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COSANTA.

BUREAU OF MILITARY HISTORY, 1913-21.

STATEMENT BY WITNESS.

DOCUMENT NO. W.S. 1690.

Witness

Miss Nora Cunningham,
Casement St.,
Macroom,
Co. Cork.

Identity.

Member, Macroom Unit, Cumann na mBan.

Subject.

Cumann na mBan activities,
Macroom, Co. Cork,
1917 - 23.

Conditions, if any, Stipulated by Witness.

Nil.

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ORIGINAL

BUREAU OF MILITARY HISTORY 1913-21

BURO STAIRÉ MILEATA 1913-21

No. W.S. 1.690

STATEMENT BY MISS NORA CUNNINGHAM,

Casement Street, Macroom, County Cork.

I was born in Macroom, on 31st December, 1900, and was educated at the Convent School there until I reached the age of sixteen. I then went to serve my time as a dressmaker.

I joined the Girl Guides in Macroom early in 1917. The strength of the branch was then about twenty-six. I was elected Captain of the unit. Membership of this organisation was confined to girls who were too young to join Cumann na mBan and was similar to Fianna Éireann for young boys. There was a similar organisation in Cork City. Some of the members at this time were :- Hanna McCarthy, Nora Sweeney, Mollie O'Brien, Nora Connors, May O'Leary, Maggie Sheehan, Nora Goggins, Annie May O'Brien, Margaret Lynch, Julia Maria Lucey, Eileen Cunningham and May Sweeney.

Beyond drilling and holding parades there was very little activity in the early stages. As the year advanced we helped to raise funds for the Volunteers and for the Prisoners' Dependents' Fund by taking part in concerts, Plays, collecting on Flag days. In this way we raised a good deal of money which was usually handed over to the officer in charge of the Volunteers in the area who at this period was Dan Corkery.

My first association with the military side of the Movement arose out of the allocation to myself and other members of our Sluagh of the job of collecting tin cans, cocoa tins and such like which the Volunteers were to use in the making of canister bombs. Everywhere we saw anything in the nature of a handy container it was seized at the first available opportunity and handed over to the members of the local Volunteer Company. We were also engaged in collecting and breaking up scrap iron which was used in the bombs as shrapnel. I first indulged in these

activities at the beginning of 1918, and devoted a lot of time to them as time advanced and the British threatened to enforce Conscription.

During the Conscription all members of the Girl Guides were engaged in helping Cumann na mBan in the making of First Aid outfits for the Volunteers. We were also attending First Aid lectures and in a short time became proficient in this aspect of the work. We also carried dispatches and often transferred small arms from one area to another.

After our training during this period we became more interested in the activities of the Volunteers and were always ready to co-operate with them and to perform any duties their officers might allocate to us. We now began to train enthusiastically/had the first call on our services and parades. Our First Aid lectures and training continued throughout 1919 as did our work on the collection of scrap, tin cans and the raising of funds.

Early in 1920 the Volunteers - now the I.R.A. - became more active and a series of attacks were launched on the enemy military and police forces in the area. The bombs made from the scrap and tin cans we had collected were generally used in these operations so we now felt that we were doing some real work. Arising out of the I.R.A. activities we were now called upon regularly to perform dispatch carrying duties and on occasions to transfer and hide arms after an engagement. Shortly after the I.R.A. had intensified their activities our organisation was declared illegal so I then joined Cumann na mBan as did all the other members of the Girl Guides.

When Martial Law was proclaimed in the area in July, 1920, my activities included the performance of Intelligence work, scouting and such like for the I.R.A. I kept I.R.A. scouts posted on the movements of the enemy in the town when Carrigadrohid R.I.C. barracks was attacked and when the mails were raided at Dooniskey Railway Station about this time.

On 5th September, 1920, one of the British garrisons at Massytown, Macroom, was attacked and his rifle captured. After this attack it was reported that the enemy intended carrying out reprisals in Macroom. The members of the local I.R.A. Companies were mobilised under arms and held positions on the roads approaching the town from the two enemy posts each night for about a week following this incident. While the men were in these positions I, with several other members of Cumann na mBán, was engaged on intelligence work watching the movements of the enemy troops and their supporters. In addition I engaged in the transfer and dumping of some of the small arms in use at the end of each guard session.

My father at this time had been elected to Macroom District Council as a Sinn Féin representative. He was also a member of the local Republican District Court. As a result our home was now subject to raiding by enemy forces as often as they felt like it. It was nothing unusual to be raided twice in twenty-four hours, but on no occasion did they succeed in finding anything of value to them although dispatches and sometimes arms were dumped in the house.

Early in November, 1920, a party of I.R.A. raided Macroom Railway Station and seized a large quantity of military stores including medical stores, bedding and underclothing. A considerable quantity of this material was actually removed through my home which adjoined the railway premises. Some of the medical stores and underclothes were dumped in my home and later sent on to the Column when it was operating in the surrounding country. About this time an abortive ambush was laid for a patrol of R.I.C. in Main Street but the enemy party did not turn up.

There was a lull in all activities as Christmas approached, but we were all still engaged in watching the movements of the enemy.

During January, 1921, I was in constant touch with the Battalion Column which was operating in Macroom area furnishing reports on the movements of enemy patrols. The Column was moving round the area and dispatches were delivered on numerous occasions by members of Cumann na mBan. When the Column took part in the engagement with a big force of Auxiliaries at Poul nabro on the Ballyvourney road on 25th February, 1921, some of our members had to make contact with the Column after the engagement to find out what had actually happened.

As 1921 advanced enemy forces were beginning to move around the area in large bodies and were carrying out large-scale round-ups. One of these large forces captured a number of unarmed I.R.A. men in the vicinity of Toames on 5th March, 1921. One of the I.R.A. men was wounded. His name was "Neilus" Foley, and his sister was a member of Cumann na mBan. The wounded man was taken to Macroom Castle where he died and his body was then removed to the Workhouse. The arrangements for the removal of his body and its burial were made by my sister - Mollie - who was at this time Vice-President of Macroom District Council of Cumann na mBan.

Several raids were made on my home at this period. The raiders posted handbills on the windows and my father was informed that, if they were removed, the house would be burned. The handbill showed in large print - "Up the Rebels" and in smaller print underneath, "Any person found harbouring rebels will be shot at sight". This bill brought our house to the notice of all soldiers, Tans and "Auxies" in the area.

During March and April, 1921 several operations were carried out by the men of the Macroom Companies "A" and "B" which necessitated the transfer of arms (small) from one Company area to the other. On most occasions these transfers were carried out by myself and other members

of our unit. In carrying out these jobs we had to pass within a few yards of the sentries at the front and side gates of Macroom Castle and we were likely to be held up at any time. These operations became more dangerous when the enemy decided to instal a lady searcher at the post, but despite all their precautions the transfers continued to be carried on safely.

Early in May, 1921, the enemy bombed the home of the Battalion O/C., I.R.A. (Dan Corkery), who resided a short distance from my home on the opposite side of the street. This was an official reprisal for an attack carried out on an enemy patrol in another part of the Brigade area.

An enemy Column, about 400 strong, under Major Percival - known as 'Percival's Column' - moved into Macroom about this time and billeted in the National Schools directly opposite my home. While the Column was in the area we were all busily engaged keeping a record of their movements all round the clock. These records were taken to Battalion Headquarters (which was being moved round the district each night) by me or by some other member of our unit. As Curfew was in operation, at this period, we had often to remain in the country overnight.

All members of Macroom Cumann na mBan were engaged in Intelligence dispatch carrying, supplying food to prisoners and 'moving' arms as required in the period up to the Truce on 11th July, 1921.

The strength of Macroom branch of Cumann na mBan, of which I was a member at the Truce, was about fifty.

During the Truce period I was engaged in reorganising the Cumann na mBan in the area and continued with my activities on intelligence work. Although the fight was suspended we were still

at work on the making of First Aid outfits, field-dressings and such like as there was no certainty that the British would clear out, or that agreement would be reached between the Republican Government and their Government. These activities continued up to the signing of the Treaty, in December 1921.

When the terms of the Treaty were examined it was found that our delegates had agreed to partition Ireland and as we had been working and fighting for a Republic for all Ireland there was great disappointment in many places particularly in the South. With all the other members of my family and the vast majority of the I.R.A. men in the area I was opposed to the acceptance of the Treaty. However, Dáil Éireann approved the Treaty by 64 votes to 57 and a Provisional Government was set up to operate the Treaty. This new body took over the military and police posts which were being evacuated by the British and in our area these posts were garrisoned by the I.R.A. It was now about March, 1922, and Macroom Castle was occupied by an I.R.A. force.

Sometime in April (I think), 1922, three British officers, accompanied by a driver, arrived in Macroom Castle and were, I think, later executed as spies. Following this incident a strong force of British troops returned to the district and took up positions with a view to attacking the garrison, but they withdrew after about 24 hours. On this occasion, I, with several other members of Cumann na mBan, was 'standing to' to undertake First Aid duty in the event of a fight.

As the people were now divided into Pro-Treaty and I.R.A. sections I was delegated by the Battalion O/C., I.R.A. (Dan Corkery) to take on intelligence work in connection with the activities of those who were known to be in favour of the Treaty so that we could

be prepared to take some action when they moved.

After the I.R.A. garrison in the Republican Headquarters in the Four Courts, Dublin, had been attacked at the end of June, 1922, the garrison (I.R.A.) in Macroom Castle was increased in strength. This led to increased work for all of us as we had to cater for this unit. There was more work of this nature to be carried out when, following the evacuation of Cork City by our forces (I.R.A.), a large body of men arrived in the area where they were billeted.

It was now about the middle of August, 1922, and the Free State forces, which had landed in Cork, were gradually spreading out into the surrounding country. Eventually one of their Columns reached Macroom where they were engaged by a Column of I.R.A. men. On this occasion I was engaged on scouting work for the I.R.A. Column. The Free State troops were ~~re~~-inforced and the I.R.A. Columns evacuated the posts held in Macroom.

When the Free State forces had established themselves in Macroom they occupied a number of posts. Within a short time they had rounded up a number of prisoners and part of ^{my} their duty was to ensure that these were visited and supplied with cigarettes, tobacco and such like. One evening while visiting the prisoners I was held as a hostage when it was learned that a Free State force was being attacked at Carrigaphooka. Reinforcements were sent out to the besieged force and on their return I was released. It was now about the end of August, 1922.

The I.R.A. Columns were now moving around the area on the outskirts of Macroom and with other members of Cumann na mBan I was engaged in maintaining contact with them and reporting/and movements ^{on the activities} of the Free State forces in the town. At this stage, the Free State garrison erected barricades on all roads leading from the town and

held up everyone who passed through. I managed to get through on a few occasions as I had disguised myself by wearing a Macroom hooded cloak, but eventually some local officers of the Free State forces, who had been in the I.R.A. before the Truce, suspected me and I was informed that I would not be allowed to leave Macroom town. There was then no use in chancing the sentries at the barracks so I had to make my way out of town by wading across the River Sullane, or when the river was swollen I travelled along the railway line on which route I had to cross two suspension bridges on my hands and knees. I managed to maintain regular contact with the I.R.A. Columns in the district right up to the end of November 1922. However, on 28th November, 1922, about 4 p.m., I was served with an order in the following terms :-

"Oglais na hÉireann

Southern Area,
Macroom.
Date 28/11/1922.

No. 2. Column,
Command Headquarters, Cork.

To: Miss Nora Cunningham,
Cork Street, Macroom.

Notice is hereby given to Nora Cunningham to leave the town of Macroom before 6 p.m. o'clock this 28th day of November, 1922, and not to return without permission of the competent military authority. Charge - giving deliberate information to enemy and carrying despatches.

Signed: W. J. O'Donoghue.
Garrison Adjutant."

Similar orders were served on my sisters, Mollie and Eileen.

I left Macroom that evening and reported to O/C., Macroom Battalion, I.R.A. (Dan Corkery) at Crookstown. It was then decided

to attach me to a section of the Macroom battalion forces operating north of Macroom. While attached to the forces I was engaged on intelligence work and had to visit Macroom each week and furnish a report on the activities of the Free State forces there. I usually entered the town by a roundabout route at night and left by a similar route on the following night. About Christmas, 1922, I was seen on the street and two Free State officers with drawn revolvers escorted me to the barricade at the end of the street and again forbade me to Macroom.

All houses in the country likely to shelter I.R.A. Columns were being raided regularly at this stage and I was often engaged on scouting duties while the raiding Columns were in the area. My visits to Macroom continued each week and I was seldom able to travel by the roads so I usually travelled across country.

During the period from November, 1922 to April, 1923, the Free State forces in the area were attacked on several occasions on which I was on call to render First Aid in the case of any casualties.

On the occasion of my weekly visits to Macroom at this period I was unable to sleep at home as the Free State forces were regularly raiding for me.

Sometime early in 1923 our forces (I.R.A.), in order to obtain funds, carried out a number of raids on Post Offices in the area and seized a quantity of postage and insurance stamps. The raiders were arrested after they had dumped the stamps but before they could report the whereabouts of the dump. My mother, who used to visit the prisoners regularly, ascertained where the stamps were and they were taken to my home. During the course of one of my weekly visits to Macroom I called to my home and while arranging there for the disposal of the stamps my home was raided but I managed to escape through the

backway taking the stamps with me. I later arranged for the disposal of the stamps.

While attached to the Column in Musherá area about this time I was instructed to make contact with a man who was suspected of supplying information to the Free State. I did so, but no definite information confirming the suspicion came to light.

Towards the end of March, 1923, a number of members of Cumann na mBan in Macroom area were arrested. These arrests reduced the number of my contacts and compelled me to make more frequent visits to Macroom with urgent messages from the men "in the field". At this stage I often passed through the barricades on the outskirts of the town in my usual guise of an old woman in a hooded cloak. When visiting the town at this period I dare not go near my own home as I was under constant watch while several houses in the country area around the town had been searched for me.

I returned to my home about October 1923.

SIGNED: Mrs Cunningham

DATE: 20 Dec 1957

WITNESS:

P. Lonnell

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