

W.S. 1,373

ORIGINAL

BUREAU OF MILITARY HISTORY 1913-21

BURO STAIRE MILEATA 1913-21

No. W.S. 1,373

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BUREAU OF MILITARY HISTORY, 1913-21.

STATEMENT BY WITNESS.

DOCUMENT NO. W.S. 1,373

Witness

Edward Balfe,
28 Shannon Hill,
Enniscorthy,
Co. Wexford.

Identity.

Acting O/C. Wexford Brigade, 1920.

Subject.

Irish Volunteer activities,
Enniscorthy, Co. Wexford, 1913-1921.

Conditions, if any, Stipulated by Witness.

Nil

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STATEMENT BY EDWARD BALFE28 Shannon Hill, Enniscorthy, Co. Wexford.

It was in 1913, when a few of the boys - after attending their Irish language classes in the Gaelic League Rooms - met with a few other lads. There were about twelve in all and they were discussing the arming of Northern Ireland which was then going on apace. It was suggested by Thomas Doyle of the Shannon that we should lose no time in forming and arming a fighting force in Enniscorthy. This was agreed to unanimously and we held our first meeting in the Gaelic League Rooms, Lower Church St. at which the following names were taken for membership:- Patrick Fitzpatrick, Richard King, James Maher, Edward Balfe (myself), Thomas Doyle, Thomas Hearne, Philip Murphy, Larry de Lacy and five or six others whose names I cannot remember. Temporary appointments were made. I was appointed captain and I cannot recall who held the other ranks of 1st and 2nd Lieutenant and adjutant. It was decided to name this organisation "The Irish Brigade". A couple of months later we took residence in a clubhouse in Mary St. which was occupied by about 10 members. Some of them I soon discovered were members of the I.R.B. and, as time went on, some of our members were absorbed into its ranks.

This place became very attractive and entirely free of charge to anyone interested in taking part in any of the activities which were carried out there. These included military exercises, primarily rifle drill with dummy guns, signalling, squad drill, physical culture, friendly boxing bouts, marathon racing, and an occasional dance. Our membership in a short time had more than trebled. This extended into the year 1914 when the Volunteer organisation was

officially launched by The O'Rahilly at a public meeting in the Abbey Square. This new organisation began to build up rapidly and "The Irish Brigade" was assimilated into its ranks, the members joining one or other of the three companies being formed, according to their choice. Jack Whelan was captain of A/ Company and Alex Doyle captain of C/Company. All companies seemed to develop a genuine flair for parades. There was no lack of instructors to put them through the various military operations.

In 1915, I held the rank of sergeant in B/Company and was requested to attend and take part in the deliberations of a brigade meeting at which it was announced that Mr. Jameson Davis, Killabeg, about $2\frac{1}{2}$ miles from Enniscorthy, had made representations for a commission in the Volunteers and promised that he would arm the local Volunteers if accepted. This was put to a vote and narrowly passed; this was the only brigade meeting which I was to attend, but I know that he never succeeded in assuming any control whatever in the ranks of the I.R.A. as there was a sense of suspicion as to his sincerity.

However, the idea of getting some equipment and more military experience prompted me to go into the ranks of the Redmond Volunteers which started two or three weeks later. Jameson Davis now succeeded in his quest to gain control of this party and became their colonel. He had no military experience; his officers were Thomas Ryan, ex-British army commandant (a local business man), and M. Kelly, a local chemist, was lieutenant. They were joined about three months afterwards by Captain Ekersley (this may be spelt Eckersly). He was an Englishman who was brought here specially to train the company. The colonel would inspect and address the

parade periodically on Sundays. It was about the month of February 1916, when he revealed his true colours and told the parade that he had been out to the front visiting four or five members of the company who had joined the British army and were fighting side by side with the British forces, and that those men would like to see more of us out there. This statement brought looks from several in the ranks, and he immediately dropped the subject and refrained ever after from making any reference to the British army, where we would have got the promised guns, no doubt. However, the company kept together up to the time of the Rising, when it then faded out of existence.

A few days before the insurrection broke out, myself and Seamus Doyle accidentally met in the street. He seemed to be depressed about something. He stopped me momentarily and said in a low voice: "Ned, are you with us?" Unhesitatingly, I replied "Yes, I never had any other intention". He then went away without uttering another word. I knew from that moment that things were about to warm up. Three days more had passed before the early morning of Thursday, 27th April 1916, when Captain Michael Cahill of C/Company, Irish Volunteers - who lived not very far from me - came along kicking doors on his way, including my door, and shouting "Come on, come on, the Boys are out". Myself and four other brothers leaped from our beds and hurried towards the town. The first sign of hostilities I saw was that all the poles in my immediate vicinity had their telegraph lines cut down. I was directed to the Athenaeum which now had become our new headquarters, and had been taken over much earlier that morning. The building was crowded with the local Volunteers and men who came from outlying districts during the day to join up. Men were put on outpost duty at strategic points a distance

from the town, while sentries took up their positions about the town. Trees were felled and trenches dug at vantage points on roads. A party of cycle scouts were operating, paying particular attention to any infiltration of strangers. The whole military structure was rapidly built on a purely military basis. The R.I.C. Barracks in the Abbey Square commanded a field of fire covering the Shannon Quay, the Wexford road and the Turret-Rocks, overlooking the town. From another angle of the barracks, their field of fire covered to the top of Castle Hill, all within effective range. The Athenaeum is situated in Castle St. flanked by one other building. It was highly dangerous for anyone to expose himself at this street corner without coming under intermittent fire. I approached the brigadier, Seamus Rafter, about this nuisance and advised that the barracks should be attacked and taken. I pointed out that none of the windows of this three-storied house were barricaded and, as they had no means of getting any material to do so, I considered the position of the R.I.C. force there untenable, but the brigadier disagreed and said: "They are locked up there and are safe enough".

The next place I found myself was on top of the Turret Rocks, overlooking the barracks and in close range with a squad of riflemen. A few rounds were fired through the barracks windows from loopholes we had made in a ditch surmounting the hill, and soon afterwards an ambulance arrived at the barrack door and a policeman was carried out to it by four others. It was Constable Grace; he had been wounded in the leg. As the ambulance drove away, these men ran into the barrack again, but we had no intention of firing on them.

The following day, 28th April 1916, a military police unit was inaugurated and its special duty was to look after

the pubs. and to see that they were properly conducted and that no member of the Volunteer organisation would be on such premises under any circumstances.

Well, so far as could be seen, this order was strictly observed. The men appointed to this duty were of the elder class of our supporters and wore a red band on the right arm. Nobody was allowed to leave the town without an official permit and vouchers for provisions were given to deserving people. Late on Friday evening there was a call for Volunteers to relieve the garrison in Ferns, six miles from Enniscorthy where, apparently, there were not sufficient men available for relief duty. Between 25 and 30 were selected from those who answered the call and were soon on their way to Ferns under Captain Paul Galligan. Having to follow a roundabout route, increasing the distance, as the main road to Ferns was barricaded in a number of places. On our arrival there I saw the R.I.C. Barracks (which had been evacuated two days previously) occupied now by the Volunteers, and the Republican flag fluttering above the rooftop.

In the afternoon of Sunday a motor car was seen in the distance carrying a white flag. When it approached our first outpost it was halted and then allowed to pass through into the village where the occupants made known that P.H. Pearse and his staff had surrendered and were prisoners in Dublin. They then proceeded on their mission to Enniscorthy; incidentally, I recognised the policeman who was bearer of this news. His name was Drake. He was stationed in Enniscorthy some years previously. This news had to be verified by an eyewitness of our own. Seamus Doyle, Executive Council, went to Dublin and saw P.H. Pearse in a prison cell lying on a mattress on the floor.

The news of the surrender set men busy in search of suitable hiding places for their rifles, shotguns and ammunition, etc.

This was only a temporary disruption and those of us who were left after mass arrests and deportation did all in our power to keep things going for a future day. In a matter of about two months, the companies were on parade again although in diminished numbers for a time.

The year 1917 was spent chiefly in building up new strength and some new officers were appointed to replace those who had gone to Ballykinlar, Frongoch and other places of detention.

A recruiting meeting held by Infantry and R.A.F. officers in the Abbey Square attracted a large crowd and from a platform the officers addressed the gathering and showed films depicting life in the trenches, but no combative scenes were shown. At the conclusion, an officer called for recruits to come on the platform but nobody answered the call. It appeared that people went there just through curiosity. About six weeks later certain loyalists received their conscription papers. They were frantic about this and vowed that they would not go into the army. One of them was a book-keeper where I worked for years. We were on good terms, but he quickly developed an abhorrence of me. The other man, an office hand in an adjacent firm, but almost under the same management, was also highly upset and came into the department where I was engaged to give vent to his feelings. He said among other things that he would join the army and leave me behind. I told him he was a coward and that if I was as loyal as he purported to be I wouldn't be a conscript. The manager put him out and told him to go back to his own place.

Barely a month had passed when, by accident, I saw a soldier with a rifle and fixed bayonet pass the main gate. It was too late to make a run for it before the place was surrounded. I ran into a cellar where there were about 25 boxes of bacon stored and also some empty bacon boxes, one of which I got into with its bottom turned upwards. There was no visual difference between the box I was in and the rest. The cellar having been well searched, they left, but the book-keeper I referred to (Fred Owens) sent the soldiers back again saying "he is there". The search went on again and failed. A work-man, Patrick Fitzpatrick, locked the place up as usual and threw the bunch of keys through a cat-hole and I let myself out when it was dusky enough.

1918. The Co. Council quarry at Ryland was raided and a quantity of gelignite taken.

1919. I was appointed commandant of 1st Battalion, Wexford Brigade. Officers were ordered to sleep out in compliance with general order from G.H.Q. Some newly-formed country companies lacked competent instructors and the townsmen had to go to the country to alleviate the position there till such time as they could act on their own initiative.

About the month of March 1920, I was elected brigade commandant, Wexford Brigade, in succession to T.D. O'Sionoid, after a persuasive debate. I had already been engaged preparing plans for an attack on Clonroche R.I.C. Barracks, six miles from Enniscorthy, in accordance with our former brigadier's orders. All particulars of the proposed attack had to be furnished to G.H.Q. for sanction. Married men were not to be engaged in any dangerous operation, but these men insisted on being in the vanguard and could not be left out of it, irrespective of the consequence. On the night of 24th

April the attack began. Our whole dependance lay in the use of tailed grenades to blast the slates off the roof. The bombing party occupied positions at the rere of barracks which offered the best and nearest cover, but unfortunately, a fierce wind blew and no amount of human energy could land the grenades on the target. Grenades thrown from a loophole in the barracks prevented us from getting close enough to use our heavy cart-box bombs to blast the door in. The police constantly sent up Verey light signals which illuminated the scene and we were forced to abandon the attack.

An order from G.H.Q. for the burning of evacuated R.I.C. barracks was carried out during August 1920. The barracks burned in the brigade area included: Oylegate, Camolin, Galbally, Killanne and Riverchapel. As a reprisal for the burning of Oylegate Barracks, the Seamus Rafter Hall, Lower Church St., was raided by a patrol of the Devonshire Regiment. They rushed into the Hall shouting "hands up" several times, but nobody took any heed, thinking it was some of the members playing tricks, which often happened before; but, to our consternation, it was real. There were about 14 members present and, by the time personnel and premises were searched, there were aching arms. After a long time, a few old men, unable to endure the strain, were allowed to drop their arms. Having finished their job, the Devons withdrew, only to return about 20 minutes later in their fury, armed with pickaxes. Luckily, no one was in the Hall. The billiards table was smashed to pieces, its heavy slabs being reduced to rubble. On the front door and wall written with chalk were the words: "Reprisal for Oylegate".

15th June. Percival Lea Wilson, D.I., R.I.C., shot dead in Gorey under direction of G.H.Q. officers, viz: Frank

Thornton and Liam Tobin. Joseph McMahon and Jack Whelan also took part in the shooting and Liam O'Leary was one of the scouts. Reports had been received in Enniscorthy of Lea Wilson's aggressive attitude towards people who were forced to remain on the street even under rain when frequent and unnecessary raids were carried out for the sake of upsetting the household.

J. Morrissey, a rural postman, was also shot. He was known to be a spy; he had ignored previous warnings as to his behaviour. According to reliable sources, he told his mother that he didn't expect to be home again.

Information was received that James Doyle, who lived near Ballindaggin, was giving information to the enemy. A Volunteer, James Whelan (Jigger) was dressed in a British officer's wartime uniform and sent to interrogate him. Doyle freely gave all the information he knew and, in addition, he willingly led the disguised officer on a walk pointing out the homes of Volunteer officers and other prominent men during the dark hours of night. He was put on trial and sentenced to death by shooting. His clergy was sent for to reconcile him, after which the sentence was duly carried out. A card on his breast bore the words: "Spies beware".

Constable Jones, R.I.C. was shot dead in a publichouse in Bunclody. It was a habitual practice of his, when having a drink at the bar, to impose himself on company and introduce some quarrelsome point of a political nature; if they didn't approve of his point of view, he would hustle them about.

One Sunday in the afternoon I was spending a few hours on Rosslare Strand and happened to meet Dr. Ryan with another gentleman named O'Sullivan who, I understand, afterwards qualified in the same profession. They gave me information

concerning Hook Head Lighthouse and the kind of material that would be found there. I passed on the information and the following night, the boys, having secured two lorries, were off to the lighthouse where they took away about 15 cwt. of Tonite and 5000 electric detonators. A large box of this Tonite was sent by rail to Waterford. The box was damaged in transit and the consignee had to gather some of the contents which had fallen out at the Railway Goods Store.

During the Emergency 1946, I handed over 192 of the above detonators to the National troops stationed in Wexford town who used them when training about 30 members of a demolition party twice weekly in Enniscorthy at the time.

A raid took place at the Enniscorthy railway siding and 800 gallons of petrol taken and removed to O'Toole's, Ballingale Mills, Ballycarney, where it was stored for I.R.A. use. It was difficult to get supplies at the time and it was generally believed that this scarcity was created to restrict Volunteer activities.

Early in October 1920, I was arrested in a house in Irish Street with 3 or 4 others. We were arranged in single file with intervals of 5 to 6 yards between us. I was placed behind the rest. We were then marched off to the R.I.C. barracks between two files of soldiers keeping our hands up from the moment of arrest. I had not gone many yards when the soldiers on either side began using their bayonets stabbing me severely all over the body. We were ordered to take our hands down after we entered the R.I.C. Barracks where our names and addresses were taken. We then lined up as before and proceeded to the Courthouse. I received several clouts on the way. We were shown into dark flag-floored cells. As I stepped in unaware of a soldier's presence there, he delivered a heavy

punch flush to my face which sent me reeling backwards. The officers in charge of the garrison were Captain Yeo and a Lieutenant Yeo. The latter was a villain; he would enter my cell for questioning and kick my shins for not standing to attention and said that I would leave that place in a paste-board box. The soldiers were free to come in whenever they liked, sometimes under the influence of drink, and ask "Where is your company tonight?" On three occasions a revolver was forced into my mouth.

During the three consecutive mornings of detention there all prisoners were washed by the soldiers. The mornings were cold and frosty and prisoners were compelled to stand one at a time on a concrete patch. The water was not spared; there were buckets of it thrown with such force that it was impossible to keep balance; a hard scrubbing brush was also used. When washed, the order "run to your cell" was given and three soldiers, at about 7 yards interval, in turn would direct a swinging blow, but sometimes they didn't land, as a little extra speed would be reserved for the critical moment in passing. The Tommies enjoyed this kind of sport and had many laughs at us. There was nothing to dry ourselves with but part of our clothes. We got no rations from the military; all our food was brought in from our homes. The day we were shifted from the Courthouse, the Lieutenant saw a piece of bread in my cell. He advised me to take it with me, saying I would be glad of that before I got any more.

We left by lorries, and a couple of other prisoners were picked up at Wexford Militia Barracks. One of them was Joe Quinsey of Kilmuckridge. We were then brought to Rosslare Pier and boarded a destroyer, H.M.S. Valorous, and taken to Cobh where we descended a rope ladder to a small motor boat

and were brought to Cork where we spent two days in the Bridewell Barracks. On the night of the second day we were handcuffed in pairs and roughly helped into a lorry which brought us to the Military Detention Barracks. On the way two soldiers stuck into me about Gaelic football. They didn't speak as in a social conversation, and I felt that trouble was brewing. Finally, they asked me did I think I was going to beat the British Empire, but thank God, the lorry was slowly pulling up at its destination and I was not pressed for the answer. They had Kerry accents.

After a few weeks had passed, myself and Mike Parkes of Blackwater, Enniscorthy, with a batch of other men were brought for trial, having to walk through a military encampment where soldiers shouted to the escort: "shoot them, shoot them", using their usual filthy language. This had to be endured on three occasions before our case was dealt with. A few days afterwards, a number of us were brought by military tender to the jail. On the way we were ordered to lie down. An officer produced a revolver and, showing it to me, said: "if there is a shot fired, this is for you".

Some months later, very early in the morning before the people of Cork appeared on the streets, about 30 prisoners in lorries - handcuffed in pairs - were on the way to the railway station. The man I was handcuffed to was an ex-British soldier. He was in a sorrowful mood when he said: "There is my home with the curtains drawn; little does she know that I am passing by the door now". When we arrived at the railway station, a train of luggage vans was waiting for us. We were locked in semi-darkness and had no idea where we were going to till we arrived at journey's end - Kilkenny Jail. On the way we were given some bread and corned beef and would have been

glad of water to wash it down.

The Rev. Fr. Delahunty was a prisoner with us for some months and, for privacy sake or some other reason, he was shifted to a cell in the hospital section of the jail. Amongst other things sent to him was a cake of bread and this was not cut into the usual four parts for other prisoners. Inside the cake was a few hacksaws. He was heard sawing the window bars and sent back to his mates again.

In the wing of the jail which we occupied there were two rows of disused cells on the top balcony, one on either side, to prevent access to them. Strands of barbed wire only a few inches apart were stretched from the balcony on one side to the balcony on the opposite side. A sufficient number of those strands were cut to allow entry into this prohibited place which gave us a good view over a large area of the surrounding high wall and particularly of St. Kieran's Diocesan Seminary. Two of the students there were attracted by our presence at a gable end window and one of them brought out two flags and signalled a few words and then inquired for Fr. Delahunty's welfare. He happened to be by my side and, through a broken pane of glass, I was able to communicate with them, prompted by His Reverence.

I was allowed the use of a camera but the want of a dark room made the work of developing films very difficult. A printing frame had to be improvised by somebody else who managed to solve the problem by cutting a piece of window glass with a scissors under water. One side and top of the glass was already rectangular and two cuts of the scissors finished the job remarkably well and may have been an act of providence. The frame was made from a piece of bedboard. Many snaps of individuals and groups were taken. It was decided to give our spiritual director a souvenir and this was in the form of

a number of photographs taken head and shoulders individually and fixed on a fairly thick sheet of white paper in suitable formation, with Fr. Delahynty seated as centre piece. The artistic design was by P. Quinlan, Mohorough, Annacarty, Co. Tipperary.

A committee was formed to consider means of escape. Several suggestions were put forward including burrowing our way out, which was adopted. Plans for this were discussed and immediately put into action. Three of four solitary confinement cells underground were the objective. They were apparently inaccessible; at least, so the authority there thought, as the winding staircase in the centre of the corridor which led to them was packed to its full with barbed wire. But another way of approach was found, viz: by lifting a couple of floor boards in the condemned cell and dropping into the solitary confinement cell beneath. This was the nearest and safest point to work from to the outer walls. Calculations were made so as to direct the tunnel to a point beneath its foundation. Our equipment consisted of two dinner knives with half the blades broken off to give them more strength. They were ideal for the job as only a short tool could be used when lying in the prone position. We operated in shifts at a depth of 12 feet approximately. The ground was of a shingly nature and the danger of it caving in behind the man inside was ever imminent. This threat was overcome to a certain extent by propping it up with laths made from bedboards and erected at intervals of about three feet and at bad spots much closer. A bag made from a blanket and fastened to the middle of a rope was used to remove the excavated material. A slight jerk of the rope was the signal to pull the loaded bag out and dump its contents into the cells. A similar signal was used for the bag to be drawn

back and refilled. This went on day after day till we reached the outside of the jail wall. Boring to the surface was done at an angle of 45 degrees to make it easy and more speedy in scrambling out. The final 18 inches or so of the surface was left as a support for any passing vehicle that might come too close to the wall. The opportune moment had now arrived to break jail.

The warder on duty was invited to a cell to play draughts. This was not unusual. After some time the warder's suspicion was aroused by the quietness of the place, but it was too late. He was gagged, tied up and locked up. Fr. Delahunty was the first to leave; those serving life sentences followed, then the men who made the tunnel. The remainder followed in succession. About 28 in all escaped.

During the dark winter nights a short piece of candle was allowed for reading purposes, as there was no lighting system installed in the cells. This was very much in our favour, as a number of candles were kept in stock to be used at the underground work where it was perpetually dark, and progress would have been extremely difficult, if not impossible without them. When the breakaway was effected, those first to emerge from the tunnel took up positions in front and rear of the adjacent houses to prevent any scene that might occur and possibly attract the enemy's attention. Those who came after walked through the street with an unconcerned attitude to a pre-allotted assembly point for each county where an appointed leader took over.

Our party consisted of a group of four, viz: M. Kirwan, J. Whelan, Liam O'Leary and myself. The night was very dark and every vehicle that came in either direction forced us to quit the road by hastily crossing a ditch and sometime to fall sprawling into a brake of briars or into a field below the

road level. It was impossible to see where we were going. Liam O'Leary lost touch with us and took refuge in a farmer's house for the night. The rest of us reached Ballymurphy where we met friends who had been at a coursing meeting there that day. They drove us the remainder of the journey home to Enniscorthy where I spent the night in the home of another friend who informed me that the Wexford Brigade had been divided into two separate brigades, north and south. The next morning I decided to go to a Volunteer training camp at Kyle 9 miles from Enniscorthy where I spent little more than a week when Nicholas Murphy, later Chief Supt. Garda Síochána, sent me to the Blackstairs Mountain in charge of a foundry where a blast furnace and all the other necessary equipment were installed. Casting and moulding was done once a week and an average of 25 grenades made. This work was done by three experienced foundry workers, viz: Patrick Farrell, James Goff and Patrick Boyne.

During the time on the mountain I had an individual course in the manufacture of explosives under ex-Christian Brother Donal O'Kavanagh. The recipes are still in my possession relating to fulminate of mercury for detonators, &c. Irish cheddar, T.N.T. war flour and war flour 3. I also have some tonite and electric detonators taken from Hook Head Lighthouse.

Signed: Edward Balfe
(Edward Balfe)

Date: 12th March 1956

12th March, 1956.

Witness: Sean Brennan. Lieut. Col.

(Sean Brennan) Lieut.-Col.

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