ROINN COSANTA.

BUREAU OF MILITARY HISTORY, 1913–21.

STATEMENT BY WITNESS.

DOCUMENT NO. W.S. 1673.

Witness

Daniel E. Ryan,
40, Merton Drive,
Ranelagh,
Dublin.

Identity.

Lieut. 'F' Coy., 2nd Battn., Dublin Brigade.

Subject.

Escape from Hare Park Internment Camp, 1921.

Conditions, if any, Stipulated by Witness.

Nil.

File No S. 2991.

Form B.S.M. 2

ORIGINAL

STATEMENT BY DANIEL E. RYAN,

40, Merton Drive, Ranelagh, Dublin.

I am not sure whether it was a company or a Battalion Council meeting that I attended on a Monday night in 1920 in a little house occupied by two sisters and situated in a safe quarter off Jones's Road. It was soon after Bloody Sunday and at the time I was a Lieutenant of 'F' Company, 2nd Battalion, Dublin Brigade. The Company Captain, the late Patrick J. Sweeney, declared that "our friends the enemy" were attempting to gain the offensive and that something must be done. Turning to me, he said: "Turn out on Wednesday night next with eight picked men from your half-company and you will receive your orders". I was proud to think that I was chosen to begin the offensive as far as 'F' Company was concerned.

On Tuesday I received my orders. Every evening about 8 p.m., an enemy lorry occupied by military came along at a slow pace from Dollymount towards the city. It was an open lorry, an unusual thing in that period of caged and armoured lorries, and it appeared to be a "soft thing" to attack.

At about 7.30 p.m. on the Wednesday evening, we took up positions in groups of twos and threes near the wall at each side of the road at the Dollymount side of Newcomen Bridge, and waited patiently. To have patience with a revolver in one pocket and a Mills bomb in the other, and suspected spies everywhere around, was not an easily acquired virtue. About 8.30 p.m. the lorry appeared and Pat Sweeney's words came back to me: "The enemy must be attacked; we must gain the offensive". As the lorry

approached, I moved nearer to the wall, drew the pin from the Mills bomb and lobbed the latter at the lorry. My companions fired a few revolver shots at the military and then, in the ensuing confusion as the soldiers fired indiscriminately, we slipped quickly and quietly away from the scene. Although the usual official notice appeared in the Press on the following morning to the effect that there were no military casualties, it was learned later that two of the occupants of the lorry had sustained injuries. Incidentally, Oscar Traynor, the Brigade O/C, informed me later that Michael Collins was in the vicinity at the time of the ambush and that he (Collins) was held up and searched by the military.

On the following Friday when going with a companion along Harcourt St., the latter remarked as we turned into St. Stephen's Green, "Good heavens, here is Igoe and his crowd". Igoe and his gang of plain clothes R.I.C. men and secret service men were then fairly well known to members of the Dublin Brigade. In our case, to turn suddenly back would have been disastrous. We attempted to walk nonchalantly past them and had almost begun to congratulate ourselves on our escape, when one of the gang, a man named Connolly (who had escaped, as he was absent from his digs on Bloody Sunday morning, and who was a prominent Crown witness during the trial of Frank Teeling) stepped over and confronted me. Instantly some of the others gather around and a number of guns were shoved into my face. I was searched, my parabellum, which was in my pocket, was taken, and I got various kicks on the way to the Castle via Cuffe St., Aungier St. and George's St.

Once inside, I got my "desserts". Any man captured with a gun at that period is well aware of the welcome that awaited him in Dublin Castle. After the usual process of interrogation in the Intelligence Room, I was removed to the guard room to mingle with the pleasant company of 'F' Company of the Auxiliaries.

After a week or so, I was shifted out to the City Hall - at that time occupied by the Black and Tans - and with another prisoner, a typical big Kerryman from Ballylongford, I was told that if I made any attempt to escape I would be plugged immediately. That night, Joe Rochford and Paddy Moran were brought in. Both are now dead. Paddy Moran was executed in Mountjoy Prison some time later after trial by courtmartial in connection with the Mount St. shootings. Joe Rochford died in 1925 from the effects of his campaigning. The Kerryman and myself spread out our bed, meagre though it was, to share it with Paddy and Joe.

A few days later I was removed to Arbour Hill Detention Barracks. I met many smiling faces there, including Seamus McNamara who was tried with Paddy Moran for the Bloody Sunday shootings, Jimmy Boyce, and several more whose names I cannot readily recall. We were detained there for about two weeks, and every day rumours of our removal were flying about. At last the eventful day arrived. All prisoners were paraded before the prison staff, and an officer approached with a file of papers and proceeded to read aloud certain names. I heard my name called and immediately fell out to pack my belongings. That morning, over 100 of us were destined for Hare Park Camp at

the Curragh, and we were conveyed there under escort in about 10 lorries, with an armoured car in front and rear and two British army aeroplanes soaring overhead.

The morning was bitterly cold and a drive of 30 miles in a lorry was far from pleasant. As we proceeded on our journey, we amused ourselves by singing national songs, and the soldiers of the escort laughed when an officer put a gun up to one of our boys and told him to stop singing rebel songs. To the great delight of the soldiers, our party sang a parody of "Rule Brittania" which infuriated the officer still more.

We arrived at our destination about 5.30 p.m., weary and hungry. We were duly searched and allotted our places in the huts. A crowd of us who were old members of the Dublin Brigade had no desire to be separated, and we luckily succeeded in remaining together. We were about the first batch of prisoners to arrive at Hare Park Camp. For the first week, on account of our changed addresses, we received none of the usual parcels from our friends outside, and to say that we were often hungry during that week would be putting it mildly.

A friend in the enemy's camp invariably proves a valuable possession. In our case he turned out to be an exceptionally valuable one. When strolling around the camp one morning after breakfast, I accidentally opened the door of a hut which appeared to be in the course of construction, and to my great surprise and delight, who rushed over to me but the late Jerry Gaffney who was an active member of 'E' Company, 2nd Battalion, Dublin Brigade, and who was then employed as a carpenter at the Curragh Camp. After a warm handshake, Jerry produced a packet of cigarettes and we discussed

the question of getting into communication with G.H.Q. as early as possible. I arranged with him to bring in a couple of loaves of bread and some cigarettes daily, and he did not spare himself in this respect. He also conveyed to me letters that the censor had not the pleasure of reading. That went on for a week or more, and then we discussed thoroughly the question that was uppermost in my mind, that of escape.

With Gaffney's assistance there was a sporting chance of getting out. The next question was: who should go? I approached the senior I.R.A. officer amongst the prisoners in the camp. That officer was the late Rory O'Connor, Director of Engineering at G.H.Q. He was a prisoner under an assumed name and had kept his identity a secret from the enemy and from many of the prisoners. He had often planned escapes for others. Now he was to have the pleasure of planning his own.

I told him that I saw a possible chance of escape but I would not disclose my plans until one condition was entered into - i.e. that I should be one of the two or three to escape. That was the greatest number I estimated could hope to get out without arousing suspicion. To this he smiled and said: "That's the spirit; you can do more outside than here. There are too many locked up". He added that he had been thinking of a possible way of escape since his arrival.

I immediately revealed my plans to him. I told him about my meetings with Jerry Gaffney and to what extent the latter was prepared to go to help us. Rory hesitated. I could see he was thinking deeply, and then a torrent of questions in rapid succession: "Are you well acquainted with Gaffney?" "How long do you know him?" "Can you trust him?". I replied that

I knew Gaffney for a considerable time, that he was a good Volunteer, and that I was prepared to place implicit confidence in him. We decided that Rory should meet Jerry as soon as possible, as time was precious and the camp authorities were introducing stricter regulations each day.

I lost no time in arranging the interview. Accordingly, on the following day, Rory, Jerry and myself sat in a disused hut at the end of the compound and discussed in detail the proposed escape. We decided that only three at the most could hope to escape successfully, and with this end in view Rory and I approached a certain prisoner, and after relating our plans we were surprised to meet with his refusal, the reason given being that he was in failing health. We did not court another refusal and decided that both of us would make the attempt.

The plan was that we should escape in the guise of two workmen. Dungarees, together with the various articles that comprise a tradesman's outfit, were smuggled in by Gaffney within the next couple of days and were secreted in a safe place. He also secured for us faked discs and passes and everything was then in readiness to await a favourable opportunity. We decided that Friday, being pay day amongst the workmen, would be the best day to chance our luck. We could let our plans be known only to a few sincere and trusted comrades, and then only when it was absolutely necessary, such as when we wanted someone to keep watch whilst we did some little job or other on the sly. Success depended on keeping our plans a secret as it was well known that the enemy always had a number of paid hirelings among prisoners in camps and jails.

Friday morning came and the suspense was almost unbearable throughout the day. It had been decided that 5.30 p.m. should be the hour to try our luck as that was the hour at which the workmen left each evening. About 3.30 p.m. Rory approached me while I was strolling around and to my utter disappointment said: "That's all off this evening. I shall explain later". The tone of his remark did not invite questions and he went away hurriedly, but knowing Rory well I knew that he had some good reason for calling it off. The reason was, and it was well he thought of it, the roll would be called in the camp at 6.30 p.m. We would have been missed within an hour of our departure and our chances of success would have accordingly diminished.

Later on that evening we had another impromptu meeting in the old hut and it was arranged to make the attempt on the following day, Saturday. Saturday came, and after breakfast Rory and I had a long discussion.

About 12.30 p.m. we both rambled away from the general body of the prisoners and made our way to the hut in which all our requisites were hidden. We dressed in the dungarees, smeared our faces with dust to make ourselves look like workmen, got our discs and passes ready, and after putting the finishing touches to our personal appearance we silently opened the door of the hut and, with a saw and tools under our arms, followed in the train of about a dozen workmen to the exit gates. We had to pass through two gates, with a full guard on each, and the majority of the workmen were well known to the guards on each gate.

As we approached the gate I could feel my heart beating quickly, my breathing became jerky and my senses began to weaken. At the exit I brazened myself up, produced my pass and disc, which were examined and found to be in order by the sentry at the first gate. We next approached the second gate and, to my horror, I recognised the sentry on duty. This particular soldier was always sympathetic and when passing me in the camp invariably greeted me with the remark, "Hard lines, old man". I could feel myself sagging when he looked at the card and disc and then looked at me. Fortunately, I had a cap pulled down on the right-hand side of my face. He again looked at the disc and at me - these few seconds seemed like an eternity - and then he said, "All right, pass on". I have often wondered since if he did really recognise me. The gate was opened and we passed out through it.

We slouched away down the road, keeping a distance from the workmen. When we got out of sight of the camp, we made our way across fields in the direction of Kildare railway station. In an old cowhouse we discarded our dungarees and tools and endeavoured to make ourselves look a little presentable. Rory turned to me and said, "Thank God, they have been caught napping again".

After half an hour's plodding across the fields, we arrived at Kildare railway station in time to catch a train to Dublin. Rory went to the booking office and purchased two first-class return tickets for Dublin. Not that we intended to return, but in case we were missed before roll call, and inquiries were made at the station, this would help to turn the enemy off the scent.

We got off the train at Lucan and walked about a mile from the railway station to the old steam tram which then ran from Lucan to Parkgate St. When we were about halfway along the road, we saw a tender load of Auxiliaries coming along. Rory remarked: "I'm afraid it's all up, but walk on". We walked on, and as the tender drew near it pulled up. Had they got word of our escape? One of the Auxiliaries asked if that was the road to Newbridge. Rory replied, "Yes", and, much to our relief, the tender continued on its way.

We arrived in Dublin about 3 p.m., and after a warm handshake and arranging to meet later, we parted at Parkgate St. I went to my digs, no doubt a risky thing to do, and when my landlady opened the door she nearly collapsed. However, the welcome was splendid.

That night, with Rory I had the pleasure of meeting and being congratulated by Michael Collins, Gearóid O'Sullivan and other members of the G.H.Q. staff, all of whom were delighted to get a first-hand account of the first escape of prisoners from an internment camp in Ireland.

Signed: D[illegible]

Date: 16th. September 1957

Witness: [illegible]
(Investigator).