

ORIGINAL

BUREAU OF MILITARY HISTORY 1913-21
BURO STAIRÉ MILEATA 1913-21
No. W.S. 1,415

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BUREAU OF MILITARY HISTORY, 1913-21.

STATEMENT BY WITNESS.

DOCUMENT NO. W.S. 1415.

Witness

Michael Hartney,
14 Prospect Villas,
Rosbrien,
Limerick.

Identity.

Company Captain.

Subject.

Activities of E. Company, Irish Volunteers,
Limerick, 1913-1921.

Conditions, if any, Stipulated by Witness.

Nil.

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STATEMENT BY MICHAEL HARTNEY

14 Prospect Villas, Rosbrien, Limerick.

I joined the Volunteers in 1913 when they were started in Limerick. There were almost 1000 members until late in 1914, when an attempt was made to get the Volunteers to meet members of Mr. Redmond's Irish Party, and a minority felt that the movement, being non-political and non-sectarian, should not be used for such a purpose, which would be in direct conflict with the Constitution of the Irish Volunteers Organisation. An organiser of the United Irish League was primarily responsible for the 'split' that ensued, and his name was Mr. O'Connor, who had come home from Boston and was appointed to the position of organiser through the influence of the Ancient Order of Hibernians. Only about 90 men remained with the Irish Volunteers, the others being supporters of Mr. Redmond. The Editors of the local press - "The Limerick Leader", "Chronicle" and "Munster News" - were strongly pro-Redmond and lost no opportunity of heaping ridicule on the Irish Volunteers whom they described as pro-German and "tin-pike" soldiers.

Time justified the action of those who remained loyal to the Constitution of the Irish Volunteers. There were four bands in Limerick, all of which gave their support to the Redmondites, and we had to start a fife and drum band of our own, which played national airs during route marches.

As time went on, recruits commenced to join our ranks. It was observed that those who sought admission to the Irish Volunteers were of the better type, sober, respectable young men. It was, in some instances, tantamount to leaving a job to join, because the employers, in the main, were bitterly opposed to the Irish Volunteers.

On Whit Sunday, 1915, the members of the Dublin Brigade visited Limerick, led by all the senior officers and members of the Volunteer Executive, many of whom were executed after the insurrection in 1916. An organised gang of hooligans, all members of the National Volunteers, took up positions in laneways from where they threw stones at the marching Dublin men. This action was the outcome of articles which had appeared in the local newspapers for a week prior to the coming of the Volunteers from Dublin. What made matters worse was, many Limerick men in the English army and fighting in France were killed, and the 'separation' element were very bitter. It was sad to see men like P.H. Pearse, Thomas MacDonagh, Ned Daly and others stoned in the streets of Limerick.

When the Dubliners were entraining at the railway station an organised attack was made, the idea being to disarm the Volunteers, or some of them. Were it not that the men were disciplined, blood would have been spilt, but the magnificent demeanour of the Volunteers won the respect of the decent-minded people of Limerick. One young man was deprived of his rifle. Father Mangan, a Redemptorist, followed the men who took the rifle and wrested it from them, assisted by Mr. Thos. Duggan, Secretary of the Holy Family Confraternity of which the priest was Director. After this incident, things were assuming an ugly appearance, and Major James McInerney of the Limerick Regiment, ordered his men to fire a round in the air, with a warning that if the mob did not disperse, the next round would be on them. The effect was as desired and the men then proceeded to their trains without further molestation.

Early in 1916, the two corps of Volunteers had route marches arranged - the Irish Volunteers to O'Callaghan's Mills, Co. Clare, a distance of 14 miles, and the National Volunteers

to Patrickswell, 5 miles from the city. The former body started off after 6 o'clock Mass at the Jesuits' Church, and the latter at 2 o'clock. The Redmondites arrived back home around 6 o'clock, many under the influence of drink and accompanied by an undesirable crowd. At 10.30, the Irish Volunteers' band was heard crossing the Mathew Bridge and playing "Clare Dragoons", every man soldierly, erect and sober. When we arrived in Rutland St. a huge crowd awaited and we felt an attack was about to be made on us. Instead, for the first time, a cheer went up and the people fell in and marched with us to the centre of O'Connell St. where we were dismissed, to the accompaniment of another lusty cheer. Truly, the tide had turned. Later, we learned that the coming back from a short route march in a drunken condition disgusted the people who had waited for the Redmondites. Of course, there were many decent, sober men amongst them, and during the following week, some of those joined our ranks.

From this incident until Easter Sunday 1916, the people realised that the Irish Volunteers were following in the footsteps of patriots and the National Volunteers were merely hangers-on to a political party.

The Limerick Volunteers were to march to Newcastlewest and receive arms which were to be brought from Kerry when the German boat, which was to arrive there prior to the Rising and as a consequence were trained to long route marches for some months. It was to be our duty to distribute rifles and ammunition on our way back to Limerick.

On Easter Sunday, we were at the Fianna Hall, ready to march out, but were kept some hours late, while officers were debating whether they would cancel the parade or not. At 3 o'clock we moved off and proceeded to Killonan, where we

remained until the following day. About 1 o'clock on the Monday, Miss Agnes Daly arrived and delivered a dispatch from Sean McDermott, which instructed Colonel Colivet to go into action. We were served out with 50 rounds of .303 rifle ammunition and formed up for a march back to Limerick. We thought we would be fighting that evening, but when we arrived at the Fianna Hall (off Barrington St.) we were told to 'stand to arms in our homes' and then dismissed.

We (Volunteers) were not aware of the countermanding order of Eoin MacNeill, or that the ship conveying arms had been intercepted by the British, but the officers were. They held a meeting and decided by a majority that there would be no fight. The following voted to commence hostilities:- Captains Liam Forde, Michael Brennan, Major James McInerney, Lieut. John Lane, Section-commander John McSweeney (the latter was I.R.B. Centre for a circle in the city and a member of what was known as the Civil Committee). Sean Ó Murthuile, who was in Limerick at the time and attached to our regiment, also voted to fight. Day after day we were told to be in readiness, but the week went by without any order to take the field.

In 1917, after the East Clare election, when Commandant de Valera was elected, there was a feeling in Limerick that the existing Volunteers would not fight, owing to the officers in charge being more interested in politics than revolution, and it was decided to start a second battalion, which was done with the help of Mr. Ernest Blythe, Mr. Peadar McMahon and Mr. Peadar Dunne, the latter two being from Dublin and sent to work at Daly's Bakery after being released from Frongoch in December 1916. Five companies - A, B, C, D, and E - were organised and received official recognition from Headquarters. Peadar Dunne was appointed Commandant with Peadar McMahon

Vice-Commandant; Robert Byrne, adjutant and Martin Barry, Q.M. I became company captain of E. Company.

Intensive raiding for arms was carried out. British soldiers were contacted, and rifles and ammunition purchased; drill and manoeuvres and route marches engaged in, while lectures on guerilla warfare were frequently delivered. The 1st Battalion did not function and some of them transferred to the 2nd Battalion.

The first clash with the enemy occurred on 6th April 1919. The battalion adjutant had been arrested for having a revolver which was found in his house during a police raid. The weapon was not serviceable, but being in possession warranted arrest. Robert Byrne went on hunger strike in Limerick Prison, was daily forcibly fed by the prison physician, Dr. McGrath. A letter was sent to the latter, threatening his death, and he refused to continue the forcible feeding, and Byrne was transferred to the Limerick Union Hospital. On visiting him we saw that only three R.I.C. men and a prison warder were in charge and it was decided to rescue him.

On a Sunday evening, the rescue party, which numbered six and who were all members of E. Company, arrived as visitors at the hospital and at 3 o'clock a whistle sounded, the Volunteers closed with the R.I.C., a shot was fired and Byrne was wounded, while, as the outcome, a Sergeant O'Brien and Constable Spillane were fired on by the Volunteers, the former shot dead and the latter seriously wounded. During the melee which ensued, Byrne was taken from the hospital ward to a waiting car and it was only then it was discovered that he was wounded. He was taken to a house a mile away and died next day.

On 31st January 1920, a police raid resulted in eight men being arrested, and I was one of them. We were conveyed to

Cork Prison and later to Wormwood Scrubbs, England, having been served with Deportation Order's while en route/a naval sloop. Joe McGrath of the Dublin Brigade was Prison Commandant. He was taken to Brixton Jail during the early hours one morning and we did not know what happened to him. An interview with the Governor was demanded and secured. When we learned where he was, we demanded his return. This was not acceded to, so we went on hunger strike on 18th March 1920. After four days, we were told that Joe McGrath would agree that four of us be sent to Brixton to keep him company. Tom Byrne, (Commandant in Dublin Brigade), Peadar Dunne, Seamus Gubbins and myself were selected and brought to Brixton.

We arranged an escape from there and were to get away on a given day, but a hunger strike took place at Wormwood Scrubbs and we were ordered to join in. My companions did not do so, hoping to get permission for the escape from H.Q., but I felt that it was my duty to go on strike and I did so. After seven days I was offered parole, owing to the serious illness of my wife, which I accepted on the order of Joe McGrath. I was four weeks home when I read in the newspapers that my companions had gone on strike. I at once sent a telegram to the English Home Office asking for a travel voucher to return. This arrived in a few days and I proceeded to Brixton, went into prison and hunger struck at once. The other prisoners had been removed to hospital and had escaped from there, the Self-Determination League paying their fares home. They kept me for 12 days and released me. I refused to go to the hospital and demanded my fare home. This was refused but later given me. I was the only man who came home without expense to the Self-Determination League, a fact which Mr. Sean McGrath, Old Kentish Town, London, Secretary S.D.L., commented on in a letter to the Irish morning Press.

Engagements carried out after my arrest and while I was in jail by E. Company included - attack on Sergeant Willwood, R.I.C. on the night of my arrest. A short time later Conables Oakeley, Murphy, and two other Black and Tans were attacked in Henry St.. The execution of a spy named Boland. Attack on a Private Jones at the Crescent, Limerick. Bomb attack on R.I.C. in Carey's Road. Several raids on railway stations to secure British supplies and helping adjoining companies in their areas. It is difficult now to enumerate after such a long time.

During my period in Jail, Richard O'Dwyer, a publican of Catherine St., and a Miss Johnson, Thomondgate, were killed by R.I.C. on Monday night, 2nd February 1920.

On coming home I at once got attached to my company and, after two weeks, had to go 'on the run' again. British soldiers who came to my shop in 16 Davis St. became friendly and I suggested that they might sell me rifles and ammunition. A few agreed to do so and brought .303 rifle ammunition and, on a few occasions, rifles which had been smuggled out of New Barracks (now Sarsfield Barracks).

Commandant Peadar Dunne, now back in Limerick, ordered me to bring a letter to Tadhg Barry in Cork (it was sealed, and I learned it contained material for a lecture and an I.R.A. dispatch). Mr. Taylor, who was local agent for Eason & Co., and in charge of the newsagency shop at Limerick railway station, travelled to Limerick Junction every morning by motor car to collect Dublin and Cork morning newspapers, and I asked him to give me a seat to the Junction, from where I intended to entrain for Cork. The train drivers' strike against British troops being carried was on and rails had been removed from the line at the time between Limerick city and Limerick

Junction. As I was about to ^{go to} Mr. Taylor's car, District Inspector Craig, B.I.C., William St. Barracks, Limerick, arrived and got into the car with Mr. Taylor which, of course, made it impossible for me to travel with him. I cycled to Cork, instead, got my message to Tadhg Barry and returned home.

Barry was a prominent Transport Union official, a Gaelic Leaguer and I.R.A. man. He was arrested a short time later and interned at Ballykinlar. In December 1920 (I think on the 8th) when prisoners were being released, he with others were near the barbed wire around the camp, waving goodbye to his comrades, when a British soldier raised his rifle, fired and killed him. The soldier stated, at an inquiry, that he thought Barry was trying to escape.

On the day I arrived in Cork with the letter for Tadhg Barry, Police Commissioner Colonel Smyth was shot dead in the County Club, Cork, and District Inspector Craig, who was in company with him, was wounded. D.I. Craig must have been told by Mr. Taylor that I was to have travelled with him in the car because, a few days later, on the morning of 30th June 1920, my shop and dwellinghouse was blown up by a land mine by R.I.C. and a notice nailed to the door read: "These reprisals are being taken on I.R.A. officers to avenge the death of a very gallant Irishman, Colonel Smyth". I had not any knowledge that Smyth was to be shot. My first intimation was when I read it in the papers.

Some time in June or July, an I.R.A. man who had been wounded and captured after an attack on Cappawhite R.I.C. Barracks, Co. Limerick, was placed in Limerick County Infirmary. Word was sent to me and I was warned that four R.I.C. men were guarding the prisoner. With five others, I went to the Infirmary, saw the doctor and demanded to be brought to the

ward in which the prisoner was. We were armed and intended, if necessary, to deal with the R.I.C. To our surprise, when we went into the ward, there were not any police there. They had decided the prisoner was too seriously wounded to be removed. After some persuasion, the house surgeon agreed to help in preparing the wounded man for removal. We had an enclosed hearse outside the infirmary into which the stretcher on which the man lay was placed. We drove him to Mrs. Benson's in the Crescent, Limerick. Here, he was treated by the doctor, who was most co-operative. Later, by order of Dr. Devane of Limerick, he was removed to St. John's Hospital in the Fire Brigade ambulance and nursed to complete cure. The poor fellow thought, when we entered the hospital ward, that we were a Tan or R.I.C. murder gang and asked us not to take him out.

On 15th August 1920, I had arranged to ambush a party of eight Black and Tans at Boherbuoy. These Tans used attend at St. Michael's Protestant Church at 12 o'clock Service and come across the People's Park through Boherbuoy to Edward St. Barracks. I had 20 men in position, but the scouts reported that the Tans were not at Church - the first Sunday for many they were not present. As I was about to dismiss my men two detectives walked down the road and, not to disappoint the men, I ordered the hold-up of the detectives, disarmed them, also taking their notebooks, then tied them up and left them on the road.

Later, lorry loads of R.I.C. and Black and Tans arrived on the scene, broke into houses, started shouting and ill-treating the people. Upwards of forty houses were visited, furniture broken and occupants beaten.

Two houses and shops in High St. were fired and burned to the ground. A Black and Tan named Nathan was killed in

Lord Edward St. as the outcome of the indiscriminate firing by the Crown Forces.

My company area was Carey's Road, which became known locally as 'Hill 60'.

While waiting for one of my men who had borrowed my gun, I was chatting with the Vice-Commandant of the 2nd Battalion - (Sean MacSweeney) - when from apparently nowhere four R.I.C. men confronted me and demanded I put up my hands. I refused and they caught my arms and proceeded to take me to jail. This happened in Carr St. Limerick. On the way to the William St. Police Barracks I threw the two R.I.C. men who held my arms and ran. They opened fire, sending 8 rounds after me, one of which I received in the right heel. Feeling myself getting weak, I ran into a house, out to the yard in the hope of climbing to safety by the wall, but fell and was again in custody. This happened on the 13th October 1920, and I was interned in Bere Island, after having been carried around as a hostage for six months. The order, every time I was put on a lorry, was "In case of attack shoot the hostage".

Before finishing in Bere Island I had been kept in Limerick Co. Gaol, William St. Barracks, Ordnance and New Barracks (Limerick), Rathkeale Courthouse, Buttevant, Cork Prison, Ballyvonane, Spike Island and Bere Island. On 10th December 1921, I was released, having been 15 months in custody.

On arriving home, I at once reported for duty.

Signed: Miscal Hestney

Date: 9th May 1956

Witness: John J. Brady

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