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ORIGINAL

BUREAU OF MILITARY HISTORY 1913-21
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NO: **W.S. 1,321**

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BUREAU OF MILITARY HISTORY, 1913-21.

STATEMENT BY WITNESS.

DOCUMENT NO. **W.S. 1,321**.....

Witness

Joseph F. Dennigan,
Irish Town,
Lusk,
Co. Dublin.

Identity.

O/C. Ballymacormack Company
Longford Brigade, I.R.A.

Subject.

Ballymacormack Company Irish Volunteers,
Co. Longford, 1913-1921.

Conditions, if any, Stipulated by Witness.

Nil

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STATEMENT BY JOSEPH FRANCIS DENNIGAN

Irish Town, Lusk, Co. Dublin.

I was born in the year 1892 in a townland called Clooneena, Ballymacormack, Co. Longford, and went to school in that locality, and later on to St. Mel's, Longford. When the Home Rule Bill for Ireland was being discussed in the British House of Commons, Carson called for Volunteers in Ulster and set up a military force there known as the Ulster Volunteers or Carson's Volunteers to fight against the application of Home Rule to Ireland. A number of influential men in Dublin under the chairmanship of the late Professor MacNeill then initiated a similar force of Volunteers to counteract Carson's organisation and thus was started the Irish Volunteers. The Irish Parliamentary Party under the leadership of the late John Redmond was opposed to the organisation at first, but when it was taken up with enthusiasm throughout the country and he saw in it a danger to his own position, he demanded a controlling hand in the organisation. This almost precipitated a split in the organisation and would have, had the original executive of the Volunteers stood firmly against Redmond's demands. In order to avoid such a national catastrophe at the time, the executive council of the Volunteers agreed to Redmond's demands and he nominated a number of members of the Parliamentary Party and others to act on the executive, which gave him a controlling position on that body. The Volunteers continued to flourish and companies were formed in practically every parish in the country.

I joined the Longford Town company or contingent which had a strength of about 200 men. There was no higher

organisation existing than companies that I was aware of. We had no arms of any sort and used sticks and hurleys to drill with in lieu of arms. We had the services of ex-British army men or reservists to act as instructors. In the meantime, the first Great War had begun and Redmond had gone out of his way to support the British Government in their war effort and agreed to the Home Rule Bill being put on the long finger until the war was over. Redmond's imperialism reached its peak point when he offered the services of the Irish Volunteers to the British Government and informed the members of the organisation, in a speech which he made at Woodenbridge, Co. Wicklow, that their duty was in the trenches in France. A crisis could now no longer be avoided in the Volunteers and the organisation was split in twain throughout the country.

The vast majority of the Volunteers followed Redmond's lead, and in our unit only about twenty men remained loyal to the original executive. Redmond's force now assumed the name of the Irish National Volunteers. Ned Cooney was nominally in charge of our small unit who took the side of the Irish Volunteers. We still had no arms and very little contact with our headquarters in Dublin or other Irish Volunteer units.

Our part in the 1916 Rebellion was a very small one. I remember two of the Cooney brothers calling me out of bed. The brothers Cooney, whose sister was afterwards married to the famous Sean MacEoin, and a chap by the name of McGuire and I blocked the road between Longford and Athlone, two large garrison towns. After the collapse of the Rebellion a period of complete inactivity took place for some time and anything in the nature of patriotic action was at a very low ebb. There were no arrests in our area after the Rebellion.

In October 1916, on orders of the Sinn Fein Executive

for the country, a few of us started organising for Sinn Fein and for the Volunteers in our district. We got a local Sinn Fein Club started and James Farrell, a farmer, was elected as first president. Ned Cooney was elected captain of our small group of Volunteers, and I was first lieutenant. Tom Bannon was also very active in getting both organisations going again. Our small company covered a very large area as we were then very selective in the men we took in.

Shortly afterwards came the famous North Roscommon election in which we took an active part in assisting the Roscommon men in the election work. Later still, our own Longford election, in which Joe McGuinness was elected on behalf of Sinn Fein, took place. Both of these elections tended to show how the people of the country were thinking and that the end of the old Parliamentary Party or Nationalist Party was drawing near. The rallying songs that we then sung played no small part in sweeping the youth of the country to our side. One line I remember well - Hip, Hip, Hip Hooray - the Glorious 9th of May". We had a stiff fight in Longford at that election because we had the most powerful man in Ireland to fight against with his own Press "The Longford Leader", and with bands and banners from all over the country at his side. This man was the late J.P. Farrell, a more powerful man in the Parliamentary Party than Redmond, Dillon and Devlin put together.

From this period on, Sinn Fein began to gather strength. I remember about 200 Volunteers walked from Longford to Drumlish and back with twelve R.I.C. men walking behind us. When we came to Longford that night, we were attacked from all quarters by the ex-British soldiers and their wives and families. The military garrison in Longford had to be called out to quell the riot. We defended ourselves with what weapons we had, such as hurleys and sticks.

About this time the British Government brought in a Venereal Disease Act in their own country. They tried to introduce it into Ireland also by trying to compel the County Councils and Urban Councils to accept it and set up clinics and so forth. This Act was opposed by the Church and the people in general. A meeting of the County Executive of Sinn Fein was called for Longford and attended by delegates from all branches in the county to devise what action should be taken to oppose the Act. When all the executive officers had spoken on the matter, up gets a swarthy determined looking man from the body of the hall and spoke with such force and determination against the Bill that the delegates who did not know him were amazed. Quickly we learned that he was Sean MacEoin from Ballinacorney, who afterwards proved himself so famous in the fight for freedom.

In the end of 1918 a General Election was held and this again meant a very active time for the Volunteers, but it also served as a time for recruiting and furthering our organisation. By this time there was a battalion organisation existing in the South Longford area. Michael Murphy, afterwards Commandant in the National Army, was Battalion O/C. Mick Dowd was Battalion Adjutant, and the quartermaster I cannot remember now. There was also a brigade organisation which comprised the whole county area.

As far as I can remember, the companies making up our battalion were Longford Town, which had two companies; Newtown-Forbes, Ballymacormack, Killashee and Clondra. Later on, when there was a reorganisation, some of these companies were amalgamated. Our company, which was Ballymacormack, was commanded by Ned Cooney as captain. I was 1st Lieutenant and Frank Murphy was 2nd Lieutenant. We had now about 30 men in the company and had one service rifle, two revolvers and a few

shotguns for armament.

The O/C. of the Longford Brigade was Tom Reddington. Sean Connolly was Vice O/C. and Mick Heslin was adjutant. When the conscription crisis was threatening the country there was a big influx of men of all ages into the Volunteers and the strength of the various units increased out of all proportion to its original strength. Other than drilling, which was now carried out openly, and the signing of the anti-conscription pledge and the collection of money for the conscription fund, little was done to combat the menace that now faced the country. When the crisis was over, most of our new members became inactive again. There was no way of holding them as they had not been sworn in - there was no oath then - nor had they made any declaration. In later years, a number of them did rejoin us.

Some time towards the end of 1919, a general raid for arms was ordered by our headquarters in Dublin. All houses where there were guns or arms of any description were visited by our men and such arms were collected by us. In most cases the arms were given to us freely, but in a few cases we had to make a display of force by showing arms. There was no shooting incidents during the raiding. We collected a large amount of shotguns, many of them unserviceable, and a fair supply of cartridges and one revolver which was the property of an Orangeman living in the area.

Company parades were now held regularly both in secret and in the open. We had an ex-British army soldier named McGoey who acted as an instructor. In the end of 1919 and early 1920 a number of attacks were made on isolated R.I.C. Barracks throughout the country, some with success, others the reverse, with the result that the police authorities

realised that it was no longer feasible to keep their small country barracks open and they evacuated them and reinforced the garrisons in the larger centres with the men withdrawn. In ~~one~~ area, Killashee Barracks was evacuated and, on Easter Saturday night of 1920, we destroyed it, as we thought, by blowing the gable end out of it with explosives. Some days later Mick Collins passed that way and, seeing the barracks, was not satisfied with our work and ordered that it be properly destroyed, which we did by stripping the roof off it completely.

The evacuation of nearly all of the outlying barracks by the R.I.C. was the first step towards the final defeat of the British Government. The R.I.C. were the intelligence agencies for the British and their retraction was a serious blow in this respect.

The Volunteers, who were already doing a certain amount of police work, had now to intensify their efforts and keep order in the country and also in the towns where the R.I.C. were. This gave the Volunteers plenty of work to do and was beneficial in that respect and helped to raise their morale. They could only devote their spare time to this work mostly, and yet, they did it so successfully that the people quickly gained confidence in them and would not think of going to the R.I.C. with their troubles.

The Sinn Fein Courts were now organised in the area and the people soon also got confidence in them. Here, commonsense in dealing with cases applied more than law, and I have often heard it regretted since that these Courts were not made permanent. Soon the British Courts were out of work, except for an odd case brought by some of their loyalist friends. The people generally abided loyally by the decisions of the

Sinn Fein Courts and only in rare cases were the Volunteers called on to enforce any of its decisions. Mr. McNight, a solicitor or barrister from Ballymahon, did a huge amount of work in getting the Sinn Fein Courts going and in instructing them in procedure. John Cooney and Frank Murphy were judges in the local Court and Patrick Ward acted as Clerk of the Court. Although the enemy tried hard to locate where the Courts were being held, they never succeeded in doing so, and no arrests were made.

The R.I.C. had by now been strongly reinforced by men recruited in England. These men were generally of a bad type and were selected, not because of likely police abilities, but rather as a force who would strike terror into the Irish people. They were called Black and Tans because of the uniforms they wore, which were a mixture of R.I.C. uniforms and soldiers' khaki uniforms. By this time, at any rate, the R.I.C. had ceased to have any semblance of a police force and were purely an armed military body. An additional force, known as Auxiliary police, were also drafted into the country by the British Government. This force consisted of nearly all ex-British officers who had seen service during the previous Great War and had the reputation of being tough fighters. The members of this force were called cadets.

By now, the Volunteers had become far more active in pushing the fight against the enemy and attacks on barracks and ambushes were a daily occurrence throughout the country. Communication lines - telephone and telegraph - were being destroyed and roads blocked to impede the mobility of the enemy. North Longford had an active service unit organised on a whole-time basis and ~~were~~^{was} doing wonderful work in ambushing and attacking the enemy with great success. This unit was

commanded by Sean MacEoin. This activity in North Longford brought down heavy enemy concentrations on that area and both the Volunteers and the people there were having a rough time. In order to relieve this situation, the Brigade O/C., Reddington, decided to organise a similar column in the South Longford area.

I volunteered to join this column, but the Brigade O/C. refused to let me do so and, instead, he instructed me that I was to go on the run and take over charge of C/Company of our battalion from Ned Cooney, who was now appointed to be the column commander. The column was mostly comprised of men who were on the run and had ten or twelve rifles and a Lewis gun which were supplied by the Brigade Headquarters.

In our company area we had one rifle and a small supply of .303 ammunition and two revolvers and a number of shotguns. Ammunition for the revolvers and shotguns was also very limited. Every night there was some job to be done in the way of blocking roads and interrupting enemy communications.

One incident will prove how trustworthy and sincere the Volunteers were. One night a few of the Volunteers and I raided the mail car which plied between Lanesboro and Longford. We opened and censored the letters. In one letter which was going to a Mr. Igoe of Longford we found £25. This was a man paying a debt he owed Mr. Igoe. In another we found £14 for another merchant. We sealed up the letters again and posted them on without interfering with the money. This did us good and brought us goodwill and influence on our side with the general public.

We also raided Killashee Courthouse where the money for Dog Licences was and got over £20, but we did not send that

back. This was British Government money and was forfeit. We escaped from this raid only by a hairsbreadth, as a lorry or Tans and R.I.C. arrived to collect the money.

Another narrow escape for a number of us took place one morning at about 10 o'clock. We had orders from our Brigade Headquarters to intercept a motor cycle dispatch rider from Athlone military garrison to Longford. We had just settled down at a small bridge and were awaiting the rider to arrive. We were armed with one revolver and one shotgun. Suddenly, out of nowhere it appeared to us, came about 500 cavalry in our direction. The only thing we could do was to slip down into the water and get under the bridge. There we remained standing in over four feet of water until they had gone. That same day we cleared out 40 men who were cutting timber in a forest in our area for the British. The men never came back.

North Longford column were carrying the brunt of the fight in their area at this time; so, in order to try and relieve the enemy pressure there we decided to lie in ambush at Clondra for a patrol of R.I.C. and Tans from Tarmonbarry. Our sole arms were two rifles and two grenades, 2 revolvers and four shotguns. We lay there for two nights and days and, lucky for us, the patrol never came that way. The morning following our withdrawal the place of ambush selected by us was surrounded by troops and lorries of Black and Tans, but we were gone. Although our company did not take part as a unit in any ambushes or barrack attacks, in all such cases they were engaged in numerous activities such as blocking roads, scouting and so forth.

The Truce put an end to our activities and we were all sorry, as we were enjoying the excitement and adventures of the time and we were all in good form and anxious to carry on.

The lack of arms and explosives, of course, was lamentable, but we had become accustomed to getting along without these things. When the Treaty came I supported it and I still feel I was right in doing so and do not regret it.

After the Truce I was taken up to Brigade Headquarters and, shortly afterwards, I was appointed brigade commander of the newly formed Inny Brigade with M. Skelly as adjutant. 'Nap' Farrelly was vice-commandant and Seamus MacEoin brigade quartermaster.

In July 1922, a party of us National Army men were ambushed by what we then called the Irregulars - our own kith and kin. I was severely wounded on the occasion and still carry a few lumps of lead, too near my heart to be operated on at the time, and I expect I will carry them to my grave.

In my opinion, the available arms were too unevenly distributed in the period prior to the Truce between the different companies of Volunteers, as the few incidents I have given go to prove. With the exception of filling shotgun cartridges with home made slugs, no attempt was made in the area to manufacture any other war munitions. In the battalion there were some concrete land mines made and also bombs or mines from cartwheel boxes and metal pipes. Explosives of any sort to load or fill such weapons were not just to be got.

I joined the I.R.B. in Longford town. As well as I can remember, it was the Brigade O/C., Tom Reddington, who swore me into the organisation. I cannot now remember the year or the date. Four or five of us from the company area were brought into Longford to be sworn in. I took the I.R.B. oath, but I was never asked to attend any meeting of this

organisation afterwards and, with the exception of the few men from my own company area, I did not know any of the other members. We had no circle locally, nor did we pay any subscription towards any fund of this organisation.

There were no spies shot in my area and I have no knowledge of the working of the Volunteer Intelligence system.

Signed: Joseph F. Dennigan

(Joseph F. Dennigan)

Date: 22. 12. 55

22.12.55

Witness: Matthew Barry

(Matthew Barry) Comd't.

