

ORIGINAL

BUREAU OF MILITARY HISTORY 1913-21
BURO STAIRE MILEATA 1913-21
No. W.S. 1604

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BUREAU OF MILITARY HISTORY, 1913-21

STATEMENT BY WITNESS.

DOCUMENT NO. W.S. 1604

Witness

Albert George Fletcher Desborough,
25 Jermyn St.,
Prince's Park,
Liverpool 8,
England.

Identity.

Lewis Gun Instructor,
3rd Royal Irish Regiment,
British Army.

Subject.

Easter Week, 1916.

Conditions, if any, Stipulated by Witness.

Nil.

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THE DUBLIN TROUBLE.

Easter 1916.

As experienced by Sergeant Albert Geo, Fletcher-Desborough.
Late Lewis Gun Instructor. 3rd, Royal Irish Regiment.

Written at

LIVERPOOL. 1957.

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No. W.S. 1.604

THE DUBLIN TROUBLE.

1916.

RECORDED by Sergeant Albert Geo. Fletcher-Desborough.
Late 3rd, Royal Irish Reg.

Easter Monday, April 24th, 1916, opened bright and sunny and promised to be an ideal day for the races. I had only joined up as a recruit, - enlisting at St Patrick Street Offices Cork, a week before the previous Xmas, - as a Home Service man, owing to having varicose veins in the right leg behind the knee.

By the above mentioned date, I had become the servant, valet or batman to six commissioned Officers, among whom were the nephew of Field Marshall French and the son of the Mayor of Cork.

I was extra busy this morning, for my officers were a sporty lot, and I had orders to turn them out, spick and span, for they were going to the races. There was some apprehension amongst them, for fear of trouble occurring - in what direction or from whom they didn't know, but there had been for some weeks prior to this date, assemblages of young men, who had formed companies, who had been seen drilling and marching...some in uniform and others without. At times there had been clashes between the men and officers in the regular army and the Sinn Fein civilians, to such an extent, that for some time, most of the Commissioned Officers had taken the precaution of carrying their regimental sticks with them, when out for leisure, "In case" they countered when asked "Why?".

Many reported upon returning to Richmond Barracks on that Easter Sunday, that, there appeared to be much uneasiness in the City. People

were far and few in the streets, and those who were, were churlish and really rude. Early on Easter Morning, Monday, an officer brought in the report of the murder of a policeman on duty near the City Hall. His killers had been seen, and chased into and through the building of the Irish Independent Newspaper Offices, but had escaped, through the means of a rear exit.

This was considered as an act of retaliation by some criminal, and at the time, little more was thought of it. Then came the news, some one had cut the overhead cables. This was considered a foolish escapade by some irresponsible fools.

I left the officers quarters, my valeting completed at twelve o'clock, and started to cross the barrack square to my quarters...A section...for my dinner.

I had only got half-way across, when the Regimental bugler sounded the 'alarm!' and immediately following it with the 'Fall in'.

From all quarters our troops rushed, while Commissioned men and N.C.Os rushed to their positions to serve as 'markers' for the various companies and sections. There, we were told that the Sinn Feiners were out in strength, had taken over strategic positions in the city. It meant fighting, for they had to be ejected, as they carried arms and were supplied with ammunition. These men we were told, meant to defy the Viveregal Authority and were determined to fight it out.

We were handed out rifles and side-arms, with bandoliers and 250 rounds of ammunition, formed into column-of-route order, and under our respective supervisors left Richmond Barracks, turning towards the South Dublin Infirmary.

The struggle for the mastery and possession of Dublin had commenced.

We carried on down the Inchicore Road and a little later a few of us were turned into a sunken road on the right, immediately behind the South Dublin workhouse.

We had not been sitting by the roadside but a few moments, when an intrepid officer of ours, wishing no doubt to find out the lay of the building, - for we knew it was held by a section of the rebels - got hoisted onto the wall, and was immediately shot through the forehead by a sniper. He was our first casualty. We then knew it was to be a fighting job, and no quarter given.

Soon after, another officer, a first Lieutenant, one of my officers, trying to force open a door in a side wall, got three or four rounds through his hip, from a machine gun. We carried him across the road into a butcher's yard and laid him upon some sheep skins, there to await an ambulance. I visited him in hospital after the rising had been quelled, on the afternoon of the day he had had his leg amputated.

We surrounded the building, as a Sergeant went to various houses nearby, breaking holes in the windows, behind which he placed a man, with instructions to shoot anybody who refused to stop when challenged.

I amongst others continued towards the city under the direction of our Colonel, Lawrence Owens... 'Larry' the troops called him, a shrewd man and a just one, but at times very bitter and uncouth.

A little later it was noised round, that one of our full-corporals was missing. He had been send on some duty and had failed to return, and could not be traced. He was never seen alive again, but, after the trouble was over, his grave was pointed out. He had been buried in the grounds of Portobello Barracks.

I am not so sure of dates after so long a lapse of time, over 40 years, to be enabled to write a detailed account with the strictness of accuracy, but whatever is set down here, is written without any embellishment. It must have been very early on in the week, as we were carrying on slowly one morning, when we heard a sound of tramping feet, and the singing by a crowd, men and women, of the Sinn Fein marching song, - 'Soldiers are we'.

We were immediately alerted, and made preparations for some kind of attack. Suddenly, rounding a corner we saw a procession of Uniformed men, looking very smart in their uniforms, marching proudly along, as if on some ceremonial parade, and at their head, a slim jaunty, tall woman dressed in a tailor made costume entirely of green coloured cloth. By her side equally as erect and as jauntily, a tall Scots Highlander in Regimental kilts. Every body was singing defiantly except this kilty.

This was the contingent under the command of Countess Markievicz, whose head-quarters had been at the College of Surgeons somewhere on St. Stephen's Green, and the first contingent to capitulate. They were being marched up to Richmond Barracks, between files of Irish Rifles and our men. There they were kept until their trial and sentence, when they were dispersed to other places. The Countess, she at their head, was taken immediately to Kilmainham Jail, as we had no accommodation for women.

This same day, several of us were picketed at the Cathedral end of Marlborough Street, and given the task of closing the road with barbed wire slung across. We had but just completed the task, when an elderly man, clothed in heavy overcoat and a cap pulled down low over his forehead came along, jumping from side to side like a frog, carrying a rock rifle, which he kept discharging in our direction, taking no notice of

our challenge, that we would shoot, if he didn't cease. But on he came, reloading and firing. Suddenly two or three of our men at a command, fired at him.

He must have been killed instantly, for he came forward automatically dropping his weapon, and meeting the barbed wire, erected across the road, hung over it, legs on one side, head and shoulders on our side streaming blood.

We took him down and laid him on the pavement. He had been shot through the centre of the forehead, once through the throat, while two of his fingers dangled by the wool of the glove he wore.

We covered his body with two shutters taken from a shop. He was not moved until the end of the week, for whenever an ambulance showed up in the street on its errand of mercy, it was fired upon...which I nor any of the others were able to understand.

We never knew who he was. Whether his actions were those of a would be bravado, or whether he was drunk. It was never discovered. But when his body was laid out in the mortuary afterwards and carefully examined, aAdwad of Irish notes was found upon him, to a considerable amount. This was the first death I witnessed.

That evening I and a few of my company marched to the goods station at Kingsbridge, and had our first meal of the day supplied by our field kitchen. To me it tasted delicious for I was famished. We stayed there until late the next day .

It was mid-day, and we had just finished dinner. Everyone was lolling about or resting in any and every position, our rifles care-

laid down, and the Officer's Sam Browns and holstered revolvers carelessly dropped by their side as they reclined smoking, when suddenly from a house opposite, standing on a slight rise and overlooking our section of the platform, - came a burst of machine-gun fire. Thank goodness none of us was hit. There was a regular melee as each rushed for weapons and a place of safety. I was standing a few feet away from a piece of artillery at the time, and as I stooped to pick up my rifle and bandolier of rounds, ~~and~~ amidst the din of rushing feet and anxious voices, the artillery piece was fired at that gun nest. We learned afterwards that all the gunners had been killed.

Simultaneous with the sound of the explosion, there was a tearing shattering cacophony. We were stunned and bemused by that thunderous sound, and away we all rushed like so many scared rabbits, officers and men, each seeking to find a place of safety, either in or under the trucks stan^ding at the platform.

Eventually all was quiet again. The stillness descended on the place as suddenly as had that awsome crash. It was then found, that every pane of glass in the whole station had become detached, and shivered into thousands of pieces. The whole was ^adevastating sight.

Suddenly, another machine gun commenced to fire, this time men were firing from the end of the road leading into the station. They soon turned tail when we started to fire in return. They got away without a casualty and that was the end of that excitement.

Each morning ~~and~~ Sergeant and I were detailed to escort many of the housewives - who desired to shop - to the shops to get the essentials for their families, accompanied in many instances by their young children, clinging to them, some laughing, others crying, many extremely poorly clad, half starved, dragging themselves wearily along in

small groups. They were always pleased to have our company, and after shopping were escorted home again.

The afternoon of the Kingsbridge Station episode, we were ordered to make our way to Trinity College. When there, to have our tea, then by way of a side exit we were to take up our headquarters in a studio, which had been used by an artist...a portrait and landscape painter, I believe. This was situated obliquely parallel to the Parnell monument.

Eventually we arrived at the College and entered by way of the main entrance, and though this was the most dangerous part of the city, we experienced no sniping until just as the last man entered the gates. He was shot in the back, and we carried his body in and placed him in the students dining room. He was none other than the Kilted Scotsman I have mentioned before. He had been released that morning from our Barracks, as it had been found, that he had been on furlough, when he was arrested. He had been following behind us. We had our meal and left without further incident.

From then on things became a little confused, because I became a little excited. My officer had recommended me to our Colonel as a man who could be trusted as confidential messenger. From that moment onwards until the end of the rising I was kept busy taking messages and orders to the commanders of the various sections throughout the city, returning with their local reports and progress. I cannot say I relished the duty at the start...though my officer assured me...no ordinary private would have been selected for the duty...being as one might say a raw recruit of only four months ^many experience, and never having had to face fighting conditions before, but, the timidity wore off and the ability to look after myself when performing these missions made me extra alert.

I can well remember near the end of that week, of being sent....

to an officer in charge of a piece of artillery. I found him and the gun's crew within a few steps of what was left of that famous meeting place, Liberty Hall. It was then nothing but a battered hulk of a house. It had been the pride and I believe the headquarters of the Sinn Fein enthusiasts.

Now here, I must relate an action, which to my knowledge has never been made general knowledge, nor can it be contradicted. This relates to the first shelling of the G.P.O

It is on record, and I have seen it in print on more than one occasion, that, the first round which penetrated the Post Office, was fired from a boat on the Liffey. No such thing. That fired from the river, was the shell which entered the side-wall of the Four Courts, creating such havoc and doing so much damage, placing its defenders in such jeopardy that they could do nothing but capitulate.

To return to the officer and the artillery piece. I delivered my message. At his command, after loading the weapon the crew manning it raised its trajectory exceedingly high, swivelled the gun round, and at another fired it. The round went over the railway bridge which crossed the road nearby, at least my memory retains that glimpse of that moment, soaring high, then turned downwards, plunged through the roof of the G.P.O crashed through the floors and setting fire to the material stored in the basement. How true this statement is, can be ascertained from those who may be living today, who helped to man the building at that time.

That shot was NOT fired from the Liffey, for I stood close by and saw the whole manoeuvre, from start to finish. This was the order sent by me from our Commander Colonel Owens. In the archives of the regiment's history will be found this procedure during that week.

I will, at this point digress, if I may, to give a slight pen picture of the city at this date. On the Thursday morning I wandered round the corner by Parnell's Monument, to get a glimpse of the Post Office from which at times spasmodic rifle fire emanated. Opposite the building one or two Lancers horses lay ~~XXXX~~, magnificent in death.

I ventured to take a walk across the road to Henry Street, where I saw the damage done through wanton destruction and looting. Arnott's windows out, and the windows bare. Samuels the small jewellers combining a small waxworks and entertainment hall burnt out, and a dismal wreck, while the picture palace, - standing on the site of which was once Jame's cheap article emporium and waxworks - stood derelict, doors wide open, with no one in charge to prevent any casual, human or animal from entering unchallenged. Frekes the oriental shop, and Goggins Oak shop in Grafton street were also looted.

Months after the end of the rising, flower sellers and paper vendors round the pillar, sported fur coats and bejewelled fingers, which in the usual way, they could never have bought with the profits from their flower selling.

Dublin was a deserted and battered city, as far as the streets were concerned. Every private citizen was behind closed door, and those to be seen in the streets were those in uniform, or snipers occasionally on the roof-tops. The only sounds, tramping, heavy feet, a command and an occasional crack of a rifle.

At length came the momentous day, Sat. April 29th. It was in the afternoon. I had been sent by my officer to obtain from his wife, lodging in Merrion Square, the wages for his company which he had left with her for safety. I arrived without incident, had an enjoyable cup of home made tea, received the money and returned to headquarters, and handed it over.

Inhadn't returned very long, when suddenly round the corner from the G.P.O. direction, came a Red Cross nurse carrying a white flag, whilst marching behind her followed six stalwart Citizen Army men carrying on their shoulders a stretcher supporting a wounded Officer of theirs.

He had been shot in the knee and was obviously in pain. I ran inside and informed the Colonel, who immediately came out to meet them.

"Well?" Colonel Owen snorted in his most officious and stentorian voice. "Well?" he spluttered a second time, "What do you want?"

The six bearers lowered their burden to arms length, and as they did so, I saw the wounded man wince with pain. Then he answered in a clear voice, "I have come personally to know, that if I and my officers surrendered, you would allow the rank and file to return to their homes unconditionally?"

For a moment there was a tense silence. I saw the colonel getting red in the face, then spluttering he ejaculated, getting redder in the face like some school boy caught in some misdemeanour, - "What!!!..you.. you bloody rebel...you..dare..If I had my way, I'd shoot you. I am the one to make terms not you. Listen, if you and your men, everyone of them don't lay down their arms and surrender before nine to-night, and without any conditions attached, and I want an answer as quickly as possible, I'll order the bombardment of the entire city, and raze it to the ground. But see to it that all your women and children, and non-combatant people are got to a place of safety. You'll be responsible for any of their deaths. Take him away..he spluttered...you...bah!

Without another word, the colonel turned on his heel and re-entered the orderly room. It was the most poignant scene I witnessed from the start of the rising to the completion of the court-martials at our barracks.

The six men raised the stretcher to their shoulders again, and the nurse taking her place at their head again, they marched off. Many conflicting thoughts and feelings assailed me just then, ~~for~~ what I had seen seemed callous, for every now and again the face of James Connolly winced with the pain he was evidently enduring. But I suppose these are the episodes which often occur between belligerents.

Immediately they had gone, I was summoned to give a very important message to the Vice-regal Lodge. It covered all that had transpired between our Colonel and James Connolly, and also enquired if there were any further commands or orders to be issued, and if all should be carried out as Colonel Owens had stated.

I reached the Lodge without further incident, delivered my message, after being conducted along many carpeted passages to the person I desired to see, and returned to our head-quarters with a message, which as far as I can nor rightly remember. "Carry on as you intend doing. Drive home a decisive assault in the shortest possible time, with the least possible losses on either side. I expect the rebels to capitulate to you before the day's out."

It's common knowledge to those who survive to-day, who passed through that Easter week, as to what really happened on that fateful Saturday night. Amidst the roar and glare from the bombarded G.P.O, the Gresham Hotel, and Y.M.C.A rooms and other buildings, the shouts and commands of many voices, how the defenders of the G.P.O surrendered and were taken and placed between files of the 3rd Royal Irish Reg, with fixed bayonets, disarmed, and put into the Rotunda Hospital until the time came for them to be escorted to Richmond Barracks at Inchicore. Their arms were piled high before Parnell's monument, by which on the Sunday morning the high-ups of the regiment stood and were photographed. I had one of the pictures for years but eventually

lost it.

During the marshalling of the G.P.O garrison, one of our orderly room men ascended to the roof and hauled down the Defender's flag. This was handed to Colonel Owens who had it displayed always in the Officer's Mess until the 3rd Royal Irish Regiment was disbanded in 1922 on July 31st, when its colours and five silk Union flags of the service battalions were deposited at St. Patrick's. I have been told, the Sinn Fein which flew over the G.P.O was deposited with them.

James Connolly badly wounded, as I have said, in the knee, was taken under escort to the Castle... Dublin Castle... where under close arrest, he received great care and attention from the doctors who attended him, and the Red Cross Nurse, the same I believe who had accompanied him when he visited our Colonel. It's common history, - his ultimate trial, sentence and execution.

My story is told.. the story of the action taken by the 3rd Royal Irish Regiment during that momentous week. There is one other incident which relates to a further duty of mine connected with the rising.

Every morning, for quite a period, the prisoners at our Barracks, were arraigned before the court held in our orderly room, sentenced, and dispersed to other jails, while many were sentenced to be taken to Kilmainham Jail and there executed.

One morning before the Court sat, I was summoned before the Colonel. I was ordered to go immediately to Kilmainham Jail, there to ask for the Commandant, and to give a most important and extremely private message. It was, - "Yes. To-night. The lady in question may take her own priest, and he MUST be recognised by the Prison Chaplain, who must assist."

I fulfilled my duty, bringing back an answer, which was I think this. "Tell your Colonel, - 'all is understood."

It never dawned on me who this could be or why the mystery, until quite recently 1956 when the papers reported the death of a certain lady, an actress once, who had been married to one of the prisoners, the night before his execution.

In conclusion I would like to state, I was no stranger to Dublin, in 1916, for in 1900-I, I had a place of business in Grafton Street, opposite to the little court yard where stands the Carmelite Church, containing Hogan's sculpture of Christ in the tomb.

I personally knew Miss Maud Gonne, and was a friend of Ramsay Collis the then Editor of the Dublin Figaro.

I have been to Dublin lately, and visited other parts and have noted how the country has progressed.

Albert-Geo. Fletcher - Dedmore

April 1954

BUREAU OF MILITARY HISTORY 1913-21
BURO STAIRE MILETA 1913-21
No. W.S. 1,604

Appendix

Copy from "THE STAGE", May 25th, 1916.

T H E D U B L I N T R O U B L E .

By

Albert George Fletcher-Desborough.

Late, Lewis Gun Instructor Sergeant, 3rd Royal Irish Reg.

Copy from "THE STAGE", May 25th 1916.

BUREAU OF MILITARY HISTORY 1913-2

BURO STAIRE MILEATA 1913-21

NO. W.S. 1,604

THE DUBLIN TROUBLE.

By

Albert George Fletcher-Desborough.

Late Lewis Hun Instructor Sergeant, 3rd Royal Irish Reg.

Sir,

I was very interested in your articles in a recent number of THE STAGE relating to the terrible times in Dublin, as I believe I hold a unique position by being, the only attested soldier who took part in the revolution of this terrible, dark Easter Week.

As an actor..in an Irish Regiment..I mean.

I may claim, I think, an extraordinary experience for an experimenter, for I was through the rebellion from start to finish, unscathed, sleeping in the streets in full kit, experiencing only two hours rest each night, with the exception of the seventh day the Sunday, when I was allowed to sleep for six.

I was selected from our company A as messenger between our Col. and the various N.C.S. and Officers commanding their sections, and I was standing waiting for other orders, when James Connolly, (the commandant of the whole Dublin District) was carried up to our Headquarters on a stretcher, carried by six smart rebels, preceded by a Red Cross Nurse, wounded severely in the knee. 'Twas there and then that the first portion of the capitulation of the Sinn Feinn Rebels was spoken of with any terms of peace. This was at 4 o'clock, on Sat. April 29th.

I was about twenty feet away when the first round was fired from a 15-pounder at a nest of machine-gunners in a house opposite the

goods station, in which the rebels were sheltering. I was close by Parnell's Monument when Sachville, and I believe ^{8/}Henry Street at the same time, was looted.

I can assure you it has been a never-to-be-forgotten experience, and one that will live in the memory of every combatant. Dublin the 'Fair City' - and she was a fair city - is now desolate and partially in ruins. Through the madness of a few men, who thought they could beat the disciplined army, its resistance and numbers, coerce the Government, and raise a Republic Ireland, many promising, clever men, leaders in their sphere of life, have met premature deaths. Many civilians have been killed, as the hastily-made mounds in the cemeteries will testify.

Homes have been plunged to sorrow, shame and degradation; ruin; through the lawlessness that remained unchecked that 'dark' fearsome week - and many small shop-keepers ruined. Where stood Sackville and O'Connell Streets now are intermingled with tons and tons of debris.

Never shall I forget that Thursday night, April 27th, when the sky was lurid with the fires from the G.P.O, The Imperial or Gresham Hotel with the Y.M.C.A; and other establishments; and above the crackling of the flames, the shouts of frenzied and excited people arose the sounds of artillery bombardment as they sought out the hiding places of the rebels, the rapid crackling of combatant rifles and the splutter of machine-gun fire.. It was a night to remember, and as I write this letter I feel thankful, when remembering the chances we ran of being sniped, that I am safe and wound within barrack quarters, patiently awaiting the first announcement of some play to be presented at one of the theatres to break the present monotony.

Albert Geo Fletcher-Desborough.

Author and Late proprietor of

"The Wail of the Banshee Co"

BUREAU OF MILITARY HISTORY 1913-21

BUREAU STAIRS MILITARY 1913-21

NO. W.S. 1,604