

ORIGINAL

BUREAU OF MILITARY HISTORY 1913-21
BURO STAIRÉ MILEATA 1913-21
No. W.S. 1480

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BUREAU OF MILITARY HISTORY, 1913-21

STATEMENT BY WITNESS.

DOCUMENT NO. W.S. 1480.

Witness

Daniel O'Donovan,
Ballybeg,
Buttevant,
Co. Cork.

Identity.

O/C, Operations, Cork I Brigade, I.R.A.

Subject.

The Capture of the "Upnor",
March, 1922.

Conditions, if any, Stipulated by Witness.

Nil.

File No 5.2812.

Form B S M 2

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STATEMENT BY DANIEL O'DONOVAN,
Ballybeg, Buttevant, Co. Cork.

THE CAPTURE OF THE "UPNOR".

About five weeks prior to the date of this operation, which took place on 29/30th March, 1922, a member of C. Company, 1st Battalion, Cork I Brigade, named De Courcy, who was employed in Haulbowline, was introduced to me by Peter O'Donovan (O/C, Cork City A.S.U.). De Courcy reported that there was a possibility of taking arms from a ship which was being loaded at the wharf in Haulbowline. He was asked to submit a further report.

In the meantime, the possibility of taking action was being discussed with the Brigade O/C (Seán Hegarty) who would not consider the matter until he had further information. At his next interview, De Courcy was asked if he could get a copy of the ship's manifest. He undertook to do this, and, in due course, furnished the document in question.

Having examined the manifest, the Brigade O/C decided that the ship would be followed to sea, seized and taken to some port round the coast. With Mick Leahy (Brigade Vice O/C), I was deputed to examine the coastline and to select a suitable port to which to take the ship. Transport arrangements were placed under the control of Jim Grey (Brigade O/C, Transport) who was to

select an assembly point outside Cork city. Connie Neenan (O/C, 2nd Battalion) was placed in charge of mobilisation. Mick Burke (O/C, Cobh Company, 4th Battalion) was put in touch with De Courcy, so that the latest available information would be transmitted to Brigade Headquarters with the minimum delay.

As there were always one or two tugs berthed at the Deepwater Quay at Cobh, Mick Burke advised that there was no need to seize a boat elsewhere.

The men selected to seize the tug and go to sea were Tom Crofts (Brigade I.O.), Mick Murphy (former O/C, 2nd Battalion, and Brigade O/C, Flying Column), Seán O'Donoghue (O/C, 1st Battalion), Peter Donovan (O/C, Cork City A.S.U.), Con Sullivan (2nd i/c Engineers), Dan Donovan (witness) who was in charge. In addition, it was decided to take along four deck-hands and two firemen from Cobh. The only one of these whose name I can recollect is John Duhig. Mick Leahy was to take charge of the engine room, while Mick Burke was to be responsible for the deck-hands.

The Brigade O/C (Seán Hegarty) decided that it would be necessary to have a qualified master mariner to take charge of the boat which we proposed to seize. Captain Jeremiah Collins - a retired master mariner - was considered the most suitable for this job, as he had Republican sympathies. He was, however, not to be made aware of the plans for the operation until the last moment, and, to ensure that he could be picked up at a moment's notice, two intelligence officers were posted to keep a continuous watch on his movements between 8 a.m. and twelve midnight.

All these plans had been in operation for some weeks before the date of the departure of the arms ship - "Upnor" - from Haulbowline was finally confirmed.

Information was received in Cork city at 10 a.m. on the morning of 29th March, 1922 that the "Upnor" was to sail at 2 p.m. that day.

Dan O'Donovan (witness) and Mick Murphy immediately picked up Captain Jeremiah Collins, and transported him to Cobh. The remainder of the men assigned for duty on the job followed on - leaving Cork about 11.30 a.m. The party was armed with one Lewis gun, one Thompson gun, and each man carried two revolvers.

On arrival at Cobh, the car in which we (Mick Murphy and I) travelled was sent on to Middleton, where he resided, to pick Mick Leahy (Brigade Vice O/C); but, for some unknown reason, he did not turn up.

At this stage, the local Company (Cobh) O/C Mick Burke informed me that there were no tugs in the harbour, one having gone to sea, and the second to Rushbrooke docks. We did not discover until 2:30 p.m. that the second tug was in Rushbrooke. We immediately set out for Rushbrooke, but, on our way there, we were informed that another tug (S.S. "Warrior") had berthed at the Deepwater Quay, and that the captain had gone to the office of a shipbroker (Horne). With two of the men from Cobh Company, I went to Horne's office to try to persuade the captain of the "Warrior" to allow us to charter his tug. We failed in this, so we had no option but to put the captain of the tug and Mr. Horne under arrest until our operation had been completed.

They were held under guard by men of the Cobh Company in the Rob Roy Hotel until next morning.

The tug ("Warrior") was now boarded by the main party (Tom Crofts, Mick Murphy, Sean O'Donoghue, Peter Donovan, Con Sullivan, Dan O'Donovan - witness). We were accompanied by Captain Jeremiah Collins. The mate of the "Warrior" was informed that the boat was being chartered for Government service, and that the Captain would be back in-half-an-hour. I then informed him that the boat was proceeding on a secret mission. I asked him to assemble the crew in the forecastle, so that I could address them on the necessity for strict secrecy. The crew was assembled without delay. On being assured that all were present, I informed them that they were under arrest. They were then placed in a cabin, with an armed guard on the door.

Captain Jeremiah Collins now took over on the bridge of the "Warrior". The engines were started by the crew of Cobh men, who had now come aboard, and we moved away from the quayside into the harbour.

The purpose of the expedition was now explained to Captain Collins. He immediately ordered all hands below deck until we got outside the harbour. At the same time, he snatched my cap from my head, and replaced it with his own hard hat, saying, "Did you ever see the master of a boat on the bridge, with a hard hat!" It was now about 3.30 p.m.

Having cleared the harbour, Captain Collins was ordered to strike a course south-south-east, as the destination of the "Upnor" was Plymouth.

The Master (Captain Collins) was also informed that the speed of the "Warrior" was nine knots and that of the "Upnor" six knots. After some time, he reported to me that, on his present course - S.S.E. - he should have sighted the "Upnor" had she travelled as anticipated. He had then come to the conclusion that she had gone to a certain point to pick up fresh bearings. He then altered course, so that he would intercept the "Upnor" when she would change her course from the new bearing point. He estimated that we would sight her at 6 p.m. and should be in contact with her at 6.30 p.m. This we did precisely. Captain Collins, before changing course, expressed the opinion that, if we maintained our original course, we would be some miles from Plymouth before we would pick up the "Upnor" about 6 a.m. next morning.

When within hailing distance of the "Upnor", we hoisted the Harbour Master's flag, and one of the Cobh "seamen" waved a large envelope, at the same time, shouting through a megaphone, "Message from the Admiralty". The Harbour Master's flag and the large envelope had been supplied by our man in Haulbowline, De Courcy.

A boat, manned by four men, was immediately lowered from the "Upnor" and was rowed to our boat, the "Warrior", to collect the message. Armed with the Lewis gun, I was on the bridge with Captain Collins. All the other members of the crew of the "Warrior", with the exception of the man with the megaphone and message, were lying under cover of the deck. When one of the men in the "Upnor" boat stood up to take the message, as his boat came alongside, he was seized

by Mick Murphy and hauled aboard the "Warrior". The remainder of my crew now exposed their arms and ordered the other three men in the "Upnor" boat to come aboard, which they did without delay. They were locked up with the crew of the "Warrior".

The I.R.A. crew and passengers on the "Warrior", with the exception of Captain Collins, Con Sullivan and myself, now scrambled into the boat from the "Upnor", and rowed to the latter. They climbed aboard and overpowered the crew, which I had been covering with the Lewis gun from the "Warrior".

Being assured that the crew of the "Upnor" had been locked up and that my men were in charge, I ordered the release of the engine room crew of the "Warrior", and instructed them to proceed below to run the engines. This, they said, they were quite willing to do, as they were tired of sitting down and being locked up. The engines of the "Upnor" were now being operated by the Cobh men where Mick Murphy was now put in charge. Captain Collins now set the "Warrior" on a course for Ballycotton, and the "Upnor" was ordered to follow on.

On receipt of the information that the "Warrior" had followed the "Upnor" as planned, the transport and mobilisation arrangements, already planned, came into operation in Cork city. As a result, seventy-six lorries, five steam wagons and five hundred men were assembled midway between Ballycotton and Cork in a matter of a couple of hours. The Brigade O/C (Seán Hegarty) sent a fast car to Ballycotton to watch for the lights of two ships coming into the harbour together. When the approach of the ships was

reported, the whole party moved into Ballycotton with the transport, to await the arrival of the "Warrior" and "Upnor".

When within a short distance of Ballycotton pier, the "Warrior" was hailed from a small boat by Michael Leahy (Brigade ^{Vice} O/C) who had two local pilots with him. These pilots then took over and berthed the boats ("Warrior" and "Upnor") at Ballycotton pier. It was now about 1.30 a.m.

The Brigade O/C (Seán Hegarty) now ordered me to take charge of the unloading operations. It was found that a large steam launch was lodged athwart the ~~hatch~~ ^{hatches}. Mick Leahy got steam up on the winch of the "Upnor", and this launch was dumped overboard. The deck of the "Upnor" was also covered with furniture, which meant that there was not as much arms on board as was shown on the ship's manifest with which we had previously been supplied. The hatches were now opened up, and three gangs operated in a chain from the ~~hatch~~ ^{hatches} to the lorries, loading about one thousand rifles, one thousand Webley revolvers (.45), one thousand Webley & Scott .55 pistols, one hundred thousand rounds of .303 ammunition, some thousand rounds of revolver ammunition, a large stock of hand and rifle grenades, fifty Lewis guns, six Maxim guns and a large number of mines. Each lorry, as loaded, was despatched to a different portion of the brigade area - the last one being despatched at 10 a.m.

All transport reached its destination safely, and so the operation was successfully concluded.

I should have mentioned that the local telephone exchange in Ballycotton was taken over by our forces when they arrived in the village to await the arrival of the "Upnor" and "Warrior". In addition, all roads in the area, except those used by our transport were closed by trenching.

SIGNED: General Hanna

DATE: 24th August 1981

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WITNESS P. Donnell