

ORIGINAL

BUREAU OF MILITARY HISTORY 1913-21

BURO STAIRE MILEATA 1913-21

No. W.S. 1,419

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BUREAU OF MILITARY HISTORY, 1913-21.

STATEMENT BY WITNESS.

DOCUMENT NO. W.S. 1419.

Witness

Michael Conway,
The Square,
Rathkeale,
Co. Limerick.

Identity.

Battalion Commandant:

Subject.

Activities of Patrickswell Company, Irish
Volunteers, Co. Limerick,
1913-1921.

Conditions, if any, Stipulated by Witness.

Nil.

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STATEMENT BY MICHAEL CONWAY,
The Square, Rathkeale, Co. Limerick.

I was born at Ballybronogue, Patrickswell, Co. Limerick, in March 1895, and was educated at Patrickswell national school until I was fourteen years of age. After leaving school, I went to work on my father's farm.

During the intervening years up to the formation of the Volunteers in Patrickswell in the year 1913, I was associated with the local G.A.A. club and other national movements. I joined the Volunteers at their inception. They were ably drilled by a local postman, named G. Ward, who had been a sergeant major in the British army. The strength of the company was sixty men. The company, under the command of Ward, was one of the most efficiently drilled in the district, and secured some prizes that were offered for competitions during that period. At that time, no officers were appointed. The instructor in charge usually took command of the unit. As our training progressed, further instructors took over and put us through field exercises and general military exercises. All our instructors were reservists of what was known then as the militia or 5th Munsters. Drilling continued up to the declaration of war against Germany in August 1914 when all our instructors and a number of Volunteers were called to the colours. When they had left, members of the Company were appointed to take over as instructors.

It was around this time that the firm of Messrs. Arthur Guinness, Son and Company, Ltd., subscribed a

sum of £100,000 to the Ulster or Carson's Volunteers, which resulted in a boycott locally of their product - Guinness' stout. For a time, only Murphy's stout was consumed locally but, after a while, the boycott eased. Shortly after the start of the war, when John Redmond, M.P., offered to place the Volunteer force of the country at the disposal of England, the Volunteers ceased to exist in Patrickswell. During the year 1914, I was appointed secretary of the Patrickswell Volunteers' pipers' band which had been formed and was trained by a pipe major from Limerick city. This was a great acquisition to the company during route marches. During the period we got possession of a service rifle from a British soldier, home on leave. It proved a great success in training in the use of arms.

The war against Germany was in full swing, and the sympathy of the majority of the young men in the district was with Germany in her struggle against England, with the result that few recruits were forthcoming to fill the depleted ranks of the British army in the field. There was a general belief at the time that the Irish regiments of the British army were used exclusively for attack. Such was the situation in October 1915 that Lord Wimbourne, then Lord Lieutenant, issued an appeal direct to all young Irishmen to join the British army. The names were supplied by local R.I.C. I received one of these appeals, and I have presented it to the Bureau. Lord Wimbourne's appeal makes interesting reading now when we remember England's struggle then.

At this time, the paper, "Irish Volunteer" was in circulation. An issue dated the 18th September 1915,

has been presented by me to the Bureau. (See reference to report on Galtee camp at meeting of Central Executive on 1st September 1915, at which Commandant P. #. Pearse was Chairman, under the heading of "Headquarters Bulletin.") The paper was subsequently proclaimed illegal owing to its alleged propaganda against England. Other issues then appeared with different titles, but each in turn was prohibited.

Early in 1917, with other members of Patrickswell pipers' band, I helped to reorganise the Volunteers in the area. We were very few at first, numbering eight or nine, but by the end of the year our strength was sixty. I was appointed adjutant; no other officers were appointed at the time. Peadar Dunne, an officer of Limerick city battalion, was our drill instructor. On occasion, we were approached by the R.I.C. who informed us that it was illegal to drill, but we carried on until dismissed. They took the names of all men on parade. By this time, all members were duly sworn, and the company affiliated with headquarters. I issued a receipt for every subscription made by the members to the Volunteer fund. Led by the band, we had route marches to neighbouring areas where we helped in forming new companies or reorganising old ones. By December, Volunteer companies were working in Adare, Kildimo, Mungret and Ballybrown as well as Patrickswell, when they were linked into a battalion.

During this year, with some members of the 4th battalion, West Clare brigade, which included Commandant Ignatius O'Neill, Captain Peadar Lehane (my first cousin) and Peadar O'Loughlin of Liscannor who had been staying at my house for some weeks, evading arrest, I went to

Limerick races. While there, some of the Adare R.I.C. recognised O'Neill, with the result that a rush was made to arrest him. He was rescued, however, with the help of many men who came to his assistance. The R.I.C. obtained reinforcements, and made a baton charge. We resisted the attack, using stones and the laths of a nearby paling. No arrests were made, but that night a force of R.I.C. made their first raid on my house. However, none of us was at home.

Early in 1918, Patrickswell company area was favoured by Limerick city battalion, or the Limerick city regiment as it was called, for field exercises with the Patrickswell company. After one of these exercises on the 3rd March 1918, Patrickswell pipers band accompanied the city battalion, under Commandant Michael Colivet, into town. As the band was returning, the members were attacked at the Crescent, Limerick, by soldiers of the Welsh Fusiliers stationed at the New barracks (now Sarsfield barracks) with bayonets and belts. The members of the band, assisted by an escort of Patrickswell Volunteers, successfully resisted the attack, capturing some weapons and forcing them to retreat to their barracks. Here they were reinforced, after which they carried out a further attack. At this stage, the challenge was taken up by young men, using stones and other missiles. After several hours, the scrap ended with several people being taken to Barrington's Hospital for treatment. Many members of the band were also treated for injuries at the hospital, and many of the instruments were damaged.

To provide new instruments, I organised a sports meeting which received generous support. As a result of police vigilance on a local licensed premises during the

meeting, men entering the premises were noted, and later summoned (for being on licensed premises during prohibited hours) to attend what was the last court held in Patrickswell under British administration. As a reprisal, with other members of the company, I carried out a sniping attack on the R.I.C. barracks that night with shotguns, which resulted in another raid on my house. Next day, I posted a warning notice to all of the local Justices of the Peace who, in the majority, were Protestants. They promptly resigned. When the case against the defendants was called later in the courthouse, the case was dismissed and was not proceeded with. A short time later, we partly wrecked the courthouse by breaking all doors, windows and internal fittings. During this operation, we seized several copies of the "Hue and Cry".

In the meantime, I was appointed company captain. Stephen Moore became 1st lieutenant, and Christopher O'Brien became 2nd lieutenant. I was subsequently elected a member of the then Rural District Council. The company continued its routing activities of drilling and parading during the year. I made a number of home made bombs (pocket size) with powder and shrapnel. With these, another member and myself attacked a police lorry standing outside a public house, while the R.I.C. were inside. When the R.I.C. came out, they opened rifle fire, but we had gone out of sight. Subsequently, a military lorry standing outside a house on the roadside was destroyed by fire by members of the company. The driver and a companion were in a nearby house at the time and were unarmed.

During the general election at the end of the year,

I was appointed director of elections for my battalion area. Dr. Richard Hayes, the Sinn Féin candidate, had an overwhelming majority over his opponent, Thomas Lundon. Subsequent to the elections, enemy raids were carried out on my house. Martial law was later imposed on the area, and it was difficult for me to attend meetings in Limerick city of the brigade council which were held at the Mental Hospital. At this period, many wanted men were in residence there.

While returning to Patrickswell in May 1921 after assisting in trenching roads preparatory to an I.R.A. attack on Kilmallock R.I.C. barracks, I was recognised by a member of the R.I.C. who had been stationed in Patrickswell. I was called on to halt and, when I tried to get away, they opened fire. I was arrested and tried by general court martial, and sentenced to eighteen months imprisonment which I served in Cork and Kilkenny prisons. In Cork prison I met some prominent members of the I.R.A., including a Michael Fitzgerald who later died on hunger strike. Another person I met there was a warder who was a brother of Captain Monteith. I happened to be there when Cork City was burned by Crown forces. In Kilkenny I had Noel Lemass as prison commandant. He later lost his life during the civil war. In Kilkenny I helped in the issue of a daily news bulletin. At the time, a successful escape took place from Kilkenny jail. The warders there were very much in sympathy with the I.R.A. and took out messages. In this way, I got out a code of words which, when used in a letter to me, conveyed much news.

Arising out of the Rineen, Co. Clare, ambush during my imprisonment, a force of military arrived at my home with a quantity of petrol, to burn it down. When my

mother heard the officer in charge giving the order, she told him of my brother who was an invalid in bed. He subsequently called off the destruction of the house. It may be recalled that £1,000 reward was offered for information which would lead to the arrest of Commandant O'Neill following the ambush in question, in which twenty-six casualties were inflicted on the enemy. On the evening of the ambush, Captain P. Lehane, who had taken part, lost his life at Lahinch whilst his father was killed and their home burned down by Crown forces as a reprisal. Commandant O'Neill subsequently married Captain Lehane's sister. Following Commandant O'Neill's death in 1939, a great tribute was paid to him in the issue of the "Clare Champion", dated 7th June, 1939, under the heading, "A Great Soldier". I have given the relevant extract from the "Clare Champion" to the Bureau.

I was released in January 1921 after obtaining a remission of my sentence of eighteen months. As soon as I arrived home, I was appointed battalion commandant, as the previous battalion O/C had very little activity to his credit in the area. One of my first jobs, in order to save my home from destruction, was to notify all local loyalists that their houses would be burned down by the I.R.A. if my house was destroyed by the R.I.C. and Black and Tans. I next had the evacuated R.I.C. barracks in Kildimo and Clarina destroyed by fire, as well as the income tax offices in Adare and a Masonic Hall, No. 333, which was established in 1776, according to a Freemason calendar which we seized there. Members of Patrickswell company assisted in these operations. Public administration by the English virtually ceased, and was gradually being taken over by our own government. See

poster of April 1921 with reference to the payment of rates, issued by L.T. MacCosgair, Minister of Local Government, which I have presented to the Bureau.

By this time, I had worked out an elaborate information service and had intelligence forms typed to assist us in tracing enemy movements. I have presented a number of specimens of these forms to the Bureau.

I had the Sinn Féin courts carried on by the I.R.A. and acted as judge myself in some cases. Thus it continued to the Truce, and with its signing, the tricolour was hoisted on all enemy evacuated posts in the area, with military ceremonial, thus ending the military occupation of part of our country.

After the Truce, I was detailed for a course of military training to the divisional camp at Kilbehenny, Mitchelstown.

In February 1925 I married Miss Mary C. Purcell of Rathkeale. She was actively associated with the West Limerick brigade and was appointed special brigade intelligence officer. Arising out of her father's association with the Fenian movement and his hostility to the R.I.C., he was refused a publican's licence when he purchased a public house in Rathkeale. The licence was only granted to his wife. It may be recalled that an ancestor of the family, named Captain Purcell, was executed at the seige of Limerick.

During martial law period, my wife-to-be would not supply the military (who had commandeered houses in the vicinity) with drink in her public house. Sean Finn, the brigade O/C, requested her to do so later, saying that

it would be compensated for in the intelligence reports which would result.

In her capacity as intelligence officer, she obtained much valuable information, especially from a member of the R.I.C. Perhaps the most important episode in the West Limerick brigade area during the period was a raid by military at Ballyhahill, during which the brigade O/C was killed. Miss Purcell, as she then was, received information of the impending round-up from the R.I.C. and had it conveyed to the column resting in the area - its location there was in the knowledge of the enemy. The column, on receipt of this information decided to withdraw from the area. Commandant Sean Finn remained for a time at a cross-roads house with some companions. They were surprised at seeing the enemy convoy moving towards the house, and decided to retreat out the back. In doing so, they came under fire, with the result that Sean was killed.

During the period, many wanted men, as well as local I.R.A. men on the run, stayed at her house, from which they often looked out at the R.I.C. and Tans raiding houses in the neighbourhood. All during hostilities, her pony and trap were used exclusively for brigade purposes. She also obtained much ammunition and some small arms from soldiers frequenting their premises. In the concluding months, she was detailed to travel to our headquarters in Limerick city with a special party, to obtain permission

to destroy Rathkeale workhouse. This permission was obtained, and the operation carried out by the local company. Some years later, as a result of the burning of the workhouse, I wrote a letter to the "Limerick Leader", pointing out the necessity for an industry in its ruins. Arising out of the same letter, the present meat factory was built, giving employment to some sixty men, many of them old I.R.A. men who took part in the struggle.

With the signing of the Truce, the West Limerick flying column paid my wife an unique compliment, by marching into Rathkeale to her house where each and every one of them paid her a respectful and cherished tribute for the services she rendered in the fight for independence.

SIGNED:

Michael Conway

DATE:

17th May 56

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WITNESS

John J. Daly