

ORIGINAL

BUREAU OF MILITARY HISTORY 1913-21

BURÓ STAIRÉ MILÉATA 1913-21

NO. W.S. 1,583

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BUREAU OF MILITARY HISTORY, 1913-21.

STATEMENT BY WITNESS.

DOCUMENT NO. W.S. 1583.

Witness

Michael Doherty,
Ashgrove,
Castlefinn,
Co. Donegal.

Identity.

O/C, 1st Battn., 4th (Donegal) Bgde.

Subject.

Activities of Castlefinn Coy.,
I.Vols., Co. Donegal, 1917-21.

Conditions, if any, Stipulated by Witness.

Nil.

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STATEMENT BY MICHAEL DOHERTY,

Ashgrove, Castletinn, Co. Donegal.

I was born at Carnone, Co. Donegal, in the year 1893. I was educated at Castletinn National School. I commenced work on my father's farm at the age of 14 years.

My father was connected with the Fenian movement in his early years. My grandfather was evicted, in his young days, for making improvements on his farm. He succeeded in procuring a small patch of land and, without assistance, erected a home for himself.

My mother was deeply interested in the Sinn Féin movement. She read a lot about the persecution of tenants by the landlords and often recalled stories told by her grandmother about the persecution and sometimes execution of the Irish people on account of their Catholic belief and practices.

I joined the Ancient Order of Hibernians while quite young. I then joined the Irish National Volunteers so as to combat Carson's Volunteers, then a strong force in the area. We had no arms then and each man made a wooden gun for himself. We received instruction in foot and arms drill from a British ex soldier.

After 1916 my sympathies were with the men who fought in the rebellion. In the summer of that year, Sam Flaherty, myself and a few other men from the locality organised a Sinn Féin Club in Eastletinn. It was known as the Con Colbert Club. I was a founder member and chairman of the club. Meetings were held and addressed by Sam Flaherty

and Matt McGeehan. We ran various social functions successfully and raised funds generally.

Around this period there were a number of riots in Derry City. Serious clashes between Catholics and Protestants were almost a daily occurrence. These clashes were fomented by wealthy Protestant merchants who paid a gang of hooligans to fire on and in various ways attack Catholics in the city. In Castlefinn we collected money and bought a few rifles, shotguns and revolvers and had them transferred to Derry. Selected snipers were placed on roof tops in the Catholic quarter and succeeded in shooting some of the Protestants responsible for the trouble. This had the desired effect. All attacks on the Catholic population ended immediately.

About October, 1917, a number of young men, members of the Sinn Féin Club, were asked by Sam Flaherty to join the Irish Volunteers. He explained the aims and objects of the force, and 16 to 20 men joined then. Sam was O/C of the company. I was appointed to dispatch work. Our activities at that period were confined to routine weekly training.

Some time before the general election in 1918 we received instructions to collect money and have a plebiscite signed by the constituents on behalf of Sinn Féin. This work occupied all our spare time, as we called on every voter in the constituency. The A.O.H. organisation was very antagonistic towards us at that period. In fact, its members were more hostile than the Unionists.

Early in 1918, Mr. de Valera, accompanied by Mr. Seán MacEntee, came to Castlefinn to address a meeting there.

They were met at the railway station by a large crowd, and, headed by a torch light procession, were escorted to the platform in the village, where a very successful and orderly meeting was held. Shortly afterwards they travelled to Raphoe to address a meeting there. On arrival, they found that a large party of A.O.H. and Unionists had assembled in the town with the intention of breaking up their meeting. The time for the meeting was postponed while a call was sent out to Volunteers from adjacent companies to come to Raphoe on protection duty. Men from Castlefinn, Ballybofey and a large force from Letterkenny were quickly on the scene. The Volunteers assembled in the Market Square where the meeting was to be held. The R.I.C. made a futile attempt to prevent the Volunteers from moving in, and then quietly withdrew. The opposition parties retreated to the "Horse Square" further up the town. The Volunteers were about to pursue them but were called back by Mr. de Valera, who told them that they were asked to report for the purpose of protecting the speakers and the people attending the meeting. He ordered them to form a protective ring around the crowd. The meeting was then held without interruption or incident. I had the pleasure of meeting Mr. de Valera and having a handshake with him for the first time at a conference after the meeting. He explained to us that it was very important to secure the return of Sinn Féin representatives in the Local Government elections, and impressed on us the necessity to work hard to obtain a satisfactory result.

When the elections were over, we got down to training and collecting arms. We got information that a number of rifles, the property of the Ulster Volunteers, were stored at Baronscourt, Co. Tyrone, near Sion Mills. We mobilised

and raided the place but got nothing. We were later informed that the rifles had been transferred to Sir Robert Anderson's summer residence at Greencastle, Co. Donegal. In October, 1919, Ernie O'Malley came to Donegal to assist in carrying out the raid. I got instructions from Sam Flaherty to report at Liscooley with four other members of the company at 8 p.m. We were picked up by car, the property of Dr. Kerrigan. The car was driven by the late John McGroarty of Killygordon. Dr. Kerrigan travelled in the car with us.

We travelled via Raphoe to Bridge End (Co. Donegal), where we were joined by three other car loads of Volunteers. Frank Aiken travelled there in a car driven by my brother, who was Company Captain in Omagh. We arrived at Greencastle and broke into the house, but found no rifles there. We got two rifles of very ancient pattern and two swords, one of which I still retain in my possession. Although armed, we travelled home via Derry City. We had some breakdowns on the way back, but eventually arrived home around 7 or 8 a.m. on the following morning.

Following this, we collected a number of privately owned arms in the area. In nearly all cases they were handed over without demur.

In 1920 a general order was issued for the burning of all vacated R.I.C. barracks. We burned the barracks at Convoy in accordance with the order. Vacated barracks were also burned at Barnesmore Gap and Killeter. Castlefinn barracks was then occupied but was evacuated at a later date. This barrack was situated near a new factory, the owners of which petitioned the parish priest and local Volunteer officers not to burn the barracks on evacuation, as it would endanger the factory. An undertaking was given that the barracks would not be burned.

In my opinion, the R.I.C. were aware of the undertaking. Immediately after they evacuated the place, just as darkness set in, a light was noticed inside. We were notified and forced a way into the place. We found a candle burning under the stairs, which by that time had caught fire. We succeeded in extinguishing the fire in a short time. A Volunteer patrol was then posted to keep watch in case any further attempt would be made to burn the place. Shortly afterwards a large party of British military arrived in lorries from the Lifford direction. They got off the lorries near Clady and walked up the "Finn Valley" railway line and arrived in Castlefinn. The Volunteers got information of their approach and withdrew from the village. The military, on arrival, took out a number of local men and compelled them to whitewash over a number of painted slogans on the walls. About 50% of the men forced to do this work were supporters of British rule in Ireland.

A local cycle agent named Kearns, living in Castlefinn, got a consignment of part worn British army bicycles for sale. I mobilised some Volunteers and seized the bicycles and distributed them to the dispatch riders in the company. Some of the bicycles were later captured in the course of raids by British forces.

Early in 1920 the companies were organised into battalions and brigades. Ernie O'Malley visited the area at that time as organiser. I was Company O/C from 1918 until 1920, when I was appointed O/C of the 1st Battalion, 4th (Donegal) Brigade. Sam Flaherty was appointed O/C of the brigade.

In August, 1920, the Brigade O/C sent for me and informed me that he had planned to carry out a raid on Drumquinn R.I.C. barrack in Co. Tyrone. He told me that he hoped to take the R.I.C. by surprise. He thought it might be possible to overpower the R.I.C. and capture the barracks without firing a shot. The 29th August, 1920, was the date selected for the attack. This was cattle fair day in Drumquinn and a number of strangers in the town would not attract attention. I was instructed to report, with five other men from the local company, at Liscooley, where a motor car owned and driven by Patrick McGlinchy would pick us up and convey us to a pre-arranged mobilisation point near Drumquinn. Each man was to be armed with a revolver. We were also instructed to carry sticks and dress in such a way as to pass as cattle dealers.

We arrived before our time at the mobilisation point. The fair had not fully gathered. We got detailed instructions as to our particular part in the operation, which were as follows: to move into the town and, under the pretext of buying cattle, to find out the location of any R.I.C. men who might be out on duty on the town; to work in pairs, at the same time to keep in close touch with each other. The main attacking party was to work its way to a point beside the barrack, so as to be in a position to rush it on a given signal. Some men were detailed to cut the telephone wires. Another party was detailed to move through the town in pairs and hold up and disarm any R.I.C. they came in contact with. I was instructed to move to the far end of the town, where it was expected two R.I.C. men would be on patrol. If I met any R.I.C. on my way out, my orders were to hold them up and disarm them. I set out

with two other Volunteers. These two men had to go in a different direction to cut wires. I then proceeded alone to the outskirts of the town, but did not see any R.I.C.

As I reached the point where I was to take up a position, shooting started at the barracks. A number of people stampeded in my direction. I held them up at revolver point and advised them to keep calm. I next heard grenades exploding and suspected that the attack had not gone according to plan. I then got a signal to return to the cars, which were parked near the barrack. On my way back I met a few cattle dealers, one of whom I recognised. I asked him what happened in the town. He told me that armed men had raided the barracks, a constable was lying dead at the barrack door, that the raiders had left, and the sergeant was outside the barrack door, dressed only in trousers and shirt, with what seemed to be a rifle in his hand, shouting at the people to clear the street.

I was now alone and wondered how I was to get home. I asked the cattle dealer was he from Omagh or was he going there. He said he was not, but told me that if I wanted to get there he would give me a seat to Fintona, from where I could travel by train to Omagh. I availed of the seat, and after about twenty minutes wait I got on the train for Omagh. On arrival there I found there was considerable military activity and assumed that they had got information about the raid.

I made my way to a garage, owned by cousins named McGrath, where my brother worked. On arrival there, my brother asked me was I in Drumquinn. I told him I was. I then gave him my revolver, which he put away safely. I then got a wash and made myself more presentable.

After a meal I travelled on the train to Strabane. I had a long wait before boarding the "Finn Valley" train for home. I went into the town and visited a corn binder agent, where I bought a part for a binder as an excuse for my presence in Strabane. I eventually got a train for home. On arrival I met Thomas McGlynn, who was one of a party working with my father saving flax. McGlynn told me that my father was very annoyed at my absence while he was obliged to pay men to do the work. However, when I told my father where I had been he was quite satisfied. I learned that our party, returning by car, were pursued by a party of R.I.C. They pulled up and enquired from a young boy whether he had seen any cars passing that way. He told them that the cars had passed a short time before and had turned to the right at the next cross. This put the R.I.C. off the track, as the cars had gone straight ahead.

I was informed at the end of 1920 that a raid was carried out on a house in Dublin where Dick Mulcahy was staying, and that when making his escape he lost a case containing a list of names of officers in various parts of Ireland, which fell into the hands of the British authorities. It appears that the names of officers from our brigade were in the list captured. A short time afterwards, a large scale raid was carried out in the area by British forces and a number of our officers were arrested.

While the raid was in progress, I was engaged cutting timber for firewood about thirty yards from the main road and was not aware of any danger. I then noticed a car pulling up on the road and a number of the R.I.C. got out. I next heard the sound of lorries and could see British

in them. The police car then moved off in advance and I discovered that they were going to my home. They surrounded and searched the house, and enquired from my father where I was. He told them he believed I was gone to the forge, which is in the opposite direction to where I was working. They asked him when I was expected back home. He told them I was expected back for dinner between noon and 1 p.m.

The British forces then withdrew and returned to Liscooly, about a mile distant. On pulling up there, they saw Thomas McGlynn coming from the scutch mill where he was working. He was on his way home to have his dinner. They followed and arrested him. At this time they had John James Kelly, Company Captain, Clady Company, a prisoner in the lorry. They returned to my home and searched it again.

On their return, they pulled up at a cottage at the crossroads where a member of the Ulster Volunteers lived. I believe they made enquiries and got information from this man's wife as to my location, as they immediately came to the spot where I had been working. By this time I had cleared off and ascended a height, where I had a good view and could observe the movements of the British forces. On my way to the hill I by-passed a house owned by people named Bogan. Three of the Bogan boys were members of the Castlefinn Volunteer Company and their sisters were members of Cumann na mBan. The ground was covered with snow at the time and the British forces were able to follow my tracks for some distance. I met one of the Bogan girls on her way home from Liscooly. She gave me all the news about the raids and arrests. She invited me to her home, but I considered it unwise to go there at the moment. I could

hear dogs barking there, as if at strangers. When all was quiet, I went to Bogan's house. There I was informed that the British forces had just left after searching the house. They inquired for Michael Bogan, but that was only bluff, as they did not have his name on the list. I went 'on the run' after this round-up. My home was again raided on the following morning and on several occasions at later dates.

By this time my company officers were nearly all arrested and I was obliged to make new appointments. I travelled around to each company area in an effort to keep the organisation going, and gave lectures on training and tactics to be adopted. Raids for arms were carried out in each company area.

Harry McGowan, from Knock, Ballybofey, Brigade O/C, who was operating with a Flying Column in the area, had a dug-out at a place called Kelly's Bridge, between Pettigo and Donegal Town. He was arrested there, together with other members of his column. Two Volunteers were shot dead in the engagement. Volunteer G.H.Q. ordered an inquiry into the affair. They had some information to the effect that an agent on the estate of Lord Caledon, near Kelly's Bridge, had given information to the British forces which led to the raid on the dug-out.

I received instructions to meet Joe Murray (now Garda Superintendent), then Vice O/C of the brigade, at a place near Kelly's Bridge to assist in the investigation. My instructions were to take along some men from my battalion, also some British army uniforms which I had collected from deserters at an earlier date. The plan was to approach the agent and, posing as members of the British army, to try to get some information from him. I set out

accompanied by Joseph Hannigan, my Battalion Adjutant, Andrew Doherty, Company Captain, and a few Volunteers. I met Joe Murray at the appointed place.

After making some enquiries and having a consultation, we decided that it was impossible to come to any conclusion as to the identity of the informers. The occupants had made no effort to conceal the existence of the dug-out and everybody in the place was aware of its location. Empty food and cigarette cartons were scattered around the place. This was sure to attract attention, as there was no dwelling house nearby.

On our return from Kelly's Bridge we found that Joe Hannigan's home had been raided by British forces. It seems that the name on their list appeared as J. Hannigan. Joe had a brother at home whose name was James. He was arrested and later interned in Ballykinlar, although not associated with the Volunteer force at the time.

Early in the first week of July, 1921, Joe Murray summoned a meeting of the brigade and battalion staffs on July 10th 1921. The meeting place was Wards, Bundoran, a distance of more than forty miles from my starting point, which distance we were obliged to travel on bicycles. Joe Hannigan, John Byrne and myself set out very early on that Sunday morning from a point above Ballybofey. We found it necessary to by-pass Ballybofey, Donegal Town, Ballyshannon and Finner Camp on our way - on account of the presence of British forces in these towns.

When we arrived in Bundoran the meeting was in progress. We had no official confirmation of the Truce - due to come into operation the following day at noon.

We stayed in Bundoran that night, and when we awoke the following morning we could see British forces being withdrawn from outposts to their headquarters in Finner Camp.

We then set out for our homes. Joe Hannigan stayed over in Donegal Town. Byrne and myself continued on to a place called Killeter, where we stayed that night, finishing our journey home on the following day.

Signed: Michael O'Doherty

Date: 18th February 1967

Witness: James Bonney
(Investigator).

