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BUREAU OF MILITARY HISTORY, 1913-21.

STATEMENT BY WITNESS.

DOCUMENT NO. W.S. 1678.

Witness

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Convent Road,
Claremorris,
Co. Mayo.

Identity.

Staff Officer, 3rd Battn., South Mayo Brigade,
I.R.A.

Subject.

Active Service Unit, Manchester, 1920-21.

Conditions, if any, Stipulated by Witness.

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ORIGINAL

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STATEMENT BY WILLIAM T. O'KEEFFE,

Convent Road, Claremorris, Co. Mayo.

I was born in the town of Claremorris in November, 1899. The town is situated on the south western boundary of the parish of Kilcolman, so called because that great scholar and teacher, St. Colman, established a church there, the ruins of which can still be seen on the hillside in the townland named after him. The parish covers a large area embracing the half parish of Barnacarroll, and from its northerly tip at the Yellow River, Cuiltibo, to its southerly point on the River Robe, Koilmore, is fourteen miles long, and from Ballycarrick in the west, to Loughanemon and Cloontooa in the east, ten miles wide. Situated at Murneen North, about five miles from Claremorris, stands portion of a house known as Curleagh Lodge, once occupied by the Burke family who were Catholic. The Burke estate consisted of the half parish of Barnacarroll stretching to the townlands of Cuiltibo and Coolaght, and rent was collected by Landlord Burke from more than one hundred tenant farmers on the estate.

The fact that the Burke family were Catholic did not deter them from evicting the tenants. An old resident who still lives in the townland of Cuiltibo remembers one such eviction in the year 1881, when the home of a Kelly family was razed to the ground with the battering ram. He clearly remembers the spike helmeted policemen and their escort of redcoats. The Duddy family, who gave shelter to the Kellys, were penalised for doing so, their rent being increased by the landlord. There were thirty families in and around this townland evicted prior to

and after the Kelly eviction. Evictions such as this resulted in the shooting of a member of the Burke family whilst travelling by coach from Curleigh Lodge to Galway. The members of the Burke family who died at Curleigh Lodge are interred in the family vault at Barnacarroll.

My mother left Ireland when she was fourteen years of age to stay with her eldest sister in New York. She travelled extensively with an American family, visiting most of the U.S.A. and Europe. Many were the stories she told us of her travels in the countries she had visited, but the stories we like best were the ones about Ireland, particularly about local happenings - the landing of the French at Killala on the 22nd August, 1798, and the battle at Castlebar on the 27th August which resulted in a humiliating defeat for the English - known as "The Races of Castlebar"; the return of the English soldiers to Mayo after the capture of General Humbert, when they pillaged and plundered and slaughtered the old, the infirm and the young who were unable to escape; also how Father Manus Sweeney of Lahardane was hanged in Castlebar after a mock trial because he shook hands with a French officer.

I attended the Claremorris National School from 1905 to 1914. It was staffed by three teachers, and the only Irish history I remember being taught was about the Battle of Clontarf, the attack by Sarsfield on the ammunition train at Ballyneety, and the stand by Custume on the Bridge of Athlone. I never heard a patriotic utterance from one of our teachers during my time at the National School.

My first experience of Irish politics came during the District Council elections of June, 1908, when Connor

O'Kelly, M.P., leader of the United Irish League, was opposed by a party led by P.J. Killeen of Claremorris. There were fourteen divisions in the Claremorris area, and the U.I.L. were opposed in most areas by the big land holders and supported by business people and people of importance and influence. In the Ballindine Division, P. Fitzgerald, U.I.L., headed the poll, while the powerful Lord Oranmore & Browne, the landlord of Ballindine, polled six votes. In Claremorris area, the O'Kelly nominees, Messrs. T.W. Kelly and T.H. Keane, were returned with 267 and 233 votes. They were opposed by Patrick Vehey and Michael Noone, who received 109 and 87 votes; in a word, every man who supported P.J. Killeen was rejected, every man who supported Connor O'Kelly was elected. The result of this election indicated that the Irish people were beginning to develop independence and strength.

The authorities at this time were rather generous in handing out honorary positions. We had no less than six local Justices of the Peace who occupied in turn the Bench at the local court. They were mostly shopkeepers resident in the town. The Resident Magistrate had his residence at Carradoyne House about three miles away, and he only sat on the Bench monthly unless there was a serious case for decision. Incidentally, this R.M. was Alan Bell who was shot dead in Ballsbridge, Dublin, in 1920, as he was getting on a tram. He was replaced by a Mr. Hinkson, who took up residence on the Lambert Estate at Brook Hill House and was married to the celebrated Catholic writer of that period, Catherine Tynan. She wrote that beautiful poem 'Sheep and Lambs' while resident there. She died in 1935.

The Great War of 1914 came. I was then in my fifteenth year. Local men began drilling. I did not understand what it was all about but I joined the ranks and learned the military exercises. Our instructor was big Bob Treacy, ex-Sergeant Major of the Connaught Rangers. Later I knew I was a member of the Irish National Volunteers. After six months of this training it petered out and the younger men drifted away. Some, on the advice of the English so-called gentry who occupied the "big houses", joined the British Army.

Easter 1916. The "boys" were out in Dublin. R.I.C. were patrolling the country roads. Three local men, Tom Kilgarriff of Dunmore, James Ryan, and John Conway of Claremorris, were arrested at Tuam on their way to join up with the Galway men, and after Easter Week were interned in Frongoch with the rest of the prisoners captured during the Rising.

By the end of 1916 Claremorris became a British garrison town, its important railway junction was occupied, the inmates of the workhouse removed elsewhere and British troops took over. A military town of huts was established on the Dublin road, another camp on the Claremorris-Ballinrobe road. At peak periods those camps accommodated 7,000 troops. From those camps came the drafts for the Western Front in France, the outgoing drafts being replaced by conscripts from all parts of England. At the request of the R.I.C., military pickets patrolled the town as many clashes occurred between the soldiers and civilians. I remember one caption on a daily paper of that time: "Military, police and civilians in conflict in Claremorris". It was a night of terror. An organised platoon of the West Kent Regiment wrecked

the Sinn Féin rooms in Church St. They in turn were attacked by a group of men with hurleys, and from subsequent reports on the number of casualties the men with the hurleys won the night. Recruiting meetings were in full swing in 1917. Fair days and market days were selected for the meetings. Accompanied by a brass band, a well dressed unit of the British Army would be on show and appeals were made to the young men to join up. Foremost at those meetings in asking for recruits was Lady Oranmore of Castlemagarett, and to help her in her quest she had at least one or two local people to assist. Applications to join up were few.

Joe Brennan of Mount St., Claremorris, was the Irish boy's ideal of what an Irishman should be: a splendid athlete, great Irish step dancer, powerful swimmer, captain of our football team, organiser of céilís and patriotic plays, and last, but not least, a strict teetotaller. He organised the first company of the I.R.A. and was O/C. Under his guidance and leadership the company became a very efficient unit. He was a regular visitor to our cycle shop and often I heard him and my eldest brother, Joe, discuss ways and means of establishing a communications unit. Many times I watched a pair of handlebars being removed from a bicycle to insert a dispatch, or a tube slit and the dispatch put in and the tube repaired. Often a cycle was used by several cyclists and returned by train. Joe Brennan was arrested in 1918 and sentenced to twelve months' imprisonment, which he served in Galway Jail. Other prominent men in Claremorris in 1919-20 were M.J. Heaney, his brother, Bill, Harry Burke, Tom Gleeson, Bill Kenny, John Griffin, Tom Tucker, Conor A. Maguire, and P.R. Hughes.

In 1920, although military and police were ever on the alert, the company succeeded in bringing off raids for petrol and military stores invoiced to the railway, and also successfully raided the Customs and Excise office, destroying books and documents. This was a well planned job as the R.I.C. barracks was second next door.

P.R. Hughes was another tireless worker for the cause. He was ever ready to receive a dispatch and was raided on several occasions. He, along with Conor A. Maguire, was responsible for the establishment of the Sinn Féin Courts, not alone in Claremorris, but in all South Mayo as well. In the same year four members of the Claremorris Company, dressed as British soldiers, in a car driven by Bill Kenny, drove from Claremorris through the garrisoned town of Ballinrobe in an attempt to destroy Cross R.I.C. Barracks. Though the venture was a failure for some reason or other, the men taking part are to be commended for their courage in travelling through this military infested area and for a skilful withdrawal. Towards the end of 1920, in a swoop by R.I.C. and British military, the active members of the Claremorris Company were removed in one night to be interned in Ballykinlar Camp for the duration. The position from then until the 11th July, 1921, was as follows: - Claremorris Battalion area:

Claremorris Company,	O/C,	Tom Ruane,	I/O Bill Heaney.
Ballyglass Company,	O/C,	John Griffin.	
Kilcolman Company,	O/C,	Paddy Fleming.	
Murneen Company,	O/C,	Michael Gill.	

While working at the Ford Motor Company at Trafford Park, Manchester, I came to know the brothers Michael and Frank Ryan of Weaste, Salford, and in August, 1920, we formed a unit of I.R.A. at Liverpool St., Salford. The following men were present: Michael Ryan, Frank Ryan, Salford, Jock McGallogly (an Ulster man), Stephen Clancy, Cloonbook, Claremorris, James Ryan, Bill O'Keefe, Claremorris, Barney Igoe, Tuam. While with this small unit I took part in a raid for rifles supposed to be stored in the Boys' Brigade school at Rochdale in company with Tadhg Murphy from Cork. The raid was unsuccessful. We learned later that the rifles were removed by the authorities the previous day. At our meetings, ways and means were discussed to collect arms, particular attention to be paid to people who were likely to have serviceable weapons as souvenirs. Country mansions known to have well stocked gun-rooms, also places marked out for attack, were inspected. When the Manchester Company was formed we joined up with them, and under the leadership of Paddy Donohue we were soon at work.

We were removing rifles and 'stuff' from a store at the rear of a large house in Fallowfield, Manchester, on a Sunday night in November, 1920. I had taken along a bale of six rifles wrapped in canvas and handed them over to a person in a house at the end of the street, returning for more. The police must have observed some movement in the laneway and came to inspect - a sergeant and a detective. I just happened to approach the turn in the laneway when I heard the footsteps, and in another moment they were on us. Paddy Donohue, who happened to be right behind me, took in the situation, and in response to their questions as to what we were doing there explained that we

were having a quiet game of cards when the old man arrived unexpectedly and we had to clear out the back door. He succeeded in convincing them and they went away, luckily not having seen the black bag left in the shadow by the wall, which I had been carrying. It was considered dangerous to move any more of the 'stuff' that night. It was subsequently removed in daylight.

The next job was to destroy some farm buildings in Reddish Vale. I contacted my man in London Road, Manchester. It was a very bright night and we walked over the fields in twos, keeping to the shadows. My companion was a man whom I had not seen since I was a little boy. Jack Finan was his name and I remembered him as the man who laid the block floor in St. Colman's Church, Claremorris, in 1910, and I had not met or heard of him since then until that night when we mounted guard for the rest of the boys who were to fire the buildings. It transpired that the buildings were constructed of solid masonry and steel roof and contained only farm machinery - again failure. Christmas, 1920, saw things quiet until March, 1921. The company were assembled in a hall at Gaythorn and a series of attacks were planned on farms and buildings in Manchester. Our job was Stott's farm outside Patricroft. Again I was on guard. Barney Igoe was the man who knew the locality, and after he had done his job he was to contact me so that we should both be out and away together. Something happened that Barney did not show up and I was stranded in the blazing farmyard. It was then about 9.30 p.m. I took to the fields in the direction of the railway, which was apparent owing to the frequency of the passenger trains. Eventually I reached it and could see to my right the lights of a railway station.

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I decided to go towards the station, Walking in that direction I came to a bridge over a road. I rested and observed the road which was dimly lighted. Becoming uneasy that I would miss the tram to Manchester, I decided to move on and climbed down on to the road and into the hands of a policeman who had been standing in the shadows of the bridge. I was taken completely by surprise and was at a loss as to what to do. He asked my name, which I gave as Keith, and what I was doing there. My answers and my accent aroused his suspicions as the glare from the burning farm could be seen from where we stood. He requested me to accompany him to the police station. As we proceeded I observed a side street to our right and immediately in front on the same side the lighted lamp over the police station door. As we mounted the steps I suddenly turned and bolted. Before the policeman had recovered from his surprise I was speeding down the laneway. Shortly the police whistle was sounding and the shouts of "Stop that man" rang the night. Doors opened, and the chase was taken up by the civil population. The situation was getting bad and as I ran I wrestled with my light overcoat to extract the .45 from my hip pocket, intending to discharge a few rounds over the heads of the following crowd. The gun somehow caught in the lining of my showerproof and fell from my grasp. I momentarily halted but failed to locate it in the dimly light street. As I continued to run I was intercepted by a man with a basket, who struck me a glancing blow over the left eye. It was here that a few boxing lessons I had learned at home enabled me to deal swiftly and effectively with him. This man was arrested afterwards on suspicion. The following crowd were close

up by this time and as I took the next turn I found to my dismay that it was a cul-de-sac and also too late to turn back. Standing there helplessly without a chance, they bore down on me and I was on the ground instantly, when a woman in the crowd pleaded for me, that I was only one against many. With that I was allowed to get up and I offered to walk to the police station with any one of them. A young man offered to take me, and as we walked away from the mob I tried to reason with him that in fact I was running to catch a tram at the same time as another man was running from the policeman and the wrong man was followed, that it was just a case of mistaken identity, and if he would not mind that I would call in at the police station as I was passing through Eccles and explain matters. This satisfied him and I bade him good-night. Approaching the end of this street which led on to the main one, I heard the tramp of marching feet and had just time to slip into a side entry when a squad of about fifteen policemen turned the corner and passed within a few yards of where I stood in the entry. This was part of the police net being formed around the area I was in and must have been summoned by the policeman who first apprehended me. I was then outside the net. I could hear the rumble of an approaching tram and walked out to meet it, boarded it and climbed to the open deck on top and sat down on the steps near the driver, who observed me and the condition I was in. He said, in a rich Irish brogue: "You were in a scrap, I see". I simply answered that I had been. He then advised me to get off at the next stop and take the side lane to the left which would take me further on beyond Eccles Cross on the Salford Road. This I did, and everything worked alright. From this point I got off the car at Langworthy Road and made my way

to a family I knew by the name of Higgins who lived at No. 229. Although they had lived in England all their lives and their family had been educated there, they took me in and treated me with every kindness and kept me until the hue and cry died down. After a few days their eldest boy, Ted, contacted Frank Ryan, who lived a few streets away, and brought him to see me. I remained with the Higgins family until the cuts and bruises to my face had healed, and on the instructions of Paddy Donohue I was moved to Paddy O'Mara's house in Ardwick Green, where his two sisters looked after me and treated me as a member of the family. During my stay there I assisted in the movement of several lots of arms and explosives for shipment to Ireland. Another haven for men on the run was St. Joseph's Industrial School on the Stockport road. There the Brothers received us without question. One morning I happened to be at the school talking to Brother Coleman when there came a knock at the door. Before opening the door Brother Coleman asked me to slip into the next room. After about ten minutes I heard him say good-bye to his visitors; they were two detectives on a routine visit to the school.

The Salford C.I.D. intensified their efforts to locate the I.R.A. Foremost in the hunt were Inspector James Kelly and D/Os. Lamb and O'Leary. Incidentally, Kelly was a native of Granlahan, a village on the Roscommon-Mayo border. He was on holidays there in 1924 and happened to come to Ballyhaunis on a visit. I was managing a garage there when this car arrived in with engine trouble and two met got out of it. One of them was a big man whom I thought I knew. They explained to me what kind of engine trouble they were having and I raised the bonnet off the engine to investigate and then stood with one hand on the mudguard and

the other on the panel over the dash. I had previously noticed the index letters as being strange and asked about it. He told me they were on holidays from Salford and those were their registration letters, and that actually he was a native of Granlahan. This rung a bell in my memory and I shot the question: "Are you by any chance Inspector Kelly of the Salford Police?". "The very man" he answered, and was surprised that I should know him. To assist his memory I told him I was in Salford in March, 1921. He quickly replied: "I know you now; your name is O'Keeffe". He then informed me that he had seen a photograph of me at the Ford Works and the way I stood in the photograph was identical with the way I was standing just then. In the course of our conversation he admitted that the I.R.A. was the toughest organisation they were ever up against, and that the raids and fires had them mystified for some time. He mentioned Mr. de Valera's escape from Lincoln Jail, which the police there considered to be amongst the best planned escapes ever from an English jail. Paddy Donohue and Liam McMahon of Manchester played a big part in this escape.

The police of the Manchester and Salford Boroughs continued ceaselessly to search and raid, and in one such raid they arrested Joe Sullivan, a Manchester Irishman. They took him to the Town Hall to question him. Joe eluded his guards and got away. It was considered dangerous for us to remain in Manchester, so it was decided to send us to London. This was arranged by Liam McMahon and we called to his stores in central Manchester, where we were given two tickets to London with instructions to report at McVeigh's Hotel in Bedford Place. The journey was without incident, and we reported as instructed and had another

shift that night to the Cullinane family at No. 8 Sterndale Road, West Kensington.

On the second day of our stay at No. 8 we were introduced to Reginald Dunne, O/C London I.R.A., a tall stern-faced man who, I would say, was in his thirtys. He carried a stick and walked with a limp from a wound received in the 1914-1918 war. (He was hanged with Joe Sullivan in 1922, for the shooting of Sir Henry Wilson). We also met there Danny Kelleher and Phil Shanahan, both Cork men. I regret to say that was the only time we ever came into contact with Reginald Dunne, and if there were any meetings held we were not invited to them. We came to the conclusion that the London organisation was not equal to that which existed in Manchester.

After a week in Sterndale Road we changed to a house in Kensington, from where we were introduced to a family named Dempsey who resided in Clapham Common. We had a standing invitation to call there at any time, where we were treated with great kindness. Also staying there was Mrs. Dempsey's brother, a member of a Cork Active Service Unit, recovering from a wound received in Ireland. During our calls to the Dempsey home we came into contact with people there who could procure passes to visit the Irish prisoners, and Joe Sullivan actually visited Seán Hales from Cork who was then a prisoner in Wormwood Scrubbs Jail.

On a Sunday morning in April, 1921, a young man was found shot dead on a London golf course with a notice on his chest worded: "Spies and traitors beware". He was supposed to have been shot by the I.R.A. This might be so, but Sullivan and I were not aware of the facts of it. Police were very active during the day - anyone with an Irish accent or look was interrogated, clubs raided and so on.

That night we were at a céilí in St. Ann's parish. There, in a room off the hall, I met Dick Walsh from Balla, a Brigade Officer from South Mayo, seeking out arms for the brigade. We chatted about the position in London. In result he advised me that I should go back to Ireland and contact the South Mayo Active Service Unit. Here our conversation was interrupted as a shot rang out. Somebody shouted "Raid", but it wasn't. One of the boys was showing another a gun when it went off and a young man was wounded in the arm. Dick Walsh calmly bound up the wound and called a taxi and kept going until he found a doctor with an Irish name. There were no questions asked by the doctor and the incident passed over. I remained for a further week in London, but as there was no I.R.A. activity Joe Sullivan and myself decided to part. When that time came it was with feelings that I find hard to describe I said good-bye to my comrade as the Irish Mail moved out from Euston. Joe and I knew what hunger was and many a time we plodded the streets of London together without hope or friends. I reached home without any trouble and could not find any contact in Claremorris. On the 3rd May, 1921, the Tourmakeady ambush took place which ended up with a fight on the mountainside on the same evening and also the death of the Brigade Adjutant, Michael O'Brien, and a serious wound in the arm to the Unit Commander, Tom Maguire. Towards the end of May I met Michael Corless, a member of the unit outside the village of Kilmaine. I told him who I was and that I had been sent by Dick Walsh of Balla. I heard nothing further until July, 1921.

News from Manchester was not good at this time. Practically the entire Active Service Unit was surrounded at a hall in Erksine St. and captured after a stiff resistance

which resulted in the death of Seán Morgan. They received terms of imprisonment ranging from five years to penal servitude for life. Paddy Donohue, Unit Commander, was also taken prisoner.

Before closing this statement I would like to record the complete list of names of the men I knew from Claremorris and district who were members of the Manchester Active Service Unit during the years 1920-21, which list is not generally known: -

- James Ryan, Mount St., Claremorris (1916-20-21)
- Bill O'Keefe, Convent Road, Claremorris.
- Joe Dillon, Rockfield, Claremorris.
- Matt Cribbon, Bekan, Claremorris.
- Tom Dolan, Belisker, Claremorris.
- Pat Duffy, Belisker, Claremorris.
- Stephen Clancy, Cloonbook, Claremorris.

The following Claremorris men took part in the Connaught Rangers Mutiny in India in 1921 and were sentenced to life imprisonment:

- Val Delaney, The Square, Claremorris.
- J.J. Buckley, Convent Road, Claremorris.
- Eugene Egan, Convent Road, Claremorris.

Signed: W O'Keefe
 Date: 20/9/57

Witness: [Signature]
 (Investigator)

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No. W.S. 1,678