waited in hiding. Meantime, Monteith had gone to the town of Tralee to contact the Volunteer leaders there and announce their arrival. Bailey went towards Abbeydorney where he was arrested later in the day. The little boat was down on the Strand and word was conveyed to the police barracks about the strange little boat on the strand. So two of the police from Ardfert barracks went to Currahane Strand. Reilly and Clarke were their names. On their way down they were told that a stranger was seen going into the Fort and, of course, they arrested Casement in the Fort.

Now, we did not know who the people were that had landed, but the rumour was that they were Germans. I saw Casement myself on Saturday morning in Tralee when he was being taken to the train and, looking at the man, I remarked to my companion that he was no German.

There was a good deal of naval activity then from the Fenit base, such as patrol boats searching the bay.

Later in the day (Good Friday) Austin Stack and Con Collins came down to Ardfert to contact Casement not knowing that he had been arrested and, of course, they were known to the police who followed them to find out what they were after. Later on Good Friday, both Stack and Con Collins were arrested in Tralee and taken to the barracks.

When Casement was in the F.I.C. barracks he was visited by one of the Dominican priests. I think it was Father Ryan, O.P. and Casement made known to him his identity. But Father Ryan did not disclose this information. I noticed in the

'Irish Press' recently a statement to the effect that Captain Holmes arrested Casement. This is not correct. The purpose of Captain Holmes's visit to Ardferret was actually to identify the type of boat that was found at Currahane Strand because Casement was already in custody when Holmes came down.

Our company had not been notified of the expected landing of Casement or of the 'Aud' with the arms. We had no information of any kind. We suspected that something was happening. But, had information of the landing been in our possession, Casement would not have fallen into enemy hands.

Earlier in Holy Week we received orders to mobilise in Tralee on Easter Sunday at 12 noon. We mobilised at The Rink in Tralee. But after some time we were sent home, as the news came from Dublin that MacNeill had sent out a countermanding order cancelling mobilisations.

Among the Volunteers that mobilised in Tralee on that Sunday were the company from Dingle who marched barefooted 32 miles and marched back on Monday. The mobilisation for Easter Sunday was carried out with full arms. It had been arranged that provisions would be supplied by the Cumann na mBan.

Late on Tuesday of Easter Week we heard a rumour that a Rising had taken place in Dublin. Following the Rising an order was issued by the Naval Base officer that two of the officials of the local branch of the Transport Union, who were also connected with the Volunteers, were not to be employed and were actually sent ashore from a boat they were working at the time. These men were Jerry O'Sullivan and Martin Collins.

Coming towards 1917 the Volunteers fell away in Fenit. Being a railway clerk, I was transferred to Tralee and here I joined a Cycle Corps of the Volunteers. We kept in practice there until the release of the prisoners in 1917. At that time there came to the Tralee area in Kerry the following

released prisoners:- Thomas Ashe, Austin Stack, Frank Fahy, Fionan Lynch, Paddy Cahill and Paddy Landers. A torchlight procession met the released prisoners at Ballymactomas about two miles outside Tralee on the Killarney side, and escorted them into Denny St. in Tralee, where they were accorded a rousing reception by a large crowd.

Thomas Ashe remained in the Tralee area for a few months. On the first anniversary of Casement's execution there was a big rally at the Fort where he was arrested. Volunteer companies from all around Tralee, Ardfer, etc. marched to it. A decade of the Rosary was recited from the edge of the Fort by Fionan Lynch, and an oration was delivered by Thomas Ashe. Shortly after this, Ashe went to Co. Longford and was arrested in Ballinalee. He subsequently died as a result of being forcibly fed while on hungerstrike.

At that time the Volunteers were re-formed and requests for arms began. Austin Stack got busy in this connection and I came back to my own company area in Churchill.

We engaged in raids for arms and got a large number of shotguns mainly. We had intensive training and drilling and lectures. Sinn Fein Clubs and the Cumann na mBan were organised.

In 1918 an anti-conscription campaign got the Volunteers into a very strong position. Large numbers came into them. There was an anti-conscription fund collected at the Church gates. This fund was intended for the purchase of arms to equip the Volunteers. There was no election in our constituency, West Kerry. The sitting M.P., the late Tom O'Donnell, withdrew from the contest, and Austin Stack, the Sinn Fein candidate, was returned unopposed.

Following the flu in 1918, Christy Lynch, an engine driver in Tralee, died. He was given a military funeral by the Volunteers. We were greatly surprised at this as we had

no idea that Lynch had been associated with the Volunteers or any national organisation. We then learned that Lynch was a member of the I.R.B. and that he had agreed to take an engine and wagons on Easter Sunday from Tralee to Fenit where the arms from the 'Aud' would be loaded on it and then drive the train to Limerick where the arms would be distributed to various parts of the country.

We are now at the vital period 1919-1920. Following the establishment of Dáil Éireann in 1919, the Volunteers became the Irish Republican Army. The company, on the instructions of the Brigade O/C., Paddy Cahill, were paraded one night in Churchill and, as far as I remember, it was Desmond Fitzgerald who accompanied the Brigade O/C., Paddy Cahill, when the latter visited the company to administer the oath. We were addressed first by Desmond Fitzgerald and he told us the purpose of what was taking place. He said up to this we had been a Volunteer organisation, but that now we were entering on a footing which meant that once we got an order from our superior officers we would be expected to carry it out. The company was very strong then and he said, before he administered the oath: "If there are any men in the ranks who feel that they would not be able to take the Oath of Allegiance and what it entails, it would be better for them to step out of the ranks and their action would not be held against them" or words to that effect. Quite a number stepped out, mostly married men, and the remainder stood fast. The three company officers were, at this time, Michael Moriarty, captain; myself 1st Lieutenant, and Jerry O'Sullivan, 2nd Lieutenant. The oath was administered to the three of us by the Brigade O/C. We stood out in front of the company with our right hands raised and took it in front of the company. Then we administered the oath to the remainder of the men. We took them in groups. This was called 'H' Company, 1st

Battalion, Kerry I Brigade.

About the middle of April 1919, the local company carried out a raid for arms on Gortatlea R.I.C. Barracks, in which two Volunteers - John Browne and Richard Laide - lost their lives. The garrison consisted of one sergeant and three constables. On the night of the raid, the sergeant, whose name was Boyle, and Constable Fallon were out on patrol. Both of them were armed. It appears that the sergeant and constable saw the Volunteer raiding party and followed them, apparently unnoticed. When the patrol reached the barracks the Volunteers were already inside it. The sergeant and constable fired at the Volunteers through the windows. Volunteer John Browne was shot through the head and died soon afterwards. Volunteer Richard Laide was shot through the stomach; he was removed to the County Infirmary, Tralee, where he died a day or two later.

About the middle of June the same year, the adjourned inquest on the two Volunteers was held in Tralee and Sergeant Boyle and Constable Fallon were in Tralee to give evidence. When they were proceeding from the Courthouse where the inquest was held to the Tralee R.I.C. Barracks they were ambushed and both of them were wounded. As a reprisal for this incident, the British authorities declared Tralee to be a special military area, and to enter or leave the town it was necessary to hold a permit which was issued by the local R.I.C. Sergeant outside Tralee, and by the military authorities in Tralee at the Town Hall. All roads leading into Tralee were blocked by barricades of sandbags some distance outside the town and these barricades were manned by soldiers. Everything was normal for a day or two and then the R.I.C. in Tralee got busy checking up on outsiders seen in town. As I lived six miles outside Tralee and cycled into work each day, it was necessary for me to



obtain a permit. I could not approach the local R.I.C. sergeant in my area for a permit, so I decided to chance getting one from the military in Tralee. I called one day at the Town Hall and, having explained that I required a permit to travel to and from my work each day, a permit was issued and signed by a British officer. As he was about to finish the job a Head Constable Kearney arrived in the office and spoke to the officer, as a result of which he endorsed my permit "until further orders". I used this permit for about a week until one morning as I arrived at the barricade I was confronted by an R.I.C. man named McGrath who took my permit and informed me that it was cancelled. I had to return home. Myself and others so affected planned to enter the town by devious routes which we put into effect, but we ran the risk of being spotted in town with its consequences. I never went down town from my place of employment during this period. Eventually the barricades were withdrawn and normal conditions prevailed.

Next we started to organise for the collection of the Dáil Loan in the area. There was an intensive publicity campaign, posters, leaflets and all that sort of thing. Paddy Paul Fitzgerald, Michael McMahon and Mick Moriarty and myself carried out a house-to-house collection in the area. The amount collected was substantial and was handed over to Paddy Cahill. Many farmers subscribed £10. There were very few refusals.

Next, Dáil Courts were set up. There was a Parish Court set up in our place and three were picked out as Justices. They were myself, Jim Walsh and John Moore. We were sworn in at the Presbytery by the late Father Scanlan. He gave us the use of the school in Chapeltown to hold the Courts. I was Chairman of the Court. The Court dealt mainly with cases of trespass and of publichouses being open after hours.

Solicitors appeared at the Courts. In one case a local shopkeeper sued some customers for non-payment of debts. The British Courts ceased to function.

Our next activity was in connection with the attack on Camp I.R.A. Barracks which was carried out by the Camp and Castlegregory Companies. The village of Camp is situated on the southern side of Tralee Bay opposite to Fenit. It was thought that when the attack started that the garrison in Camp would fire Verey lights and as these would be clearly visible at Fenit that the R.I.C. in Fenit (as all the communications in the Camp and Fenit areas were to be cut) might attempt to go to Tralee on bicycles to inform their H.Q. there that Camp R.I.C. Barrack was being attacked. Our company was instructed to take the necessary steps to prevent this from happening. On the night of the attack, having first cut all telephone wires in the Fenit area, we occupied an ambush position at Oyster Hall on the main Fenit-Tralee road. We remained in position until the attack was over, but the police in Fenit made no attempt to leave their barrack. I was in charge of this ambush party.

Some time after this the Brigade O/C., Paddy Cahill, asked me to keep a close watch on the movements of the R.I.C. in Fenit, and also of the destroyer which was almost continually at anchor in the harbour. We were already aware that the destroyer used to go to Cobh once a month for refuelling and reprovisioning. It was decided to carry out an attack on Fenit R.I.C. Barrack the night the destroyer would be in Cobh. The barrack in Fenit was one of three houses which were together. It was the end one to the road, and was strongly fortified with loop-holed steel shutters on the windows, and sandbags. The garrison was composed of one sergeant, nine constables and some Black and Tans.

It was planned that a bomb which had been made out of the

box of a cartwheel would be fixed to the eave of the barrack. Riflemen would take up positions at the front and rear of the building and, having evacuated the families - without arousing any suspicions - from the private houses adjoining the barrack, a party was detailed to occupy the house next to the barrack and when the attack started to break a hole in the dividing wall with the object of pumping petrol into the barrack.

Convenient to the barrack was the Coastguard Station in which there was a detachment of Royal Marines. A party was detailed to cover the Coastguard Station so as to prevent the Marines from coming to the assistance of the P.I.C. Unfortunately, just before the time planned for the attack to commence, the destroyer arrived back in the harbour. As the plans had gone so far, it was decided to go ahead with the attack. It was now necessary to send another party to guard the viaduct from the pier with instructions to burn the pier if there was any danger of the Volunteers being overcome by a numerically superior force of Marines which might attempt to land from the destroyer.

At about 12 midnight fire was opened from front and rear. The bomb on the eave of the barrack/<sup>roof</sup> was exploded and, simultaneously, the men in the house next door started to break the dividing wall. The attack continued for about three hours, during which time the garrison in the barrack put up a spirited fight, and, although called on several times to surrender, refused to do so. The destroyer took part by firing some shells and using her searchlights to pick out our positions. The garrison sent up Verrey lights. After about three hours the attack was called off and we retired, leaving the barrack and the two houses completely destroyed by fire. The roads were sufficiently blocked to prevent reinforcements reaching the barrack until about 11 a.m. the

following day. The sergeant and a couple of men in the barrack were wounded, but we suffered no casualties. This attack was carried out by our own company and sections from the Tralee and Ardferit companies.

Dan Jeffers was in charge of this operation. The Brigade O/C. was also present. About 50 took part in the attack. I was in charge of a party which was detailed to cut all telephone wires and block all roads in the area. Having carried out my task I returned to Fenit and took part in the actual attack. I was with the party which attacked the front of the barrack.

A Swedish steamer arrived at Fenit about this time with a cargo of grain from South America. Information was conveyed to us by one of our spotters that there were rifles and ammunition aboard this ship. So a hurried conference was called with the officers and we decided that we would raid the ship one night for this ammunition. Six of us took part in the raid and my job that particular night was holding the viaduct in case any of the crew from the Coastguard Station would come out to the Pier. It was customary for them to come out when a boat was arriving. The remainder of the party went around to the steamer and saw the skipper of the boat in his cabin and explained the purpose of their call. He explained that those rifles and ammunition were the property of the Swedish Government and were supplied to ships for the purpose of exploding drifting mines at sea. He said he had no objection to our taking the stuff, but that it was without his consent, so we took the arms and ammunition. While the raid was in progress and our men on the steamer a boat whistled at the lighthouse. Two coastguards came out and these were held up and made prisoner until the raid was over. They were warned then not to come ashore for half an hour; but they did not come ashore for an hour. Six rifles

and three boxes of ammunition were taken to our dump at Lisodigue and we used some of it on the following day to fire a volley at the funeral of one of our members who had died a day or so earlier. The Chief Customs officer in Fenit, named Mahony, met me the morning after the raid when going by train to Tralee. He called me into the carriage with him, saying that he wanted to have a word with me. He said to me: "I don't know whether you are aware there is a bit of a complication as far as international law is concerned. There were rifles taken off a Swedish boat at Fenit. I don't think the men who carried out the raid were aware of the international law involved. I should like to see Paddy Cahill and explain the position to him".

He contacted Paddy Cahill in Tralee and explained the position to him, with the result that orders were issued to us to put those rifles and ammunition back where we got them. We got them back the next night, but when we handed them back the skipper told us that members of the crew had small arms which were their own personal property, and if we wished to make a deal with these we could do so. Actually, we purchased two revolvers and ammunition.

About this time there were a number of desertions from an East Lancashire Regiment which was stationed in Tralee. We facilitated their escape from Fenit. Later, two civilians arrived in Fenit. They posed as deserters endeavouring to get away. They asked for certain people by name, including the company captain, Mick Moriarty. Their movements were suspicious and it was decided that no information would be given to them. They returned later in the day to Tralee by train, but were taken off the train at Kilfenora and brought to Barrow for interrogation. It was then discovered that they were two British officers who were sent out for the purpose of checking up on the means used to get the deserters

away. Having warned them not to return to the area, they were released. Actually, it was known they did return as members of a raiding party that came to the area a day or two later.

We planned an ambush to take place at the Spa. The Black and Tans used to come occasionally to Fenit from Tralee and it was arranged that we would ambush them at the Spa at 11 a.m. On the day selected for the attack, we occupied positions on both sides of the road at a sharp bend and remained there until about 4 p.m. Information leaked out that we had been seen there and we had to evacuate the position. They actually did not come out on the day of the planned ambush. Then a campaign went on of trenching and blockading roads right up to the Truce. At the time it was a martial law area. The Black and Tans burned the local hall in Kilfenora one night.

There was a man named Sheeny (since deceased) who had tried hard to get into the Volunteers. He had been in the British army during the first World War. It was decided that we would not take him into the Volunteers, but he kicked up a row with two of our lads in a publichouse in the village and, as a result, there was a bit of a fight. He subsequently joined the Black and Tans and was one of the most active men on raids around the district. Prior to his joining the Black and Tans he was accused of giving information to the R.I.C. in Tralee as to some of the personnel who were on the attack of the barrack in Fenit. In his absence a courtmartial was held on him in Ardfert and some of the lads were inclined to have him executed. It was decided then that they would tar him. This was done, but, as it had been decided that it was not to be carried out by the local fellows, men from another area did the job. To this day, I am accused of being one of the men who did it

and his sister is quite convinced about my part in it. When the Black and Tans were disbanded, Sheehy went with them to Swansea. He came back once about five years ago and my brother in law saw him come in the gate, but did not recognise him until Sheehy told him who he was.

Signed: Mark J. Kenna  
(Mark J. Kenna)

Date: 3/6/55.  
3/6/55

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

