

ORIGINAL

BUREAU OF MILITARY HISTORY 1913-21

BURO STAIRÉ MILÉATA 1913-21

No. W.S. 1,615

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BUREAU OF MILITARY HISTORY, 1913-21

STATEMENT BY WITNESS.

DOCUMENT NO. W.S. 1615.

Witness

Seán Keogh,
Smithstown,
Ballinlough,
Kells,
Co. Meath.

Identity.

O/C 5th Battn., Meath Brigade.

Subject.

Crossakiel Coy., Irish Volunteers,
Co. Meath, 1914-21.

Conditions, if any, Stipulated by Witness.

Nil.

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ORIGINAL

STATEMENT OF SEAN KEOGH

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Smithstown, Ballinlough, Kells, Co. Meath.

I was born in Smithstown, Ballinlough, Co. Meath, on 27th April 1898. I attended the local National School. When I was 12 years of age my father, who was a farmer, died. I left school then and started to work on the farm.

A company of the Irish National Volunteers was formed in Crossakiel in the year 1914 which I joined at the start. The strength of the company was about 200. They had been organised by a Captain Worship Booker, an officer in the British army, reserve. We were drilled by this officer and an ex-British army man named Terence Brady. The company ceased to exist after about six months when John Redmond offered the Volunteers to England in their supposed fight for small nationalities.

In September 1915, I went to an agricultural college run by the Franciscan Brothers at Mountbellew, Co. Galway, for a course in agricultural training. Shortly after going there a company of the Irish Volunteers was formed from among the students attending the course. It was organised by a John Casserley who drilled us in the college grounds. We numbered 24. The R.I.C. often saw us drilling, but took no notice. But for the fact that we were all sent home for Easter holidays in 1916, it is possible that we may have taken part in the events of Easter Week in Co. Galway.

I returned to Mountbellew after the holidays and finished the course in July 1916.

A week or so after coming home, a sports meeting was held at Stonefield, about two miles from my home. On the occasion I organised a group of the young men in my area and lined them up four-deep and marched them to the sports meeting. At a ceili that evening I was approached by Sean Hayes (later

Commandant Sean Hayes), Frank O'Higgins (brother of Brian O'Higgins) and Phil Tevlin, who explained to me the aims and objects of the I.R.B. and asked me if I would like to join. I agreed, so they asked me to meet them at Drumbaragh, Kells, on the following night. I kept the appointment and was sworn in a member of the Drumbaragh Circle by Frank O'Higgins. It appears that the Circle had only a short time before been organised by Mick Price. The I.R.B. meetings were held in a disused private house at Drumbaragh. The house was also used for drill and instruction in the use of firearms.

From the moment I joined the I.R.B. in July 1916, I set about organising a company of Volunteers in my own area.

I confided in five men at first and, by the end of the year, had 25 men enrolled in the company. We started off drilling in the fields by night, using shotguns and wooden rifles.

By March of 1917, our strength had reached 40, when company officers were appointed. I was appointed captain, Tom Manning became 1st Lieutenant and James O'Neill, 2nd Lieut. After his appointment as 1st Lieutenant, Tom Manning was accepted into the I.R.B. Circle in Drumbaragh. Regular weekly drilling continued to the end of the year.

Coming up to the conscription crisis in 1918, our strength increased to 100 men. Most of our new members dropped out when it was over, which left our strength approximately 45. By this time, other companies had been organised in Oldcastle, Ballinlough, Stonefield, Whitegate, Ballinacree and Moylough. In the summer of this year a by-election took place in Co.Cavan. Arthur Griffith, the Sinn Fein candidate, won by a good majority.

Members of Crossakiel Company and other companies in Co. Meath spent a couple of days in Bailieboro and Virginia canvassing and working for the success of Arthur Griffith. At the general election at the end of the year, Arthur Griffith was returned unopposed. But in our area in Co. Meath, we had a busy time canvassing for the Sinn Fein candidate, Liam Mellows

On polling day we did police duty at the polling booths. Liam Mellows beat his Nationalist opponent. On the evening of the election we tied a Sinn Fein flag to a pump opposite the police barracks in Crossakiel. As the R.I.C. came out to remove it we intervened, with the result that a scuffle took place for a short while. We managed to save the flag.

Early in 1919, all companies in the area were formed into a battalion which became one of six battalions comprising the Meath Brigade, and was known as the 5th Battalion, with H.Q. at Oldcastle. Seamus Cogan, captain of Stonefield, was appointed Battalion O/C. Phil Tevlin, vice-O/C. and, as well as I can remember, Peter O'Connell became battalion adjutant.

About a month later, Phil Tevlin resigned the post of vice-O/C., but continued to be a member of the Volunteers. I was appointed in his place. From about the end of the year we ceased to drill in the open, but met at night in the fields and continued to drill and carry out field exercises. Around this time the brigade O/C., Sean Boylan, issued an order to collect all arms in our area. The order was carried out in each company area. In almost every case the arms, ~~which were~~ were surrendered voluntarily. In a couple of cases where the people were hostile, we raided their homes and seized the guns. As we approached the home of one of the occupants who was hostile he opened fire with his shotgun. We failed to get his gun. In all, about 50 shotguns, a few old revolvers, two .32 rifles and four .22 rifles were collected in the battalion area. Soon after, a battalion Q.M. - Matt Tevlin - was appointed.

In the month of July 1920, the R.I.C. evacuated Crossakiel, Carnaross and Stirrupstown barracks. We then received an order from the Brigade O/C. to have those three barracks burned down. With members of the local company, I helped to burn down Crossakiel barracks and, later that night, went to Carnaross where I helped the local company there to burn down the evacuated building.

Soon after the burning of Carnaross barracks, a Sinn Fein Court was established in the area. Jimmy Roche was appointed Chairman, while the local I.R.A. took over the police duties of the district. An I.R.A. man named Paddy McDonnell was appointed battalion O/C. of police. At the end of July, a case of cattle stealing occurred in the area. A man named John Farrelly came under suspicion. The battalion O/C., Seamus Cogan, Owen Clarke, Jimmie O'Neill, Harry Sheridan, Tom Lynch and myself called to Farrelly's house one evening and arrested him and placed him in a motor car which we had commandeered for the purpose of taking him to an "unknown destination". Cogan, Clarke, O'Neill, Sheridan and Lynch got into the car with their prisoner. After passing through the town of Oldcastle on their way, they ran into a section of military who had just dismounted from a lorry. The officer in charge put up his hand to halt the car. The car slowed down until it reached the officer; when it did so Cogan gave the order "drive on", at the same time drawing his revolver. The driver, Jimmy O'Neill, accelerated. The military opened fire; the boys in the car replied with revolver fire and got through the military patrol. When the car reached a crossroads a short distance further on, one man in the car said "turn right", another one said "turn left", with the result that O'Neill swung the car across the road. It crossed a ditch and landed in a field. Here they discovered that Cogan had been shot dead while O'Neill, Sheridan and their prisoner were wounded. Those who were not wounded carried Cogan's body to the house of people named Gavan, a short distance away, where he was found next day by the military and taken to Kells where an inquest was held.

After the inquest, Cogan's body was handed over to his relatives who took it to St. Columbcille's Church, Kells. On the following Sunday he was buried with full military honours in a newly-acquired Republican plot attached to

Ballinlough Church. It was the biggest funeral ever seen in the area, the cortege being over four miles long. One of the injured men - Sheridan - spent some time in the Mater Hospital, Dublin, where he was treated for an injury to the shin bone.

After the death of Cogan, I was appointed battalion O/C. and Tom Manning replaced me as battalion Vice-O/C. In the month of August, Seamus Finn, the brigade adjutant, arrested an Irishman - Thomas Maguire - who was a Private in the Leinster Regiment of the British army. He was home on leave at the time. He (Finn) sent the prisoner under an escort of three Volunteers to me with a message that he would be useful as a musketry instructor. It appears that Maguire told Finn that he was fed up with the army and did not want to go back. I employed him on the farm with four or five other hands who were mostly members of the I.R.A. They kept Maguire under constant observation. After about two months he slipped away one morning and, on the following morning, at 3.30 a.m. my house was surrounded by military. Maguire was in uniform with the raiding party. I was arrested and taken to Kells police barracks and then to Mountjoy. I was tried at Kilmainham where Maguire gave evidence against me. After my trial I was taken back to Mountjoy. In about three weeks time I was taken to the Castle and brought before a Major-General Boyd, who informed me that I had been sentenced to twelve months for the illegal detention of one of His Majesty's forces. After reading the sentence over to me, Boyd told me that they doubted the story told by Maguire and asked me to give my word of honour that I would resign from the I.R.A. I told him I was not a member of the I.R.A. and therefore could not resign from an organisation of which I was not a member. After some further discussion about Sinn Fein, I was released from the Castle and came home. It was the end of February 1921.

Just before my arrest, road trenching and the demolition of bridges commenced in the battalion area and continued while I was in jail up to the Spring of 1921. Military filled in the trenches by day, but at night they were opened again by local Volunteers. Later, the military carried planks which they placed across the trenches and were able to proceed from place to place by lorry or Crossley tender.

On 24th March 1921, Paddy McDonnell's house was surrounded by a party of Tans. Paddy and his brother, Tommy, were coming in from the fields and were ordered to put up their hands and halt. They started to run. The Tans opened fire. Paddy was wounded and fell. He was arrested and taken to Kells police barracks where he died, twelve hours later, without medical attention. Tommy escaped, having received a bullet through his hat. After the usual inquest, Paddy's body was handed over to his relatives who brought him to St. Columbcille's Church in Kells. After a public funeral he was buried with military honours in the republican plot at Ballinlough. As in the case of Cogan's funeral, neither police nor military put in an appearance at the burial.

Road trenching was still in operation and, after the death of McDonnell, the battalion staff organised an ambush for a place named Sylvan Park, Kells, on the main road to Ballinlough. On 1st April 1921, about 45 Volunteers from the various companies in the battalion assembled at the selected spot. Seamus Finn, whose permission had been obtained, got us eight service rifles; the remainder had shotguns, one or two had .22 rifles. We remained in a disused house nearby until dawn. Among the officers in charge were Seamus Finn and Sean Farrelly.

At dawn, the main body took up positions behind a stone wall with a wood at the back of them. With two others I took up a position 100 yards from the main body on the opposite side

nearer to Ballinlough. We were armed with three rifles. A mine had already been placed in the centre of the road. I cannot give an accurate account as to the composition of the mine, which was in a tin box. Having remained in position all day without any sign of the enemy, it was decided at 3 p.m. to abandon the attempted ambush. Five or six men were in the act of lifting the mine when a police tender arrived on the scene. The tender was pulled up as soon as the R.I.C. saw the men on the road. The men ran for cover while a few of the men still in position behind the stone wall opened fire on the tender. As they did so, we three opened fire from our positions. The R.I.C. and Tans replied and immediately drove out of the ambushade. One Tan was shot through the chest.

On the night of the ambush I slept in a house near Oldcastle. A large-scale round-up by enemy forces followed, during which my house was raided. The news was conveyed to me by Paddy McDonnell's sister. I decided to come home next day to investigate the raid. On the way I walked into a party of about 90 military, R.I.C. and Tans. They were travelling in twelve lorries. I was arrested and I gave a false name. One R.I.C. man, however, identified me. I was taken to Kells R.I.C. barracks and then transferred to Navan Workhouse where the South Wales Borderers were stationed. From Navan I was taken to Dunshaughlin Workhouse, thence to Arbour Hill barracks, Dublin, and to the South Dublin Union and eventually to Rath Camp, Curragh, where I was served with an internment order.

Some time after my arrival in the internment camp, an escape tunnel was completed. Forty-six men had succeeded in escaping when the 47th man was caught as he emerged from the tunnel. I was the next man. We were very disappointed. A week later, eleven of us were tried again, this time from one of a number of isolation tents in the compound. We were all

caught, brought before a field general courtmartial in Gough Barracks and sentenced to 12 months. After a week in handcuffs we were loaded into a lorry and driven to Kilkenny Jail. After 18 days of tunneling from disused basement cells there we had made a tunnel 50 feet long. I was one of 47 prisoners to escape. The tunnel caved in on the 48th man. I was in a group of six men who, a couple of mornings later, met a Bill Callaghan in Castlecomer who gave us a revolver each. We walked to Dublin and stayed at St. Enda's College that night. Next day I bought a suit of clothes and came home. The Truce had been in operation for a few days.

After my arrest on 4th April, Charles Conaty was appointed battalion O/C. in my place. Around the same time, great changes had taken place in the I.R.A. organisation in Co. Meath and the rest of Ireland. The Meath Brigade became the nucleus of the 1st Eastern Division which comprised nine brigades. We now became the 2nd Battalion of No. 3 Brigade. Sean Boylan, Brigade O/C. of Meath, became Divisional O/C., while Seamus Finn, Brigade Adjutant of Meath, became Divisional Adjutant. Patrick Farley and his brother, Sean Farley, became Brigade O/C. and Vice O/C. respectively of No. 3 Brigade.

Signed: Sean Healy

Date: 16th May 1957

Witness: John J. Doherty

