

ORIGINAL

BUREAU OF MILITARY HISTORY 1913-21

BURÓ STAIRÉ MILEATA 1913-21

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BUREAU OF MILITARY HISTORY, 1913-21

STATEMENT BY WITNESS.

DOCUMENT NO. W.S. 1476.

Witness

Seán O'Ceallaigh,
Rivers,
Lisnagry,
Co. Limerick.

Identity.

Company Captain, Ahane.

Battalion Adjutant.

Subject.

Activities of Castleconnell and
Ahane Companies, Irish Volunteers,
Co. Limerick, 1913 - 1921.

Conditions, if any, Stipulated by Witness

Nil.

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STATEMENT BY SEAN O'CEALLAIGH

Rivers, Lisnagry, Co. Limerick.

I was born in Ballymackeogh, Newport, Co. Tipperary on 1st October 1880. I attended the local National School until I was 14 years of age.

In my young schooldays, in my father's house, were a large number of books which included "The Story of Ireland", "The Forge of Clohogue", "The Wexford Insurrection, 1798", "Mitchel's Jail Journal", "Rossa's Jail Journal", as well as copies of "The Nation", "United Irishman" and, later, William O'Brien's "Irish People". When I was able to read, I read all of them and others from time to time and they certainly inspired me with a great desire to follow in the footsteps of the brave men whose names appeared therein. Besides, when I reached manhood, I didn't fail to see the manner in which we were misgoverned by an alien government and observe all the indignities and injustices that accrue when a nation is ruled by a foreigner. However, when the opportunity offered, I gloried in the day when we would make an attempt to break the foreign yoke.

At the latter end of 1913, with Sean O'Carroll, P.O'Farrel and other men in the parishes of Castleconnell and Ahane, I started to organise a company of Volunteers. At that time the Irish people had been very disappointed and become very sour through the failure of the British Government to grant us Home Rule. Having discussed the matter locally, we set about organising and, by March 1914, at our first meeting, we numbered off 110 men of all ages from 18 to 60 years. A Provisional Council was formed comprising Sean O'Carroll, Joe Herbert, P. Herbert, Tom Herbert, Martin Kearney, Tom Hopes M. Danagher, myself and others whom I have forgotten. We

drilled on two evenings each week and enlisted the services of a couple of British ex-soldiers to train us in the "soldier's trade". Some time later, John Redmond, M.P., organised the National Volunteers in the area, with the result that membership of our company became very much diminished and was reduced to twelve members only. We were then sarcastically referred to as the twelve apostles. However, we kept together as a unit and ignored the jibes of Redmond's followers and I think it was in early 1915 we had the satisfaction of receiving back into our ranks many of Redmond's Volunteers after Redmond's pronouncement that "the freedom of Ireland was to be won in France". Other Volunteers who believed him joined the British army.

It was during the year 1915 that Sean McDermott visited Castleconnell and told us that we could have some of the rifles which had been landed at Howth if we would promise to pay for them. Joe Herbert, who was a Creamery manager, said: "I have about £90 saved after a lifetime. I will give it to you for the rifles. If I get it back, well and good. If not, it doesn't matter". With this money we got a small consignment of rifles. Each of us was presented with a card and a rifle. The card was to enter our subscriptions of 6d per week.

Around this time, the local sergeant of the R.I.C. paid me great attention and accused me of receiving German gold. I think I managed to convince him that all the talk of German gold was British propaganda.

At a Manchester Martyrs' parade on Whit Sunday, 1915, in Limerick City, we had contingents of Volunteers from Dublin, Clare, Tipperary and other places. It was then that a great friend of mine, Owen O'Erien (R.I.P.), threw in his lot with me and was in Limerick that day with us. We met with a good

share of hostility that day from "separation allowance women" and their friends. One particular incident occurred that day which I will never forget. As we approached Wellesley Bridge a contingent of the British army with horse and artillery approached from the opposite side. It looked like a clash for a while. We had no ammunition and felt it sorely, but Liam Forde, Johnny Grant and some others who were on bicycles proceeded ahead and, putting up their hands to halt the British army men, informed the officer in charge that we were going to cross first. Good enough, they agreed, and stood aside while we crossed the bridge.

After this, we prepared in earnest for the day of days when we would try conclusions with Ireland's hereditary enemy. We drilled on a couple of evenings each week and learned the use and handling of the rifle. Very early one morning in early 1916, while I was alone in the creamery where I worked, I again had a visit from the local R.I.C. sergeant who again accused me of receiving German gold. I asked him if he had ever seen any of it; he said he hadn't, but still tried to persuade me that it was in circulation amongst us. I said I was sorry for him to have swallowed such nonsense considering the position he held. "Well", said he, "what is it all about so?". I replied: "We are going to make a burst for freedom now, win, lose or draw".

On Easter Sunday 1916, we mobilised in Castleconnell after last Mass with full equipment. I would say we numbered about 400 men from Doon, Cappamore, Killonan, Caherconlish and Murroe parishes. We also had a number of men from the Glen, Killaloe. Sean O'Carroll, one of the men in charge that day, told me that we were to seize the police barracks at O'Brien's Bridge after which we were to proceed to Limerick via Clonlara and seize all arms in the police barracks on our

way. On this morning, or the previous Saturday evening, we heard of the arrests in Tralee of Austin Stack and Con Collins, and with great dismay, of the disaster to the arms ship off the Kerry Coast. However, something went wrong; the seizure of O'Brien's Bridge police barracks was postponed and, when evening came, we were dismissed by P. Ryan of Doon, who was the senior officer in charge. We were told to hold ourselves in readiness for the call at any moment and to keep our equipment close at hand. We were on tenterhooks all that week with the news from Dublin, some heartening and some disheartening. After the surrender in Dublin, proclamations were posted up everywhere calling for the surrender of ^{all} arms under the threat of arrest and imprisonment. Most of our members ignored the proclamations and refused to surrender their guns and, as a consequence, were subjected to great attention by the R.I.C.

After 1916, we lay low for a short time and in the meantime secured all guns and ammunition in a safe place for another day which came sooner than I expected. By early 1917 we realised our strength and, once again, I began to organise the young men of the Ahane parish into a new company for the parish. Those of us who were members of Castleconnell Company now got together and very soon had, on our first mobilisation in the parish of Ahane, 50 young men on parade. I was appointed company captain; Owen O'Brien, 1st Lieutenant and John Vaughan, 2nd Lieutenant. Around the same time, other companies were reorganised or formed in Castleconnell, Murroe, Cappamore, Annacotty and Abington. We became the 2nd Battalion, Mid Limerick Brigade.

In Ahane, we met and drilled every Sunday and sometimes on week evenings. This routine drilling continued to the end

of the year. During this period a battalion staff was appointed. Sean O'Carroll, company captain of Castleconnell became Battalion O/C., Stephen Ryan, vice/O.C. I became adjutant and Owen O'Brien became Q.M. John Madden then replaced me as company captain of Ahane, or B.Company, as it was known; Denis Moynihan became 1st Lieutenant and John Vaughan remained 2nd Lieutenant.

During the conscription scare of 1918, our company strength in Ahane and in the other company areas was greatly augmented. In Ahane our strength rose to 90 men. During the period it was most heartening to hear the young men of the company discuss the weapons they would use, such as sleans, pikes and pitchforks, as well as shotguns. We drilled three times a week and had lectures on our plan of battle under different circumstances. To raise funds for the purchase of arms we held an Aeriocht in the name of the Gaelic League. It was proclaimed, but we decided to hold it, proclamation or no proclamation. The R.I.C., assisted by British military, took up position in the neighbourhood. We held the aeriocht in a different part of the parish and, to the credit of the people, I never saw such a crowd in Ahane since. One incident happened which I thought would have serious consequences; a young lad threw a stone at a military officer which struck a tree close to his ear. He took no action and nothing happened.

I was constantly being bombarded by young men for guns. However, it eased the situation when we collected all the shotguns in the battalion area. We also seized some revolvers and a few hand grenades. I would like to make special mention of Jack Moynihan who carried all guns and grenades in the tankards belonging to Annacotty Co-operative Dairy Society's Creamery, where he was employed as a carrier, to Limerick.

When the conscription scare was over, our ranks again became depleted.

Routine drilling continued to the end of the year and during the year 1919. The battalion staff at the end of the year decided to attack Murroe R.I.C. barracks. The attack, which was in charge of Sean Carroll, took place in the early months of 1920. With the help of Owen O'Brien and Thomas Moynihan, I made a home-made bomb for the attack with the use of gelignite and the wheel box of a cart. As I was not in the actual attack, I can only state that about 20 men took part; some were armed with rifles; the others had shotguns. The attack lasted for a couple of hours, but our men did not succeed in capturing the building.

Following the attack on Murroe R.I.C. barracks, a number of ambushes were planned by Sean Carroll and the battalion staff, but for one reason or another they never came off. They were confined to the battalion area. One of the attacks planned was on a police patrol of two or three men from Murroe barracks to Limerick City. On the day of the proposed attack the police failed to put in an appearance. Another attack had been planned for a place known as Houley's Cross on a military lorry on its way from Newport to Limerick, but here again the lorry did not travel on this particular day. On another occasion, Sean Carroll, with a number of his men, waited in ambush positions to attack a ~~private~~ ^{district} Inspector of the R.I.C. They opened fire on a private motor car in which they thought he was travelling, but it appears that the D.I. had travelled in a different car. The occupant of the car was wounded - he was a man named Tidmarch. Later, another attack under Commandant Dick O'Connell, who was in charge of the Mid-Limerick Flying Column, was planned for Sheehan's Cross near Ballinagarde on a military lorry. In this instance

a farmer and his wife, who were in a horse-drawn trap, drove into the ambush position as the military lorry arrived. The attack in the circumstances could not take place.

Around this time the Creamery where I was employed was closely watched by the R.I.C. and military. To keep them away, we had a nearby bridge blown up. This caused great inconvenience to local farmers many of whom grumbled, but others took it in good part. Some time after, the Creamery was closed down by order of the British military, after which they threatened to burn it down. It remained closed for six weeks. By this time, Tom Moynihan and Owen O'Brien of Ahane Company were on full-time active service. During the year I was appointed clerk of the local Sinn Fein Court which, with my job as adjutant of the battalion, kept me fully occupied. One of my jobs as *A*djutant of the battalion was to keep in touch with the flying column and see to their needs especially clothes and boots. In this connection I got great help from John Raleigh of Limerick City.

When Lloyd George threatened our extermination, we became more determined than ever to meet it and we burned down all evacuated R.I.C. barracks in the area. They were located at Murroe, Ballysimon and Castleconnell. We also burned down Mountshannon House and another big house, the property of Lord Massey. It was believed at the time that these barracks and big houses were to be taken over as block houses by the military. During the period, mails were seized and censored on several occasions to trace spies or informers, if any, in the area.

As my house was the H.Q. of the battalion and was used extensively as such by the Limerick City Battalion, I received many prisoners from time to time. They were detained in a disused house in the area until they were tried for their

misdeeds. Some of them were later executed as spies.

I remember on one occasion receiving a prisoner from the East Limerick Brigade area. On the night of his trial by court-martial, no one from that area turned up to give evidence against him, so we had to let him go. We did so by blind-folding him and taking him a few miles away where we released him and let him shift for himself. On another occasion a man who posed as an I.R.A. man from G.H.Q. was sent to me to be brought to the West Limerick Brigade area. Owen O'Brien and I accompanied him on the way to Patrickswell in a mourning carriage, the property of Griffin's, Undertakers. Curfew was on at the time and these carriages were the only ones allowed by the authorities after 10 p.m. Our man became very aggressive on the way and carried a revolver which he brandished at passers-by. We subsequently heard that he was a spy and he was later arrested, tried and executed as such in the West Limerick Brigade area, after which a label marked "spy" was placed on his body.

On one occasion, near the end of the period, I had to go to Limerick to meet a couple of I.R.A. men to arrange for the delivery of some bombs. Coming near curfew hour I saw what I at first took to be an old woman and a foolish-looking fellow with a donkey and cart moving along the street. In the cart they had a box which was supposed to contain duck eggs which they were trying to sell in the street. However, they called to a certain house where I met them and took delivery of the supposed duck eggs. The bombs were collected later. The old woman and foolish-looking fellow were very well disguised.

On another occasion, returning from Limerick during curfew hours, after obtaining some information about the movements of some R.I.C. men, I heard a person screaming who was being beaten

by the Tans. I managed to evade them as they turned into Lock Quay and got home without any interference.

Another incident which comes to my mind was a case of robbery by one of the Tans during a raid. It appears this Tan stole some jewellery from a Mrs. Shearin who complained to the military officer in charge. As she pointed out the Tan to the officers as the one who stole her property, the Tan drew a revolver and shot himself through the heart.

Owing to the pressure of work as Parish Clerk I had a substitute adjutant appointed in my place during the latter period prior to the Truce. His name was P. O'Carroll. During the Truce I continued my work in the Parish Court.

Signed: Sean Ó'Ceallaigh

Date: 28/8/56

Witness: John J. D. O'Leary

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