

ORIGINAL

BUREAU OF MILITARY HISTORY 1913-21  
BURO STAIRÉ MILE TA 1913-21  
No. W.S. 1441

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BUREAU OF MILITARY HISTORY, 1913-21

STATEMENT BY WITNESS.

DOCUMENT NO. W.S. 1441 . . . .

Witness

Miss Nan Nolan,  
Laragh,  
Ballon,  
Co. Carlow.

Identity.

Captain, Ballon Company, Cumann na mBan.

Subject.

Activities of Ballon Company, Irish Volunteers,  
Co. Carlow. 1915 - Truce.

Conditions, if any, Stipulated by Witness.

Nil.

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Form B S.M. 2

ORIGINAL

BUREAU OF MILITARY HISTORY 1913-21

BÚRO STAIRÉ MILEATA 1913-21

No. W.S. 1,441

STATEMENT BY MISS NAN NOLAN,

Laragh, Ballon, County Carlow.

Ballon, in the summer of 1915, knew there was a war on and believed it was being fought so that small nations like Ireland would be safe. Quite a lot of young boys, including one of my own brothers, had joined the British Army to fight for what they thought was their King and country and the freedom of small nations. Every bit of news that could be got concerning the Allies' victories was hailed with delight. Often on those summer evenings as I learned my lessons, the sound of marching men was heard near the village. We would run up to see them carrying wooden guns. They were called John Redmond's Volunteers, and while the boys at the Front sang "It's a long way to Tipperary", these used sing "Keep the home fires burning". The older people believed all that, and brought us home flags. They were green with a gold harp in the centre and a Union Jack in the corner. The only thing I did not like about Redmond's Volunteers was their band. They did not play sweet music - only the big brass instruments could be heard. They did not play nice tunes like our band played, such as, "The Harp that once through Tara's Halls", "Oft in the Stilly Night", "The Rising of the Moon", etc. Ours was a fife and drum band. My eldest brother, John, was the big drummer in it, and when he came home he played all the tunes on the accordion for us. He had no wish to join the British Army but said he was not afraid to fight.

One day in the harvest of that year a strange man drove into our village with a horse and wagonette. With him were his wife and daughter. When we saw them we ran towards them to get a better look. We did not know anything about cowboys, but we had seen photographs of Buffalo Bill and we thought this was he. That night the whole village was full of excitement. This man was going to have a show, and we were told he could do some conjuring. He wanted the school choir to come and sing at the opening and closing of the show. He also wanted the band to play. At the age of twelve years, it was great to be allowed to stay up late and sing at a show. This man told the choir that the song he wanted them to sing was "A Nation Once Again". We had a great week and the band played their Irish airs. The showman did not seem to have much of a variety. Every night he got up on the stage and gave a speech about his life in the U.S.A. He always gave this advice: "Young men of Ballon and the surrounding places, you are listening to a lot of big talk these days. You are told to drill and fight for your country, but I say to you, drill by all means, but if you have to fight, fight in your own land. Never leave the shores of Ireland to fight for a foreign king. The day may soon come and you will remember my advice". Some thought he was mad to say such things, and that he must be a half German. But that man was the first and best recruiting officer the I.R.B. ever had. His name was Dr. Powell. He had been in the 'States' for a number of years. He died only a few years ago in New Ross, R.I.F.

Things were happy enough for a while after that. About Easter the following year, 1916, my granny died. We knew that something was wrong as we could send no word

to our relations in Dublin. Then word came by one of the few papers reaching the village that there had been a rebellion in Dublin. It was said that some blackguards were wounding and killing "our heroes", and to make it worse, they were so badly needed at the Front. Such a time to go and upset things.

About two months after that my father, R.I.P., got a letter from his sister who lived in Dundrum, Co. Dublin, saying that she was in great trouble. The "gentleman" for whom her husband worked had sacked him and put them out of the lodge in which they lived, so happily and comfortably, when he found out that her whole family - three boys - had been arrested and sent to Wormwood Scrubbs Prison. It was a hard blow, she wrote, but they were lucky, as others were in a worse plight. Friends had found herself and her husband a place until the boys would be released. My father began to see just a little bit different; the old policy of Redmond died hard.

Things seemed to go easy here for a while. Then a priest came to the parish to do temporary duty for a year. He was a native of Durrow and was home on leave from San Francisco. He was Rev. Fr. Francis Fletcher, and while he was here he set things moving. He organised anti-conscription and Sinn Féin meetings. A great change came over the people. We all wore the tricolour on our coats, also Sinn Féin emblems and badges. When Fr. Fletcher was returning to America he had to go in disguise and travel on a collier, as the British had issued a warrant for his arrest. He evaded the British secret service agents and arrived in America safely. He died some years ago in San Francisco, R.I.P.

Early in 1919 the people began to hear that the Volunteers and Sinn Féiners here were getting very strong. The R.I.C. were beginning to look at the lads with suspicion, particularly my brother John, the two Mahers in the village, two Fitzpatricks, two Corrigans, two Barrys, and from about a mile outside the village, Thomas Fitzgerald and Frank Tobin, also several other younger lads from Rathrush, Killanne and Kilbride districts. Then we heard of barracks being raided and attacked and of the R.I.C. having to leave their barracks. Late in that year (1919) the R.I.C. evacuated the local barrack and went into Tullow. It was said they might be coming back. A couple of mornings afterwards, the people living nearby were aroused by the bright flames leaping through the woods. It was the R.I.C. barrack on fire. Rumour had it that strange men had come the night before and set it alight. But the "seven strange men" who burned the barrack were members of the Ballon Company of the Irish Republican Army.. They were: J. Maher, Company Captain; my brother, 2nd Lieutenant John Nolan; 1st Lieut. Richard Barry; S. Maher, W. Corrigan, Mick Fitzpatrick and Thomas Fitzgerald. When they arrived at the barrack to burn it, they thought the R.I.C. had reoccupied it and were inside. My brother John volunteered to take the chance and go in first. He did so, and when he found all was safe he gave the rest of the party the "all clear" signal. So the first act in their endeavour to do their part in the fight for freedom had actually begun.

When the R.I.C. heard that the barracks had been burned, they got very busy and almost every day a party of them patrolled the roads round Ballon. Here and there things began to happen which made them nervous. Apparently they heard that the I.R.A. were doing police work

and holding courts, which was quite true. At first the courts were held in the village hall, later they were held in secret places.

During all the summer of 1920 the R.I.C. made a point of coming out to Ballon as the people were leaving Mass. One day they caught my brother, John, Michael Fitzpatrick and Matthew Corrigan, and put them up against the rails outside the church. One of the R.I.C. said to them, "We will flog the three of you; you are doing police work we hear". Although they had three revolvers pressed against their chests, Matt Corrigan said, "Do it now, we have just come from Holy Communion and we are not afraid of you". It might not have ended so peacefully but for the fact that when the R.I.C. raised their heads, they saw framed in the church door another beloved priest, the late Rev. Fr. J.C. Kelly. He was chaplain to the I.R.A. at that very time. When the R.I.C. saw him they slunk away as if they were stunned.

When I left school early in 1920 I took up employment with a retired General of the British army who lived in the district, to take care of the child. My brother, John, told me to find out where he kept the guns and how many were there. I found them in the study, which was on the same corridor as my bedroom. I told John about them. There was a large collection of old guns, but included were about a dozen sporting guns and rifles in good condition. The window of the study opened on to the pleasure grounds, and I promised John that I would leave it open on whatever night he would tell me. When permission came for them to raid for the guns, it was too late for me to help them as I had left the job. When

the Volunteers went to raid for the guns, the General met them with a loaded revolver and, so as to avoid having to shoot him, the Volunteers came away without getting the arms.

Later in the summer I was taking care of another baby, this time it was one of our own breed and the baby's father was a very good Irishman. One day in the late harvest of the same year I was wheeling the baby in the pram at Kilbride Cross when I saw two policemen cycling from the direction of Ballon. I hurried up the hill, but when they came to the cross they turned up the road after me. I was afraid at first, and when they overtook me the two dismounted. I recognised one as Constable Delaney, who had been in Ballon before the R.I.C. went to Tullow. He spoke very nicely and wanted to know how long I was there. I was getting vexed and not afraid now. I said, "What do you want to know for?". "Oh, so you, too, won't speak to the police" he said. I did not answer and they made no attempt to cycle off, but as we got nearer the gate which I was to enter he said very quietly, "I suppose you never see any strange men about here". I got mad and asked him was that what he came to know. "Oh, no", he said, "we are only out for a spin, but you should know if there were any strangers about here". "If I knew I would not tell you" I answered, "and you are a disgrace to your country. Throw off that uniform or you will be sorry". I was turning in at the gate, and he looked back and laughed at me and said, "So the Sinn Féiners don't like me any more". That was the last word.

Four nights after that, the same two were shot dead in Tullow, and even some of the men who took part in the ambush think they shot the wrong men. I wonder,

but only God knows that. It was strange that the place to which they came that day was the house in which Miss Aileen Keogh was born, and just a week before that Miss Keogh had come up from Mount St. Benedict, Gorey, and had been at Ballon attending Mass. The baby I was wheeling was her nephew, John Keogh.

On Sundays we all went to the village hall to learn Irish dancing. At the end of the year, about October, 1920, it was decided to hold a big dance and it was my first night out. Michael Fitzpatrick, a Volunteer, was the teacher and M.C. That night the hall was crowded. It was the rule that the boys sat on one side and the girls on the opposite side. We were sitting with our backs to the windows which faced the village. It was near midnight and the M.C. called out "The Walls of Limerick". The boys stood up and so did we, but they did not come over to us. They stood and only looked over our heads. When I turned round to see what they were staring at, I saw, about six inches away from us, in each window, three bayonets on three rifles and British soldiers in tin hats leering at us. A sight that won't be easy to forget! We were too frightened to think. We just made up our minds that it was the end and we said our prayers. The soldiers rushed into the hall first, but an officer then came in - he was one gentleman - and he put out the rank and file, who were a rough lot. Mick Fitzpatrick went up to the officer, who said, "Send out the men to be searched". Before the men went out they slipped bits of paper - just receipts for guns and the like - to some of the girls. All except one got rid of these



papers. He was unlucky. When he was searched, a receipt for a gun which he had handed up to the I.R.A. was found on him and he was arrested. He was William Byrne of Killanne. Several times during the search some of the rougher soldiers tried to come into the hall, but the officer put them out.

When the raid was over, the officer asked Mick Fitzpatrick to let him see an Irish dance. Mick came on the floor, and before the band, which was composed only of an accordion and a violin, commenced to play, Mick had started to dance a hornpipe. Then I noticed only the violin was in use. I got a fright, as my brother, the 2nd Lieutenant and accordionist, was missing, but I heard immediately that he was alright. I think Mick Fitzpatrick made a lot of new steps that night, and held them there looking at him until their curiosity was satisfied. The soldiers then left, taking Willie Byrne with them.

My brother, John, went home that night over the hill road. Not one hundred yards from our home was the home of James Maher, the Company Captain. He was 'on the run', and a friend of his family, a middle aged man named Jimmie O'Brien, was working for him. When O'Brien was coming home from a walk that night he saw the lights of the military lorries in the village. He and my brother, John, spent all the night removing a big dump - guns, ammunition, bombs, etc., which was at the back of Maher's house. It had been brought there only about a week before. Soon after John and O'Brien had got the dump safely away, the military were back again in the village, raiding again, but they did not succeed in getting the dump. They made a thorough search of Edward Doyle's house. He was a member

of Carlow County Council. They rifled all his papers but got nothing.

The reign of terror got much worse, and about Christmas, as our curate, Fr. Kelly, was coming down the street of Tullow on a motor bike on his way home, he was fired on by British forces, but he escaped injury. Coming into the spring of 1921, the R.I.C. and Black and Tans patrolled the roads around Ballon at all hours of the night in armoured cars. Mother often had to put a heavy patchwork quilt over the window and a candle in the chimney, because if they saw a sight of light they would fire into the house.

One day we heard that bad work had happened up in Ballymurphy near Borris. The Carlow Brigade Flying Column had been surprised by enemy forces. A few of them were shot dead and twelve others, some of whom had been wounded, were captured. One of the dead was Michael Fahy, a member of the Ballon Company.

Things got serious again. Enemy patrols started to come out to the Sunday Mass, but now they were being hampered a lot in travelling as the roads were being constantly blocked and trenched so that the lorries could not get up too near the hills. We knew that between Ballon and Mount Leinster many a soldier of the Irish Republican Army found shelter and rest.

One day in the late spring of 1921 the police in Tullow got word that two strange men had been seen in a wood on the banks of the Slaney near Ballon. A small house near where they were seen was used for picnic teas. The police, I am sure, were delighted with the news. They must contact the military in Carlow, but it would only delay the work to go there themselves. They decided

to phone the message to the post office in Carlow for them to send to the military, and were not all the post officials loyal? So the message was sent requesting the military to come out and search the wood. The young boy in Carlow Post Office who was given the message to deliver to the military, before going to the barrack went out to Tinriland, a distance of over three miles, and gave the message to his sister. He then delayed as long as he could before bringing the message to the barrack. His sister put on speed and came to Ballon as quickly as she could and delivered the message to Captain Maher. The boy's name was Paddy Kane and his sister's name was Dinah.

In a field at home, just where I write this, my brother, John, the accordion player, was resting a pair of horses. The Mahers came down to him and he left at once. We knew that something was on and that there was no time to spare, because the military came and surrounded the wood one hour after the two men had been removed from it. If the R.I.C. in Tullow had only known that £10,000 had been within their grasp, they would have walked to Carlow with the message, for one of the men in the wood was Dan Breen. I think it was the Rev. E.J. Campion's car brought the two men to the Waterford border that night.

The enemy must have suspected that the people of Ballon were not as harmless as they looked, because about the middle of June, 1921, about one hundred or more troops and a few officers came to the village. The officers took over Doyle's shop. The men took over the houses in the yard behind the shop, also the village hall. At that time curfew was on at 10 p.m. Very few of the boys slept at home that night. They took to the fields

as the night was fine, so the British had the village to themselves that night. They left next day.

As a consequence, 'E' Company (Ballon), 3rd Battalion, decided to blockade the village so as to prevent the enemy coming again with heavy transport. On the night of the 28th June, 1921, Ballon Company was mobilised. It was 6 a.m. when they got home. At Mass that morning word was out that all the roads were blocked with huge giants of trees, also the bridges blown up. It was impossible for anything to get through except a bike. One wonders if Cromwell's Quislings, as they usurped the land of our forefathers, could see what use their beech and oak saplings had been put to, would they smile as our lads did when they made them fall in submission to the soldiers of the Irish Republic to help in stopping the last march of the tyrant, so that members of the Flying Column, who got so much shelter in the Ballon and Myshall areas, would be safe and could get food and rest? I must mention here that the rich and poor in both Ballon and Myshall were splendid in both hospitality and silence. Other people and places may have been lucky enough to get better headlines, but any man in Ireland who had been through these two parishes during the four glorious years spoke only the best of them.

Then came the 11th July and the truce. On the morning of that day a detachment of troopers passed through Ballon on their way to Kilkenny. A mile outside the village they entered the cottage of my late aunt, who was alone at the time, and relieved her of all the money she had in the house. That was their last act.

The following night, 12th, Captain J. Maher and Jim Roche, Captain of the Tullow Company, came down to the village, and that was a happy night! At Maher's and all our homes we sang and danced. All the lads - the young and the old - danced together. The M.C., Mick Fitzpatrick, who danced the hornpipe, was there. The violinist, S. Maher, brother of the captain, was there. My brother, John, the accordion player, was there. As we came homewards down the road that night he hummed a tune he loved to sing. It was:

Give me a rifle and let me away  
 To the green hills of holy old Ireland.  
 For freedom to win or else fall in the fray  
 On the green hills of holy old Ireland.

Later in the tragic war of brothers, he fell, but it was not on the hills. He was brought home from a prison camp to die here in his home in the valley that looks up to those green hills he loved so well, and where as a boy he got the call to be to God and Ireland true.

Signed: Tom Nolan

Date: 13/6/36

Witness: Seán Brennan Lieut. Col  
 (Investigator)

