

M.S. 1.252

ORIGINAL

BUREAU OF MILITARY HISTORY 1913-21
BURO STAIRÉ MILEATA 1913-21
No. W.S. 1252

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BUREAU OF MILITARY HISTORY, 1913-21.
STATEMENT BY WITNESS.

DOCUMENT NO. W.S.1,252.....

Witness

Eamonn Fennell,
Carrigaholt,
Co. Clare.

Identity.

O/C. 8th Battalion Clare Brigade,
1916 - .

Subject.

- (a) Carrigaholt Company Irish Volunteers,
Co. Clare, 1914-1921;
- (b) Preparations for landing of German arms,
Holy Week, 1916.

Conditions, if any, Stipulated by Witness.

Nil

File No.S.2558.....

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STATEMENT OF EAMONN FENNELL,
Carrigaholt, Co. Clare.

(Formerly O/C, 8th Battalion,
Clare Brigade.)

I was born on 25th March, 1885, in the village of Carrigaholt.

Carrigaholt district was one which, in the days of the British regime, contributed a lot of young men to the British Navy, and thus it happened, in the early days of 1914 when the first company of Irish Volunteers was formed in the village, that a number of competent instructors - British Naval reservists - were available to train and drill the men who joined this movement.

While I'm not very clear now as to the circumstances which led to the formation of the Irish Volunteers in Carrigaholt, or as to who were the first officers, I'm certain that I took a prominent part in organising the district. I administered the oath to companies which were later formed in Cross and Donaha.

In Carrigaholt the Volunteer company, soon after being formed, was about fifty strong, while in each of the other two companies, which I have mentioned, there were between twenty-five and thirty members. The Carrigaholt men drilled from the outset in a field which belonged to Paddy Collins and met two or three times per week.

Right from the beginning, shotguns were used by us for drill purposes. Training in target practice was also in vogue practically from the start of the movement, .22 rifles being used for the purpose. We were able to

obtain the use of these guns from the homes of our own members as, at that time, a shotgun was to be found in most of the houses in our part of Clare. We had a very early casualty in our ranks arising from an accident during target practice. It occurred on the Sunday on which the Irish Volunteers were established at Cross. The Carrigaholt company marched to that village on the occasion and were engaged in firing practice firing practice from .22 rifles when a bullet hit one of the newly enrolled Volunteers, a boy named Keane from Kilbaha, in the neck, causing his death next day.

The call of the Naval Reservists to fight for England in the First Great War deprived us of the use of our drill instructors but, by that time, we had some of our own men who were quite efficient at this job. The Redmondite split, shortly after this war started, did not affect us very much either as the big majority of the Volunteers in our district refused to accept Redmond's leadership and remained loyal to the Irish Volunteer Executive under John McNeill. We continued to have enthusiastic Volunteer companies in the Carrigaholt area throughout 1915 and up to the Rising in 1916.

Some time in 1915, through a local I.R.B. man, Tim (Sunny) Hehir, we received in Carrigaholt our first Lee Enfield rifle and four rifles of the Martin Henri type, along with a small quantity of ammunition. We used these guns for drill and parade purposes along with the shotguns, but never fired any ball ammunition from the rifles as our supply thereof was too small and regarded as far too precious to use it for such a purpose.

Until 1917, Clare formed part of the area under

the command of the Limerick Volunteer headquarters. A few days prior to Palm Sunday 1916, I received orders to attend a convention of Volunteer officers in the A.O.H. Hall in Limerick. I duly attended. The meeting was presided over by Jim Leddin of Limerick city who announced that the principal business to transact was the reorganisation of the Limerick Brigade which consisted of the Limerick and Clare Irish Volunteers. After discussion, the two counties were divided up into eight Battalion areas, four in each county, and I was appointed O/C of the 8th Battalion. The Battalion area extended over most of the area subsequently covered by the West Clare Brigade. Michael Keane of Carrigaholt was appointed as Vice O/C.

Other features of that convention in Limerick, of which I have now a clear recollection, were:-

- (1) A lecture by Captain J.J. O'Connell (Ginger) from Headquarters in Dublin on field tactics;
- (2) Some speeches which were delivered, especially one by Michael Colivet, then O/C, Limerick and Clare, that left no one present in any doubt that armed rebellion against the British government was not alone contemplated but imminent.

During the week following this convention, (I think it was Holy Thursday) Paddy Brennan (Meelick) came to me in Carrigaholt and told me that he had been sent down from Brigade Headquarters in Limerick to take charge of the Carrigaholt Battalion and that I was to place myself

under his orders. Of course, I was aware that he was one of the big noises of the Irish Volunteer movement and had met him previously - not later than the previous Sunday in Limerick. While he was in Carrigaholt in the period I'm describing, he stayed in Miss Molly Behan's hotel.

After I had conveyed to him my readiness to accept him as my superior officer, he then disclosed to me that a Rising was due to break out on the following Sunday (Easter Sunday) and that a boatload of arms from Germany was to be landed in Kerry. I also received from him the following orders:-

- (1) To select twenty-five of the most reliable men in the Carrigaholt company who were familiar with the use of shotguns;
- (2) To instruct the twenty-five men so selected to parade after nine o'clock Mass in Carrigaholt on Easter Sunday, each man to be equipped with a shotgun and whatever ammunition he could get his hands on, and one day's rations;
- (3) To hire a boat to take the Carrigaholt Volunteers on Easter Sunday morning across to Beale in Co. Kerry. Beale is situated on the Shannon between Tarbert and Ballybunion;
- (4) To instruct the remainder of the Irish Volunteers in the area to clear out of the Carrigaholt peninsula which is easily cut off from the mainland;
- (5) To set a story in circulation at once that we were taking the Volunteers

across the Shannon on the following Sunday to compete with the Kerry Volunteers for a shooting trophy. This, of course, was intended for the ears of the R.I.C. who would be bound to hear it and cause them to be misled as to the real intentions of our trip across the Shannon.

Brennan told me that, after landing in Kerry, we would march to Listowel to capture the R.I.C. barracks there and hold that town until we received a supply of the German rifles from the Kerry men, after which we would return to Clare and begin operations against the R.I.C. stations in our own county.

I asked Brennan if the men were to be advised to go to Confession on Holy Saturday, and he said, "No. Arrangements have been made for the imparting of General Absolution on Easter Sunday morning". I then made one request, which he granted, and that was to give me permission to let the Vice O/C of the Battalion, Michael Keane, into the secret regarding the Rising. Keane was the only person whom I told.

On Good Friday, 1916, my brother, John, who at that time was employed as a light-keeper at Loop Head lighthouse, came home to attend the wake of a relative. In strictest confidence, he told me that, just before he left the Lighthouse that day, a British warship had been observed taking a strange-looking boat in tow off the Kerry coast. I immediately went to Paddy Brennan and disclosed to him what my brother had said. Brennan refused to believe that it was the boat coming from

Germany with arms, and said that this was a class of incident which happened frequently on the high seas in war-time.

On Easter Sunday morning after nine o'clock Mass, everything was ready according to the orders which I had received. I went to my own home to get what I thought might be the last meal for the road. In the kitchen waiting for me was Art O'Donnell of Tullycrine. He was after cycling all the way from Limerick, a distance of about sixty-five miles. I said to him, "Are you coming to join us too?" His answer was, "No. I'm after coming to stop you". He then went on to explain that he had been sent by Michael Colivet in Limerick to convey to us the terms of Eoin McNeill's order calling off the Rising. I went straight away to Behan's Hotel and notified Paddy Brennan of Art O'Donnell's message. I shall never forget Brennan's reaction. He became furious and cursed and swore like a trooper. After a while, he cooled down and asked me to bring along O'Donnell, which I did. When the latter had delivered his message from Brigade Headquarters, we sat down to a discussion. Of course, there was no question of refusing to obey McNeill's orders. We decided to go ahead with the Volunteer parade and that we would march the company to Moveen, three miles from Carrigaholt, and spend the day in exercises in that district. So it happened that, instead of being engaged in armed insurrection in Kerry on Easter Sunday 1916, the Carrigaholt Irish Volunteers spent the day in peace in their own district.

During Easter Week, Paddy Brennan remained in Carrigaholt and then left the area. As far as I know, no further word reached him from G.H.Q. in Dublin or from Brigade Headquarters in Limerick.

After the suppression of the Rising, copies of a proclamation issued by General Sir John Maxwell, G.O.C., British Forces in Ireland, was displayed throughout the country and also appeared in the public press. This proclamation called for the surrender of all arms held by the Irish Volunteers. The Parish Priest of Carrigaholt - Canon McMahon - came to me and asked me to surrender whatever guns we had. I sent a messenger to Limerick for directions. He learned that the Limerick Volunteers had already handed over their arms to the British authorities. ^{After consultation with the Battalion and Company officers} I then arranged with the Parish Priest to leave the rifles, which we got through Tim Hehir (Sunny) in 1915, in the priest's car-house and, in due course these guns were delivered to the local R.I.C. by the Canon.

There were no arrests around Carrigaholt after the 1916 Rising was suppressed. The Irish Volunteer organisation in the area remained intact even though the companies did not meet very often. Drilling was soon resumed but only in quiet and remote places. On the release of some of the men arrested after the Rising I was summoned to a Volunteer meeting in Ennis. I believe this was in January 1917. This meeting was held in Bill McNamara's house in O'Connell St. It was on that occasion that all the Co. Clare was formed into one Brigade area. Paddy Brennan was elected Brigade O/C., his brother Michael, Brigade Adjutant, and Frank Barrett, Brigade Vice O/C. The brigade was divided into eight battalions and I was reappointed O/C. of the 8th Battalion, a post I held until January 1919, when there was a further reorganisation which resulted in the creation of three separate brigades

in Clare, East, Mid and West. The West Clare Brigade area comprised the country west of a line running, roughly, from Quilty to Lissycasey to Ballynacally on the Shannon. I declined to allow my name go forward for any officer's post at the time of the last mentioned reorganisation and from thence to the Truce I remained an ordinary Volunteer.

I was succeeded as battalion commandant by James Talty of Kilkee, and the Carrigaholt area became 5th Battalion, West Clare Brigade.

On the establishment of the Clare Brigade in July 1917, the Irish Volunteer and Sinn Fein movements made considerable headway throughout West Clare. New Irish Volunteer companies sprang up everywhere and Sinn Fein Clubs were formed in each parish. Public drilling recommenced too. In Carrigaholt the Volunteers were drilled every Sunday morning by Michael Keane and after parade most of the company attended meetings of the Sinn Fein Club in the Reading Room of the village. This Club, which was formed in August 1917, was known as the Sean Heuston Cumann. I was a member of the Committee and the President and Secretary were Thomas Keane and Tim Hehir, respectively. Usually there was not much business to discuss at the meeting of the Club, but it was considered good policy to hold weekly Sunday meetings in order to keep the members together.

The conscription threat in the Spring of 1918 brought more recruits into Sinn Fein and the Irish Volunteers. Drilling became more intensified and numerous protest meetings under the auspices of Sinn Fein were held at different places between Kilrush and Loop Head, which was the area of my battalion. Feeling against the British Government was running fairly high at the time and the relations between the majority of the people and the R.I.C. and military in the district was becoming more and more strained. In Kilrush at the time there

was a detachment of troops belonging to a Welsh Regiment and these soldiers appeared to have a strong dislike towards the Sinn Fein movement.

On 24th March 1918, the usual weekly meeting of the Carrigaholt Sinn Fein Club was in progress. I was there and I was standing at the door. About noon, a knock came to the door which I opened. A British military officer was outside along with some soldiers carrying fixed bayonets. He asked me if I was in charge and I said "Yes". He then inquired if Michael Keane was inside. I again said "Yes". He then asked for Keane who went out to him. The officer then said to me: "You must clear this hall". I asked him what he meant by this action and said that this was a meeting of the Sinn Fein Club which we had a perfect right to hold, that we had been holding meetings Sunday without interference. He thereupon shouted an order to his men to charge and, simultaneously, soldiers with fixed bayonets burst in through the door and formed up into a square in the centre of the room. A military sergeant gave orders to clear the room.

Some of the members got out by the back door. I was still at the front door trying to keep it open as the soldiers had begun to lunge with their bayonets and our people began to stampede. I next felt a bayonet stab in the back which caused me to let go the door, and in a rush out of the building the crowd swept me out into the street. Outside, I heard that Dr. Studdart was in Behan's Hotel and went up to see him. I found him attending to Thomas Russell, a Kerryman who was employed by the Gaelic League as an Irish teacher. Russell had been severely wounded by a bayonet thrust while at the Sinn Fein meeting. Dr. Studdert treated my wound and also those of two others who also had been bayoneted. Russell was

removed to Kilrush Hospital the following morning but died that night. He was buried in Kerry.

Michael Keane was removed to Kilrush as a prisoner; the books and records of the Sinn Fein Club were saved by the Chairman and Secretary. The raid and Russell's death put Carrigaholt in the limelight throughout the country; public bodies everywhere condemned the action of the military.

I should have mentioned earlier that the military came from Kilrush to Carrigaholt by motor launch during the night previous to the raid and hid in Burton's Wood about a quarter of a mile from Carrigaholt. Their presence in the vicinity remained a secret from us until they appeared outside the Reading Room.

After the arrest of Michael Keane, I drilled the Volunteers in Carrigaholt. The R.I.C. tried to arrest me, but I evaded them until March 1919, when I was caught while on a visit to my aunt's home where I lived at this period. While 'on the run' I slept in different houses around the Carrigaholt peninsula. Following my capture by the police I was tried in Kilkee by a Resident Magistrate called Mercer on a charge of illegal drilling. I received a sentence of four months which I served in Limerick Jail. Political treatment was accorded me while in jail and I was released on the completion of my sentence.

I was not long out of jail when my brother, who was in Kilkee one day with a load of oats, was met by an R.I.C. sergeant who warned him that if I were caught again I would be shot on the spot. Of course, apart from my activities in the Sinn Fein movement, and as a Volunteer officer, the R.I.C. and military did not like me on account of the evidence which I gave at the inquest on Russell's death. Several raids were

made on my home subsequent to this warning, but each time I managed to be away.

Though I remained 'on the run' until the Truce in July 1921, I was not involved in any military activities in the interval. I, however, devoted a lot of my time to the work of the Sinn Fein and Arbitration Courts as, during 1920 and 1921, there was a considerable amount of disputes over land in the Carrigaholt area. These Courts were always held in the old Courthouse. I acted as arbitrator on a number of cases. The R.I.C. had left Carrigaholt on 19.8.1920, after which the barracks was promptly destroyed by the local company, so we had a small republic of our own in the area. The I.R.A. and Sinn Fein Clubs there had to be responsible for law and order. In this connection I wish to refer in particular to the work of the I.R.A. police. In addition to performing such duties as summons serving, policing the Courts and enforcing the Courts' decrees, they were particularly strict on the publicans. Not even the most prominent members of the I.R.A. or Sinn Fein could venture in for a drink after hours.

With the departure of the R.I.C., British rule virtually ended in our district. Apart from spasmodic raids by mixed forces of R.I.C. and soldiers from Kilrush and Kilkee between August 1920 and the Truce, we had seen the end of the Forces of Occupation.

Signed: Eamonn Fennell
(Eamonn Fennell)

Date: 15. 9. 1955
15.9.1955

Witness: D. Griffin
(D. Griffin)

