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STATEMENT BY WITNESS.

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Witness

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Identity.

Member of I.R.B., I.V., & I.R.A.,
Dublin, 1912-1922.

Subject.

Easter Week, 1916.

Conditions, if any, Stipulated by Witness.

Nil.

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ORIGINAL

STATEMENT BY CORNELIUS O'DONOVAN, A.R.C.Sc.,I., B.Agr.Sc.,

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Recollections Of Easter Week, 1916.

My recollections of that week - are they worth reading? I have doubts. But here they are, anyhow. I was then a student. The week previous to Easter Sunday, I should have been at home in Cork on holidays, and it was Piaras Beasley clenched my decision to stay in Dublin. As a result, I was available all that week as carrier of dispatches, messages and, at times, heavier goods. One night, after assisting in the removal of some ammunition to the house of Seán Tobin in Nelson Street, I was arrested by the said Seán as a G-man, ordered to give up my gun (I carried a .32 revolver), and imprisoned in the cellar where Garry Houlihan stood guard over me with a loaded automatic, until, at my request, they sent a messenger to the Keating Branch of the Gaelic League in North Frederick Street for someone to identify me. Gearoid Ó Súilleabháin soon arrived, laughed them to scorn, and I was released. I should explain that I was walking up and down outside the house, waiting for a comrade to come out who had gone in with a bag of ammunition. I knew of the activity in that house, and said to my comrade that I would keep a look-out for G-men while he delivered "the goods". I thought Tobin knew me, and was disgusted at the mistake and the waste of time. My comrade passed out the hall while I was a prisoner being searched in the sitting room.

One of these days of Holy Week, I was set, with Tommy O'Connor, to watch movements around the Castle Yard and Lower Castle Gate, and I think if I had been alone, I would have funked it. Not that Tommy was with me all the time. He must have been at least two hours away, in one stretch, on a report to Liberty Hall. Such a job was quite new to me, and the strain of endeavouring to move innocently in Dame Street, around that gate, was worse than being actually in the fight, the following week. And, then, what was I to report as unusual movement? At any rate, nothing unusual occurred, as far as I could see. Soldiers and police passed in and out, singly and in pairs, but there was no bustle, and, when I found some of these "observing" me, I began to feel guilty, moved round the corner, and walked on a bit among the usual groups of passers-by. And that is what I felt an ordeal that day!!

Another night, or it may have been the night of that same day, I had to go out to the Viceregal Lodge, to call off a pair of watchers there. They had been forgotten and should have been relieved or called off about 7 p.m. Between 10 and 11 p.m., I arrived, and found that the men had sense enough to have gone. A policeman at the back gate said, "Good-night!", and seemed anxious to talk, so I asked him if he had seen a couple of chaps loitering about who had promised to wait there for me. He assured me that they were not to be seen since he came on duty, and I inferred that they were not arrested, or he would have said so.

Saturday was a particularly busy day, but the one event of that day which stands out clearly was my

carrying of a dispatch to James Connolly in Liberty Hall, about, or after, midnight. The door was barred, and an armed guard admitted and led me right up to Connolly where he lay on a mattress in a fairly large room, among perhaps thirty of his men, all lying down for the night, each with his rifle beside him. Coming away that night, and often since, I asked myself, "What impulse urges these men to fight?" Certainly, not the hope that they will get anything out of it. What have they to fight for? A country. Yes, but how much of it? A room or two in a tenement. There is, perhaps, the truest patriotism.

By Saturday, I knew, without actually being told, what the "manoeuvres" of Sunday were to be like, in reality. One of these days, I cannot now say which, I was sent to guard a prisoner and, to my surprise, found it was Bulmer Hobson. Although I had implicit confidence in the men who detailed me for these jobs, I was glad to find I was not left too long guarding that prisoner. Knowing what I did, and not knowing all, I found it hard to guess why Hobson should be a prisoner, but I gathered from him that what he felt most was the fact that he was not trusted. Away on some other job, I soon forgot all about him, and consoled myself with the belief that the men who made him a prisoner knew what they were about, and had some good reason for it. Had I not been arrested myself as a G-man? Possibly, there was some mistake about him too, which would soon be rectified.

Then, Sunday morning came and, as a result of being very late to bed the previous night, I had a rush to get to ten o'clock Mass and Communion. After breakfast, I wandered towards the premises of the

Keating Branch of the Gaelic League, and found everybody in a state of consternation. Up to this hour, I had not seen the "Sunday Independent", and knew nothing of the countermanding order.

I was soon in Liberty Hall, with a dispatch for Seán McDermott, but would not be admitted to his presence as he was, with the other signatories of the proclamation, engaged in what was surely a "council of war". I was so impressed with the orders I got, to deliver my dispatch to him as quickly as possible, as it was urgent and important, that I worked my way up to the door of the Council room, pushed my dispatch under the door, and then knocked loudly, so that those inside could not fail to see it.

In Liberty Hall, quite a crowd of Volunteers and Citizen Army men had gathered, and the figure of the Countess Markievicz moving among us was, to me, unique and impressive. She was very angry with John McNeill. I can still recall clearly the laughing face and buoyant step of Tom McDonagh as he walked to and fro in the hall, with Eamonn Bulfin, after the Council Meeting finished. His very attitude buoyed me up, and gave me the impression that things were not so bad as some had been picturing them, just previously, when the opinion was freely expressed that Volunteers, Citizen Army and every Irishman worthy of the name would be arrested before a shot was fired. (In the light of subsequent events, we were giving the gods in Dublin Castle credit for having more information and brains than they really had.)

I was soon on my way to the G.P.O. with a bundle of telegrams to dispatch. To where they were going

and what the message was, I do not now remember. I don't know if I even bothered to read them. One thing that stands out in my mind is the feeling of relief some men showed that day, as a result of the "manoeuvres" being called off by E. McNeill, while others were thoroughly disgusted. I couldn't explain these two diametrically opposed attitudes. And yet, a day later, both groups were in the thick of the fight. How very few, of those who actually knew that the "manoeuvres" meant war, shirked it, although they knew only too well that the countermand of Sunday spoiled the chances of a decent mobilisation on Monday!

On Monday morning, I got word to mobilise a portion of the company, about half my own section, and, on my way, I was to notify some members of Cumann na mBan to get to their posts. I can never forget the way in which the news was received in different houses. But, what disappointed me most was the number of Volunteers on my list that I found had gone off to Fairyhouse races, or somewhere else for the Bank Holiday. Some of these joined up on Tuesday and later during the week. All credit to them, for they certainly knew they were going into battle!

Then I got into my uniform, and proceeded to Blackhall Street, carrying full kit, including the piece of candle, needle and thread which were included in the list of articles each Volunteer was to have in his kit for the Sunday "manoeuvres". I think a small piece of dry stick for fire-lighting was also included. I carried a short Lee Enfield rifle, two revolvers, and ammunition for all three, as well as the reserve of "Howth" rifle

contained in a brief bag. It weighed, I would say, between three and four stones, and I was thoroughly sick of it before I was half way to Blackhall Street, and wondering when I would meet a Volunteer, less heavily laden, who could relieve me, even for a while. A little further on, I did meet one.

Soon, we were in the thick of it, owing to that party of soldiers who were proceeding along the Quay towards the Phoenix Park, just as our battalion, or part of it, occupied the Four Courts. No need to describe that incident. Sad and humorous was the sight of that big D.M.P. man a prisoner in the Four Courts. I think he did not take us seriously all that first day. The Monday night I spent, with others, guarding the side gate opening on to Chancery ~~Street~~ PLACE.

It was without incident, except that Frank Fahy, I think it was, sent us a box of lovely cigars. The memory of those cigars regaled me for a whole twelvemonth in Dartmoor and Lewes prisons, where even the smell of cigarettesmoke was unknown. Yes, there was another incident of a kind. A bunch of about six horses, tied loosely together, were manoeuvred quite close to our gate, once or twice that night. We knew there was a man somewhere in the midst of them, and suspected that man was a British soldier, but we could not see him, and would not risk shooting a horse, to "get" him. Innocent soldiers were we, surely!! That soldier was one of the party that had turned into ~~Chancery~~ CHARLES Street when our men opened fire too soon on Monday. They were a nuisance there, but apparently our officers were satisfied that we were not strong enough in numbers to attempt dislodging them. It was plain to us, later, that the one among the horses

was scouting our gate.

Next day, Tuesday, I was sent upstairs by Joe McGuinness, and given about seven men to defend a pretty extensive L-shaped block; we occupied two stories of it. I believe Joe McGuinness meant me to take charge but, as the seven men were all strangers to me and I was unaccustomed to being in command, I worked away with the others at barricading windows, boring holes through walls, and generally "digging ourselves in". Later that day, I was, in some informal fashion, accepted as leader, and, from that on, I arranged times on duty and all the other details of activity for our little group. We were very much away from all the others. As I cannot now recall the names of all that group, I refrain from mentioning those whose names I remember. I stated our number was seven, but I think we had as many as nine for a while. One poor fellow, who was certainly very unfitted for soldiering, even of the mild kind that we were experiencing up to Thursday, became so unbalanced from the strain that I had to get him down to the ground floor, with a request that he be kept there and not given a rifle again. A sign, hanging outside the gun shop of Keegan and making a peculiar sound as it swayed in the wind, became for him an armoured car on which he wanted to fire, but could not steady himself sufficiently to do so. After that, I got his rifle from him, and manoeuvred him to the kitchen.

We were really suffering from the strain of looking for a soldier to fire at, and I remember well the callous and, shall I say, brutal pleasure I felt when I "picked off" one who was crossing Grattan Bridge, although he dodged from side to side, and kept his head low most of

easy a mark. He walked out of ~~Chancery~~ CHARLES Street, in full kit. Our man at a loop-hole saw him, and asked me what would he do. Well, what could we do? Here was a soldier, armed and probably looking for a chance to fire on us? One bullet did it, and then the marksman raised his hat, and said, "He's dead, or dying now, anyhow. May the Lord have mercy on him!"

Although we saw, from our position, very few soldiers, some few, whom we could not see, kept up an intermittent sniping at us. Several bullets entered the rooms we occupied, and, presumably, a number lodged in the leather-bound volumes with which we had most of the windows barricaded. One of these bullets passed through the wooden casing of my rifle, just in front of the first finger of my left hand, without injuring either the finger or the barrel of the rifle. Where that bullet was fired from, we could only guess, but it certainly came from a sniper who had got our range, was not too far away, and who was probably provided with field glasses which aided him in sighting our loop-hole.

I think it was on the Thursday we were shelled. One man was with me at the loop-holes, on the lower of the two floors we occuped, while two others were similarly posted on the floor above. The big gun appeared on the south side of the Liffey, in that inset on the Quay, close to St. Michael & John's Church. We kept peppering away at the gunners whenever one of them showed himself, but, as we did not get much chance of taking deliberate aim, I cannot say that we hurt any of them. Perhaps we did. Then came a shattering explosion, and the room trembled. Their first shell hit

We had not enough sense, or military training, to then retreat, but kept on having a shot at the gunners. Soon, the second shell entered our room, through the window at which we were not. Why they put it through that window, in preference to the one at which two of us were stationed, which was nearer to them and to the corner of the building, I could not explain. For more than a minute after that shell burst in the room, I think we did not realise whether we were dead or alive. I remember distinctly, while the room was full of dust, smoke and falling ceiling, hearing the voice of a comrade from the floor above, calling my name and asking were we "dead or alive down there".

The humour of that question aroused me, and I then realised that my comrade and myself were uninjured. I called to the man above to come down quickly and follow me, as I realised that the next shell would probably enter the room they were in, directly above us. We made our way to the ground floor where we found our comrades praying for us, as dead.

I think it was three shells they fired, in all, but others can verify this. While we were down below, we got the best feed of that week, and, that evening, we were up again in our old quarters, which we cleaned up and barricaded, as before. But nothing of importance happened from that until the order to surrender reached us on Saturday afternoon. We had noticed a decided waning off in the sounds of rifle shots that afternoon. It was quite easy for us to distinguish between the report of the "Howth" rifle and of its smaller brother, the Lee Enfield.

We all knew that the supply of ammunition for the "Howth" was very limited, and wondered how long it would hold out. But that rifle made a cheery sound for us, for we knew that it was not being used by the English.

SIGNED: C. O'Donovan
F. Coy. Batt. I.

DATE: 8/1/59

WITNESS