

ORIGINAL

BUREAU OF MILITARY HISTORY 1913-21

BURO STAIRÉ MILEATA 1913 21

No. W.S. 1,676

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BUREAU OF MILITARY HISTORY, 1913-21.

STATEMENT BY WITNESS.

DOCUMENT NO. W.S. 1676.

Witness

Robert C. Ahern,
18, Friar's Walk,
Cork.

Identity.

Intelligence Officer, Cork No. 1 Brigade.

Subject.

'D' Coy., 2nd Battn., Cork No. 1 Bgde., I.R.A.
1917 - 1921.

Conditions, if any, Stipulated by Witness.

Nil.

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No. W.S. 1676

STATEMENT BY ROBERT AHERN,

18, Friar's Walk, Cork.

I was born in the City of Cork, and in April, 1917, joined 'B' Company of the Cork City Battalion, Irish Volunteers. At that time there was only one battalion of Volunteers in the city. Tomás McCurtain, Seán Sullivan, and Seán Scallan were then brigade officers. Ned Lynch and Frank McCarthy were officers in 'B' Company.

It was, so far as I can remember, early in the year 1918 when three battalions were formed in Cork City. These were known as the 1st, 2nd, and 3rd Battalions, Cork No. 1 Brigade. To the best of my recollection, the 3rd Battalion was in existence for a few months only, perhaps for six or eight months. It then amalgamated with the 1st and 2nd Battalions. My company, formerly known as 'B' Company, became 'D' Company, 2nd Battalion, Cork No. 1 Brigade. The 2nd Battalion area covered, roughly speaking, the city and suburbs lying south of the River Lee. 'D' Company district extended from Evergreen Road to Douglas, and northwards to Ballinlough.

On the formation of 'D' Company, Ignatius O'Callaghan was appointed Captain, with William ("Sailor") Barry as 1st Lieutenant. We had upwards of about one hundred and twenty men in the company, and we drilled in the Black Ash and Frankfield districts. In the early stages we had very few guns of any description. At a rough estimate I would say we had no more than half a dozen revolvers. Our supply of arms was subsequently increased as the result of many successful night raids for arms which were carried out by small groups from the company

on houses of people in our district known to possess shotguns or sporting rifles. These people were mostly of the British army or navy officer class. I cannot give any estimate of what we obtained from these raids.

To supplement our small store of weapons, we made bombs from tin canisters filled with scrap and fitted with detonators and fuses. At the time - about mid 1918 - I was employed as an apprentice blacksmith in the firm of Merrick & Son, Parnell Place, Cork, and I was, therefore, in a position to obtain plenty of scrap metal and iron for use in the construction and filling of these crude bombs. With other men from 'D' Company, I worked at night making the bombs in outoffices belonging to market gardeners named Neville at Ballinlough, Cork. The Neville brothers were members of 'D' Company too. Our instructor was a man named Leo Kenny, an electric fitter by trade. He, too, was a 'D' Company man.

Quite a large number of home-made bombs were made by us at Neville's place. They were exploded by first lighting the fuse, and when we had tried them out they proved very dangerous to handle. As a matter of fact, we had several very close escapes from serious injury, or even worse, from the premature explosion of these crude weapons. So far as I am aware, they were never subsequently used against the enemy.

When working at Merrick's, I remember being given a pattern of a Mills grenade from which to make a casting. This I did. A good number of 'casings' were made in Merrick's from the casting, and were handed over to the brigade. The firm which I have mentioned were known to be loyalist and Freemason; consequently, the job of making these casings had to be carried out with great caution to avoid discovery by those in the firm who were

well known for their loyalist sympathies. I was not alone in doing this work. There were quite a few I.R.A. men employed at Merrick's who did their part too.

Attempt to ambush R.I.C. patrol at Ballinrea:

It was early in 1919, so far as I can remember, when a party of us lay in ambush at Ballinrea, a country district about three miles south east of Douglas. The object was to ambush a party of R.I.C. men who had gone on bicycles to Ballinrea where a horse racing meeting was being held. There were about fifteen men in our party, but only about six of us were armed with revolvers. The remainder were unarmed. Some of these latter acted as scouts and some as a 'stand-by' in case they were required. I remember that Ignatius O'Callaghan, the Captain of our company, who was in charge, William ("Sailor") Barry, Ed. Fitzgibbon, William Aherne, M. Scallan, and myself carried revolvers. I am not sure of the number of the R.I.C. patrol, but I would say it would not be more than three or four. We were in position from about noon until the late afternoon, when, for some reason which I cannot now recollect, the job was called off. I think that the R.I.C. returned by a different route to that expected by us.

Raid on Woodward's premises, Cork:

In September, 1919, picked men from the 2nd Battalion took part in a raid during the evening on the premises of Messrs. Woodward, Copley St., Cork, where a large number of bicycles for delivery to the military were stored. I was one of those who took part. A few of us were armed with revolvers in case of a surprise by police or military, but the job was carried out successfully, hundreds of bicycles being taken away on carts and otherwise.

Some of these bicycles were sent out to the country I.R.A. units, where they proved of great value as a means of transport for our lads as the use of motor vehicles by civilians was prohibited except under permit from the British military authorities. About twenty-five men from 'D' Company took part in this raid. It is only right to record that Woodward's stores was in close proximity to Union Quay R.I.C. Barracks. The police were quite unaware that the raid was taking place.

Raid on Morton's gunshop, Cork:

In late November, 1919, a very successful night raid was carried out by our company on the premises of Messrs. Morton, gunsmiths, Oliver Plunkett St., Cork. The shop was situated in the centre of the city between Union Quay and Tuckey St. R.I.C. Barracks. Patrols of R.I.C. frequently passed the shop or in the immediate vicinity. With "Sailor" Barry in charge, seven of us forced an entrance into the shop at night, whilst six other men from 'D' Company acted as scouts at points nearby.

We obtained about half a dozen shotguns and a hundred cartridges, two miniature rifles, about a thousand rounds of slugs, a cartridge loader and an assortment of shotgun and revolver parts. A motor car was commandeered and the captured 'stuff' removed to a safe place. All of our lads got away without interference by police or detectives.

Raids on mails:

From early 1919 onwards, raids on mails were of very frequent occurrence in our district, postmen being held up when delivering the mail. Letters addressed to

military, police personnel or known loyalists were examined and passed on to the Battalion Intelligence Officer. These raids often resulted in the obtaining of valuable information relating to the movements of enemy secret service agents who were then becoming very active in Cork.

Late in 1919 or early in 1920 I was appointed 'D' Company Intelligence Officer, and later in 1920 I acted as Battalion I/O.

As Company Intelligence Officer, I organised the arrangements for transmitting weekly reports to me by 'D' Company men engaged in various occupations. Certain men employed in publichouses, hotels, railways, on the docks and in business houses, were nominated by me to report anything, no matter how trivial it might appear, which related to enemy activity or personnel. The intelligence officers of the nine companies comprising the 2nd Battalion met each week and considered these reports. The results were sent on to the Battalion Intelligence Officer, who, with his opposite number from the 1st Battalion, submitted them to the Brigade Staff for discussion and decision.

I was not employed at the time I was appointed Battalion Intelligence Officer and, consequently, could devote all my time to the work of watching the movements of military and police to and from barracks, noting the strength and the time of arrival and departure of enemy patrols, keeping watch on the houses and on the movements of suspected spies, and generally being on the alert for signs of enemy activity of any kind. Reports on all these matters I passed on to the brigade.

One result of the extensive system of intelligence developed in the 2nd Battalion was the numerous and very successful raids carried out by men of the battalion on the premises of the Cork-Bandon and Cork-Macroom railway in Cork City. To these stations were consigned an enormous quantity of military stores of all kinds - provisions, clothing, boots, bicycles, and general canteen supplies - for the large military barracks in Cork and the south west generally. I engaged a special section of unemployed men of the battalion to watch for the arrival of trains bringing these military stores and to take immediate action to have the stuff removed before the military arrived to take delivery. Sometimes these men acted on their own initiative, other times they were helped by men hurriedly mobilised for the purpose. Apart from the nuisance value of these raids, a very large quantity of military stores was captured by us. The stuff was taken to a dump prepared in the grounds of the Cork Agricultural Society's showgrounds at the Marina, Cork. At the time, the Neville brothers (to whom I have previously referred in connection with the making of bombs at Ballinlough) were caretakers at the showgrounds. Consequently, admittance to the grounds could be obtained at any time, day or night.

The military authorities were not, of course, long about making these raids of ours more difficult. Military guards were posted at stations and a close watch was kept on persons entering or leaving the railway premises. Notwithstanding these precautions, we succeeded in taking away quantities of goods even while the military guards were present. In this we were helped by railway employees, porters, shunters, engine drivers and others, many of whom were themselves members of the I.R.A., or, if not

actually members, were sympathetic. Some members of our raiding parties were always armed with revolvers, but quite a few were not.

I held the position of 2nd Battalion Intelligence Officer for a few months only in 1920, and was then transferred to the brigade as I/O in the latter part of that year. This position I held up to and subsequent to the Truce of July, 1921. I was engaged wholetime as Brigade I/O and from (so far as I can remember) April, 1921, was in receipt of £4 per week, plus £1 entertainment allowance from brigade funds. The extra £1 allowance was given to cover my expenses when in the company of British military and Black and Tans whom I met in publichouses and hotels in Cork City. It was part of my job to meet those people, engage them in conversation and obtain as much information as possible about their own duties, about the names of the more prominent members of the British Intelligence Service, their movements and anything else which might be useful to us in countering their activities. I need hardly add that the allowance was quite insufficient for the purpose intended.

One of the main tasks I had was to uncover civilian spies, some of whom were in the pay of the enemy. As a result of information contained in letters captured by us in raids on postmen delivering the mail, or from constant observation on barracks, or from an I.R.A. contact employed as confidential secretary to a high military officer in Victoria (now Collins) Barracks, Cork, the identity of these suspected spies was established and the facts reported to the brigade which directed the action to be taken.

These civilian spies were considered by us to be the most dangerous of all. They were well acquainted with the I.R.A. men in the different localities in which they operated (being natives of the district in certain cases), and unless they were quickly and severely dealt with would create havoc in our organisation. Some of these persons carried on their work after curfew (after 10 p.m.), which made the task of keeping them under observation more difficult and dangerous. However, a close watch was kept on suspected persons and drastic action taken to put a stop to their activities. A few examples will suffice for the record.

Execution of William O'Sullivan:

We received information that a civilian named William O'Sullivan was in contact with the enemy. This man was a local man living in 'D' Company, 2nd Battalion area. He was followed and watched for some time before it was finally established that he was an enemy agent. The facts were submitted to the brigade. O'Sullivan was taken into custody and executed by shooting at Tory Top Lane on 15th February, 1921.

Execution of Finbar O'Sullivan:

Another civilian from 'D' Company area, Finbar O'Sullivan, who was well acquainted with the I.R.A. in the district, joined the Black and Tans. When he returned to his home one evening he was taken prisoner there and removed outside the city, where on the instructions of the brigade he was executed by shooting. The date was 21st February, 1921.

Shooting of D. McDonald.

On 23rd February, 1921, another civilian, D. McDonald,

also from 'D' Company district, was shot and wounded on the Evergreen Road at night. This man was well-known as an associate of enemy forces and the brigade gave instructions that he should be executed.

An extraordinary circumstance surrounding the shooting was the fact that although about half a dozen bullets were fired into him at close range, only one (a bullet in the leg) took effect. He was left for dead, but on being removed by the British authorities to hospital it was found that the bullets had penetrated only just under the skin and could be removed with a forceps. It was obvious that the revolver ammunition used was defective. McDonald survived and was taken to Cork military barracks, where he remained as a guest of the British military until the Truce of July, 1921. He was frequently seen with military patrols at night, acting as spotter in night raids on the houses of I.R.A. men, for some months prior to the Truce. Many efforts were made by us to get this fellow, but unfortunately he was too clever to be seen alone and we never succeeded in getting him. He left the country after the Truce and never returned to Cork.

Shooting of British Intelligence Officer, Sterland:

One of the most active British Intelligence Officers in Cork was a man named Sterland. He always dressed in civilian clothes and frequented the hotel bars and lounges in the city. I knew him to see in these places.

On the morning of 9th May, 1921, the day was Sunday, I met another of our intelligence officers named Frankie Mahony, who told me that he was meeting Sterland that day in town and that in company with 'Charlo' Cogan, another

of our intelligence men, he (Mahony) would try and entice Sterland into a publichouse named Barrett's which was in the 2nd Battalion district and, therefore, away from the centre of the city. Mahony suggested that I would get a few of the boys together, armed with revolvers, and that at a certain hour we should call to Barrett's, where Mahony and Cogan hoped to have Sterland with him. He (Sterland) was to be captured by us alive and taken away to a country district, where he would be questioned before more drastic action would be taken. Mahony added that if we failed to see him, Cogan and Sterland in Barrett's at the appointed time, we were to go to the Rob Roy Hotel in Cook St., where we would almost certainly find them.

I got in touch with "Sailor" Barry, Captain of 'D' Company, 2nd Battalion, Lar Neville and Jeremiah Coughlan. The latter two were also officers in 'D' Company. The four of us, armed with revolvers, called to Barrett's as arranged, and not finding our lads there we went in to the city to the Rob Roy Hotel. I knew the Rob Roy well, having frequented it often in the course of my duties as intelligence officer.

Cook St. is in the city centre and is bounded by the South Mall on one side and Patrick St. on the other. These streets and all the adjoining streets were patrolled all day long by military on foot and in armoured cars. When we made our way to the Rob Roy that Sunday, we saw these patrols and had difficulty in avoiding them en route to Cook St. The time was after three and before five o'clock in the afternoon.

Arriving at the hotel, we went upstairs to the lounge and saw Mahony, Cogan and Sterland drinking at the bar. I nodded to Mahony. I then left the lounge with my three men, went downstairs to the hall and closed the door leading to Cook St. Shortly afterwards, Mahony, Cogan and Sterland came down to the hall. We drew our revolvers and ordered the three of them to put up their hands. They did so, Mahony and Cogan pretending to be taken by surprise.

While we were in the hall, the proprietor of the hotel, Evans, came down and started protesting. While he was talking, a knock came to the front door. One of our lads looked out and saw a group of soldiers outside. Obviously they were knocking to gain admittance to have a drink. I told Evans to go to the door and tell the military he was cleaning up the bar and would admit them if they came back again in half an hour. With some reluctance they left. We then searched Sterland and took his papers and his revolver. I left the Rob Roy and went up to the South Mall (about sixty yards distant) to see if there were any military patrols near us. I then returned to the hotel.

In Cook St. there happened to be a car from which milk was being delivered, and we considered the idea of putting Sterland in the car and taking him out of town. We decided, however, that the prospects of taking him away alive were practically nil. We were surrounded on all sides by enemy forces, who kept a special watch on all bridges leading out of the city. If we got through the patrols safely (which was indeed most unlikely), we could scarcely hope to have the same good luck crossing any of the bridges with our prisoner. As time was against us, we took Sterland out on to Cook St., where he was shot

and killed. We then ran up Cook St., crossed The Mall safely, and seeing a side-car parked outside South Chapel we climbed on it and drove the horse furiously to the Evergreen Road district, where I took possession of the guns and dumped them safely.

Attempt to shoot Sergeant Hollywood:

One of the most wanted men in the R.I.C. in Cork was a Sergeant Hollywood. This policeman was particularly active in hunting I.R.A. men in the 2nd Battalion area and we knew it was he who had shot and killed a battalion officer named Tadhg Sullivan on the Douglas Road on 20th April, 1921. This R.I.C. man lived on the South Douglas Road. On many occasions we waited, armed with revolvers, to shoot this fellow, but he never came along when we were expecting him. This particular night, Frankie Mahony, Lar Neville, Christy Owens and myself were watching for him on the South Douglas Road. We failed to see him but suspected he might have got in to home by some other route. We knocked at his door and were admitted. A careful search of the house was made but without avail. He was definitely not at home. So far as I can remember, he never did return home subsequently until after the Truce in July, 1921, and we never had an opportunity of settling accounts with him.

Attack on Douglas R.I.C. Barracks:

On the night of 24th June, 1921, I was one of a small party of men who took part in an attack on Douglas R.I.C. Barracks. This was part of a concerted attack on all barracks in Cork City and suburbs at an appointed time that night. The object of these attacks was to show the enemy that we were still strong in numbers and equipment, notwithstanding our losses in officers and men killed, wounded or taken prisoner. "Sailor" Barry,

Eddie Fitzgibbon, one other man and myself opened fire on the front of the barracks whilst other men from 'D' Company took the rear of the building. The garrison of police and Black and Tans replied with rifles and machine-guns. None of us suffered a casualty, and I am not aware if any of the garrison of the barracks was hit during the firing. So far as we were concerned, the affair was over in about five minutes, although firing from the barracks continued for some time after we had left.

While acting on intelligence duty, one of the most important jobs assigned to me was to get some information as to the whereabouts of a British officer, Captain Kelly, who was known to us to be in charge of military intelligence in the south of Ireland. This man specialised in the torturing of I.R.A. prisoners and was head of a group of British intelligence officers in Cork barracks who were notorious for their barbarous treatment of prisoners. The names of some of the latter were Hammond, Keogh, and Cusack.

We had a photo of Kelly and orders were received from G.H.Q. in Dublin that he was to be captured alive, if possible. I watched for him outside the barracks, inside publichouses, hotels and everywhere I thought he might be seen. This went on for months. I never relaxed in my efforts to make contact with him right up to the time of the Truce in 1921. I never once succeeded in locating him outside his headquarters in Victoria (now Collins) Barracks until after the Truce was signed. It was then too late.

To record all the various incidents with which I was associated in Cork, particularly relating to my activities as intelligence officer, is not possible owing to the lapse of time since these events occurred. I would, however, like to pay a tribute to the many unknown non-ranking I.R.A. men who, through their vigilance and their unselfish devotion to duty of a monotonous but highly important, and often dangerous, nature, made possible the excellent intelligence service which was a feature of the Cork No. 1 Brigade in the fight for freedom.

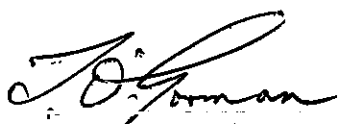
Signed:



Date:

19- 9- 57

Witness:


(Investigator).

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BURO STAIRE MILEATA 1913-21

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