

ORIGINAL

BUREAU OF MILITARY HISTORY 1913-21.
BURO STAIRÉ MILEATA 1913-21
NO. W.S. 1248

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BUREAU OF MILITARY HISTORY, 1913-21.

STATEMENT BY WITNESS.

DOCUMENT NO. W.S. 1,248

Witness

Diarmuid Coffey,
Public Records' Office,
Four Courts,
Dublin.

Identity.

Member of Irish Volunteers, Dublin,
1914-1916.

Subject.

Gun-Running in yacht "Kelpie"
June 1914.

Conditions, if any, Stipulated by Witness.

Nil

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STATEMENT BY Mr. DIARMUID COFFEY,
Public Records Office, Four Courts, DUBLIN.

My first connection with the Volunteers, apart from belonging to a Company as a Private, was in June 1914 when Conor O'Brien asked me to join a gun-running expedition in his yacht "Kelpie". The guns we were to run had been bought by Darrell Figgis with money raised chiefly by Mrs. J. R. Green from Irish and English Liberals in London who wished for a counterblast to the Larne gun-running.

I met O'Brien at Foynes on July 1st (?) and we sailed for Cowes where we were to join Erskine Childers with his yacht and get final instructions. The crew was Conor O'Brien, his sister Kitty O'Brien and two hands George Cahill and Tom Fitzsimons. We had an uneventful but sea-sick making passage to Cowes where we waited for some days but there was no sign of Childers.

As the day fixed for leaving Cowes was drawing close and there was no sign of Childers we got anxious as to what was happening and sent various telegrams to find out what news we could. We were joined at Cowes by Henry de Montmorency who was to be an extra hand. He had some experience as a treasure hunter on the Cocos Islands but he did not like the accommodation on the "Kelpie" and left after one night aboard. Nearly a week passed at Cowes before Childers arrived. He was coming from North Wales and had had trouble on the way. His crew was Mrs. Childers, Mary Spring-Rice, 'Mr. Gordon' who I afterwards discovered was a Brigadier in the British Army and two paid hands from Donegal - Irish speakers - I don't remember their names. There was some friction between O'Brien and Childers as they had diametrically opposite ideas of how to conceal our intentions. Childers believed in absolute secrecy; O'Brien in free talk on the assumption that everyone

would assume he was lying as no real conspirator would be so indiscreet.

We eventually got away from Cowes in the early morning of July (20th?) and sailed for the Ruytengen Light Ship, off the Belgian coast, our rendezvous. This was fixed as a convenient spot as, if the weather turned bad, we could shelter in the mouth of the River Schelt. The weather was perfect for our purpose, a flat calm with low visibility and we made contact with the German tug Gladiator on 12th July. Figgis was aboard her and we came alongside and began to tranship the rifles and ammunition. The rifles were packed in canvas bales with straw packing, muzzles and butts projected from some of them: the ammunition was in boxes of 1,000 rounds covered with labels indicating the contents, so the fiction that they were "merchandise ~~from~~^{for} Mexico" was a bit thin. (Note:- I ~~was~~^{had} told that the arms were bought from a firm of gun-runners in Antwerp. They were delivered in Hamburg). We had dumped most of our ballast overboard but the cargo was so bulky that we were only able to fit 600 out of the 1,500 aboard. This left 900 for Childers. We found out afterwards that he had ~~tried~~ to have the rifles unpacked to fit them in. He was annoyed with us for not having done the same and taken more than the 600.

We got away in the afternoon dead beat from the work of getting the cargo aboard. As we sailed we saw Childers arriving. We were so tired that we decided to divide the watches and only one man stay on deck at a time. I lost the toss and had the first watch and when I got below slept so soundly that I did not know we had met the British battle fleet close to the Straits of Dover. I was told that a Destroyer made for us and O'Brien thought it meant that we had been given away, but ^{she} sheered off.
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We had not seen a newspaper for a couple of days and had no idea that it was really the British Fleet exercising in preparation for war.

Our sail down the English Channel was slow with head-winds all the way. Our only contact with the shore was a brief visit to Penzance in a thick fog which made the pier invisible at 50 yards. We went in for food as we were running short. Off the Bristol Channel we had some pretty bad weather and had to heave-to, but eventually we reached St. Tudwell's Roads off the south coast of Cardigan where we were to meet Sir Thomas Myles in his big yacht, (I forget her name). The idea was that Myles, who often went for a week-end cruising, would not be suspected ^{as} he was to take the rifles from us. Our rendezvous was to be 20 miles west of Bardsey Island and we made for this point. It was blowing very hard from the West but we got there and found no sign of Myles. We waited for some time though the weather was getting steadily worse, and eventually returned to St. Tudwell's.

During the night Myles arrived. He had split his mainsail on the way over and could not make his way back. This meant a week's delay as he could only sail the week-ends. Accordingly, it was arranged that I should return to Dublin by the mail steamer and report. I did this and arrived on Sunday morning. It was difficult to make contact with anyone as the Volunteers were parading and none of the chiefs was in the office. Eventually I found Eoin MacNeill and The O'Rahilly and reported to them that our landing, which was timed for that night, was off. They cancelled the arrangements.

I went out to Howth where my family were staying for the summer and was in time to see the landing of the guns there and meet Miss Spring-Rice and 'Mr. Gordon' who came ashore at Howth. They

told me about their passage but that has already been described several times.

Myles had his sail mended and the following week-end brought our arms from St. Tudwell's to Kilcool where they were landed. I understand that a number of the rifles disappeared between Kilcool and Dublin in a fleet of mysterious taxi-cabs. This was believed to be the work of a group of the I.R.B. section of the Volunteers which had, even as early as July 1914, begun to form in the Volunteer Movement.

In September, 1914, I was introduced to Colonel Maurice Moore whom I had not met before though my family had known his brother George for many years - not a particularly good introduction to Colonel Moore. The Military Headquarters of the Irish Volunteers was in a couple of rooms at the bottom of South Frederick Street in a block of offices that had formerly been the well-known Morrison's Hotel. Colonel Moore was military head of the Volunteers with the title of Inspector-General, and was helped by Colonel Edmond Cotter, R.E. (Retired) and Captain Fitzroy Hemphill. War had already broken out and Redmond had made the speech in which he had offered the Volunteers to defend Ireland while Carson had kept quietly bargaining with the Ulster Volunteers against Home Rule.

The political position was anxious. Redmond, who had opposed the formation of the Volunteers, had found himself confronted with a body which had great popular support and threatened to undermine the power of the A.O.H. then run by Joe Devlin and his henchman J.D. Nugent. Nugent was my idea of a political boss of great ability, pretty unscrupulous, bluff and pleasant to his friends, a bitter and vindictive enemy. Nugent's ^{whole} sense of power was the A.O.H. He was their secretary and had become a considerable force in Irish politics.

Redmond and his party decided that the Volunteers had become too strong for the Irish Parliamentary Party to resist and had decided to try and absorb them. An agreement was made between the Parliamentarians and the leaders of the Volunteers by which a number of members of the Committee of the Volunteers should be nominated by Redmond in exchange for his support of the Volunteer Movement. The men nominated by Redmond included Devlin, Nugent and Willie Redmond. Of these Devlin and Nugent simply wanted to take over the Volunteers as an adjunct to the A.O.H. and make them harmless to the Parliamentarians. Willie Redmond was honestly anxious to help the Volunteer Movement.

When I came into Colonel Moore's office I found that he had no staff except Cotter and Hemphill. The job was to organise the Volunteers into Military Units, Companies, Battalions, Brigades etc. The general policy was in Moore's hands - he was a member of the governing committee and had considerable influence in that body. Cotter was given the job of the actual divisions of units and I helped him in this work. He was an elderly idealist from County Cork who had been living on his retired pay in the South of England and had always been an idealistic nationalist and had commuted part of his pension in order to come over to Dublin and work for the Volunteers. He had a weak heart and was somewhat impulsive and excitable. His title was Chief of Staff.

My job brought me in touch with all types from all over the country. The officer in charge of the Dublin area, Major James Crean (of Crean's Soap Factory), was an energetic and efficient man who gave up a great deal of time to his job. He was a nationalist of mildly Redmondite leanings interested in the Volunteers and a loyal supporter of the Movement.

The outbreak of war had brought in all sorts of people who were or had been Unionist in sympathy but who saw in Redmond's attitude a nationalism with which they could be reconciled. I think that subsequent events have so overlaid the events of that time that the attitude of a very large number of the Irish Unionist Landlords, ^{such as} Cheevers, Taaffe, Powerscourt, Dunsany, Pollard ^{Maguire} Nugent, has been forgotten. It really seemed at the time as though there was a chance of uniting nearly the whole of Ireland, except the Carsonites, into a body ready to accept a very considerable degree of Irish self government and to work together for a United Ireland. The mass of the people seemed to think that England was for once engaged in a righteous war and at least not to oppose those who wanted to join in. The Unionists seemed to be ready to meet the people half way.

I don't profess to know how far the Republican idea was held among the rank and file of Volunteers but there was outwardly, at least, a feeling of Irish unity. It seemed to be tacitly understood that the Volunteers would defend Ireland from a possible German invasion and would release the British troops in Ireland for service abroad.

During this period people such as Lords Powerscourt and Dunsany came to offer their help to the Volunteers and in the West Colonel Cheevers (always a Home Ruler) and Taaffe from Louth became organisers of the Volunteers in their respective counties. The office was filled with people of this sort as well as by active members of the Volunteers who were of Sinn Féin sympathies. The work of organising Companies and Battalions went on apace and the paper strength of the Volunteers increased rapidly.

The staff of the office were all Volunteers. It was joined by R.C. Barton, David L. Robinson and Mrs. Erskine Childers who used to drive up daily from Barton's house at Annamoe and work in the office.

Unfortunately Colonel Cotter was temperamentally unfitted to work with Colonel Moore. Cotter was a bit excitable and had all an old regular officer's reverence for procedure. He took his position as Chief of Staff very seriously and much resented any action by Moore which seemed to infringe on his position. Moore was completely indifferent to forms and regulations. Even when an officer in the British Army he had gone his own way to the despair and admiration of his fellow-officers. He was a born leader of men, did not know what fear meant and never bothered about precedents and red tape. He constantly offended Cotter by taking action over his head and not consulting him. Fond as I was of Cotter I had to sympathise with Moore over him. Cotter had spent his life in the Army and was not in touch with Irish ideas or Irish politics. He was a sort of Don Quixote ready to sacrifice himself in any way for his country except in a way that would infringe his sense of ^{dignity} rigidity. He became more and more discontented and ill. As a help to regularise his position he decided to give up his position as Chief of Staff and call himself Chief Staff Officer, but this did not mend matters and eventually he resigned and returned to his family in England. He should be remembered as a great-hearted Irish gentleman who sacrificed his health and a large portion of the little money he had to serve his country but, unfortunately, owing to age and temperament was unable to make the mark which his intentions and devotion deserved.

Moore used to tell me a good deal of what was going on behind the scenes of this outward seeming amity and unity. There was a sharp and bitter division on the committee of the Volunteers. Nugent and Devlin were party leaders first and last and only wanted to keep the

Volunteers as a support of the Parliamentary Party. MacNeill the chairman was anxious to keep unity but his sympathies were with Pearse, Connolly, O'Rahilly, Kent etc. who had the idea of an Irish Army to fight England before their minds all the time.

Negotiations were going on on Redmond's side to have the Volunteers recognised by the British War Office and armed and trained by them. It looked at one time as if something would come of this but Lord Kitchener would never hear of it. Moore would have liked to have a properly organised and equipped force and was prepared to undertake to defend Ireland against Germany and to obey English orders up to a point as the price of equipment and organisation. How far he would have gone I naturally do not know as the negotiations came to nothing. It must be repeated that subsequent events have made many people forget that the majority of people in Ireland were not very anti-English at the time and were anti-German. The idea of an independent Irish Republic was so remote that no ordinary man thought of it though it was probably in the minds of many of the members of the Committees of the Volunteers.

The uneasy alliance between the Parliamentary Party and the original founders of the Volunteers lasted for some months but the difference between them was brought to a head by a speech made by John Redmond at a parade of Volunteers when he urged them to join the British Army.

The Sinn Féin members (I call them that for convenience though the name Sinn Féin had a different connotation at the time) decided to split off. My recollections of the split are very vague, two incidents only stick in my mind, one was MacNeill having an interview with Moore about it in our office when they parted personal friends but definitely on opposite sides in the matter.

Moore definitely disapproved of Redmond's action in making the recruiting speech at the Volunteer parade, but he also considered that Redmond was leader of the majority of the people and that the best interests of the country were served by following him.

The other incident was personal. I was at this time a Staff Captain on Moore's staff, but I had no knowledge of military matters and was a Private in a Company of Volunteers who trained at Larkfield. One evening while training, a man (I think it was Kent but I am not quite sure) appeared saying he was from the Committee of the Volunteers and spoke to us of the split. He called on all who supported the committee against Redmond to step forward: about three or four of the twenty or thirty of us present did so. He then told the rest of us to 'dismiss' and clear out. I took advantage of my rank as Staff Captain to address the remaining men and tell them not to 'dismiss' but to carry on and let the few who had shown their adherence to the Committee clear out in their turn. It happened that there was no attempt to remain on their part.

The result of this was that the Company was split, the vast majority following Redmond, and a few, MacNeill and the Sinn Féin group. As regards the particular Company I belonged to, it had to find a new meeting place as the ground at Larkfield belonged to Countess Plunkett.

The split in the Volunteers was nation wide and we who remained followers of Redmond had a good deal of reorganising to do. Those who followed Redmond took the name of Irish National Volunteers and the name Irish Volunteers remained with the Sinn Féin party. There was some significance in the change of name as the word National was much beloved by the Parliamentarians. It had a sort of echo of the Nationalist Party.

Those of us who remained Redmondites felt angry with the Sinn Féin party who we thought had split the country though we felt that Redmond had been wrong in making the recruiting speech at a Volunteer parade. By far the greatest number of Volunteers joined up with the National Volunteers and a large force on paper was under the control of Colonel Moore. A large amount of money remained with Redmond and a new committee was organised under the control of the Parliamentary Party.

A good deal of money was spent on buying a house as headquarters (44 Parnell Square) and a weekly newspaper 'The National Volunteer' was started with a man called Gaynor, from the staff of the Freeman's Journal, as editor. This paper was run nominally as a Volunteer paper but Gaynor was really only a party hack and the whole effort of those running the paper was to abuse the Sinn Feiners and boost the Parliamentary Party. Those of us who had, though Redmondite in politics, gone into the Volunteers because it seemed to be a fine national movement, were disgusted with "The National Volunteers". It was strongly suspected by some of us that a subsidiary object in running the paper on the part of Nugent and the A.O.H. members of the new committee was to get rid of Volunteer funds which they wished to divert from equipping and organising Volunteers to jobs for their hack writers. They found the money embarrassing as while it was there they should have been using it for its true purpose.

Moore had nominated me as a member of the committee and he and I attended many dreary meetings at 44 Parnell Square when we tried to put a stop to the miserable rag. It was gradually borne in on us that the intention of the majority of the committee was to get rid of the money and let the Volunteers fade away.

There was a lot of the old Volunteer spirit in the National Volunteers still and many honest and patriotic people supported them.

Arrangements were made for holding a review of the Volunteers from all over Ireland in the Phoenix Park and the good organisation and capacity of those who were still really interested in the Volunteers was shown by the success of the review. Many thousands of Volunteers came by special trains from every part of the country and the review went off wonderfully well. The catering for and care of the Volunteers was also very good. This review may be regarded as the 'swan song' of the National Volunteers. The dislike for Volunteers or apathy of the Parliamentarians soon had its effect and the Volunteers became dispirited. After Easter 1916 they may be said to have disappeared. Some of the keener men who had stuck to Redmond now gave him up and joined the Sinn Féin Volunteers and were active in the fight against England. Tom Cullen is one of those I have in mind.

Signed:

Diarmid Coffey
(Diarmid Coffey)

Date:

17th Sept 1955.
17th Sept. 1955.

Witness:

Margaret C. Griffith
Michael F. Ryan comdr.

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