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BUREAU OF MILITARY HISTORY, 1913-21

STATEMENT BY WITNESS.

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**Witness**

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**Identity.**

Director of Intelligence, I.R.A.,  
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# ORIGINAL

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No. W.S. 1753

STATEMENT BY LIAM TOBIN

I was born in Cork City in 1895. My father, David Tobin, came from Clolefin, two or three miles from Mitchelstown, County Cork. My mother's maiden name was Butler; her people came from Tipperary.

The family left Cork and went to Kilkenny, where I went to school to the Christian Brothers, and later on I was apprenticed to the hardware business in Kilkenny. I do not remember how many years I was there, but we arrived in Dublin in 1912, I think. I got employment in the hardware firm of Smiths of Capel Street. Later I went to Brooks Thomas's, and just before Easter Week I had gone to Henshaws in Christchurch Place.

I joined the Volunteers immediately after the Howth gun-running. Previous to that I had been rather critical of the then Irish Volunteers. I had frequently seen them marching or mobilizing for route marches on Sundays. A number of us who lived around Phibsboro', including Jack Richmond and some others, joined "C" Company of the 1st Battalion immediately after the Howth gun-running. That incident convinced us that the Volunteers meant business.

Michael Staines, who was at that time connected with the Q.M.G.'s department of the Irish Volunteers, was also employed in Henshaws. Frank Harding was also there. Staines was terminating his employment some week or maybe weeks before Easter Week, and he told me to ascertain what shotguns, small arms, and, as far as I can remember, pike handles and stuff like that might be in Henshaws.

He also gave me the first hint that the coming Easter might be the time that we were going to fight. He passed some jocose remark like, "Well, I'll see you on Easter Sunday", or some such thing. I could not understand at the time why he did not say where, what time and the usual details of an appointment. As events turned out, it was the Easter Rising he had been referring to.

As well as I can remember I did succeed in bringing away, or having some stuff removed from Henshaws, such as - shotguns, shotgun cartridges and things like that.

Then came Easter Week, and I remember the disappointment I felt at the cancellation of the Easter Sunday mobilisation. Those of us in Phibsboro' could not understand what was happening. At that time I did not hold any rank. I mobilised for Easter Monday and joined the mobilisation at Blackhall Place, where I was struck by the small numbers who turned up. To the best of my recollection I would say there were less than two hundred there. It struck me at the time that I had often seen our Company, "C" Company of the 1st Battalion, muster a bigger number than the whole Battalion did on that morning.

Commandant Ned Daly was in the hall in Blackhall Place and, just before we left he addressed us and told us we were going out to fight. As well as I can remember he said that if there was anybody who did not feel like going out to fight they could leave, but I think they all stood firm. I have an idea that perhaps one or two did back out, but in the main, all stood firm.

We then moved off towards the Four Courts and when we arrived there I think the back gates had already been opened and we marched in. Our first job was putting the place into a state of defence and this was begun by

breaking windows and covering them up with large heavy books which were strewn around the place.

We did duty the first day at two barricades, the barricades at Church Street, that is at the Church Street Bridge end of the place, where I came under fire for the first time, and it was an experience I did not like.

I think it was on Easter Monday, when all the barricades had already been erected and such like, that I noticed a row going on at the barricade at the far side of Church Street Bridge. As far as I can remember now, a British officer in uniform was in the midst of our own men who were at that barricade, and a number of women - wives of British soldiers - were endeavouring to rescue him from our fellows. I succeeded in getting him away from the crowd - most of the women were hostile to us except one or two who were not. We got him across the bridge and over the barricades. He was our prisoner. He turned out to be a Lieutenant on his way home from England to Limerick on furlough. He was rather upset. He thought that he was going to be shot, and showed me his rosary beads. I assured him that he would not be shot, and that if I had the ill-luck to be taken prisoner, I hoped I would get as good treatment as I was sure he would receive from us. I brought him into the Four Courts, where he was put along with the other prisoners there.

This officer had come along on a sidecar, apparently from the mail-boat or somewhere, on his way to Kingsbridge, and he just blundered into our men.

While I was at the barricade at that bridge at Church Street I remember a motor car coming right up to the barricade and it was called on to halt. The driver attempted to reverse and get away and we opened fire.

There were two British officers in the car, and there was a driver, I forget whether he was civilian or military. Some of them were wounded; one of the officers I think, and possibly the driver. We succeeded in taking them prisoner and bringing them to the Four Courts. It turned out that one of them was Lord Dunsany and other was a Major, whose name I forget now, a very decent man. Dunsany, as he was being brought to the Four Courts, kept shouting and speaking loudly about the brave men he regarded us to be, and so on. He was slightly wounded, and I think was removed without any delay to, possibly, the Richmond Hospital, which was nearby. The other man, the Major, who was with him, remained a prisoner with us.

Nothing very extraordinary happened to me during that week. I remember the Four Courts being shelled. You can still see the new stones that were afterwards put in to repair that wall, that is at the east end of it, the Parliament Street end; some of the outer wall was dislodged by a couple of shells that were fired into it. As far as I can remember they did not continue to shell the place after the first salvo or so.

I got very little sleep, but towards the end of the week I remember trying to sleep with a number of others in a toilet with my head under a wash basin, until somebody walked on me.

Towards the end of the week I was sent out with three or four others to a barricade in Church Street, with instructions that we were to cover off the retreat of our men from Upper Church Street, where a big fight had gone on all the week. The barricade I was sent to was in Greek Street, and the people living in tenement houses there seemed to be very much in sympathy with us. Anyway, there was an extraordinary atmosphere of quiet

at that point, and when we were there for some time we noticed some two or three, maybe more, of our fellows coming running from the direction of the Four Courts and were passing us. I think we let a couple of them go by before we decided that there was something the matter. We stopped one fellow who was rather hysterical. He had trouble in explaining why he was in such a hurry, but he did say that the enemy were behind us. He was in a panic, but it was not so much a question of his running away, I would say he was making his escape.

I decided that the three or four of us who were there - it was the first time I had been put in charge of anything - should go back towards the Four Courts and discover for ourselves what was the matter. To our horror and surprise the enemy were at the back of us, were all around the Four Courts and were inside it. The surrender was actually taking place, or had taken place. This was probably Saturday. We went through the British lines, and in the courtyard of the Four Courts our fellows were being lined up. They were all there, all our own officers that I knew. There were one or two Capuchin priests there also, one of whom spoke loudly, and as far as I could understand him he did not agree with our action in being out fighting, especially with the poor arms which we had.

Having come in from the barricades we were now within the British cordon and had joined the remainder of our men in the Four Courts.

All our arms were heaped around the place. The general discussion amongst us was about the surrender of our arms and we felt that we should not give up our arms. There was some confusion as to what we should do, and I believe I hit my rifle off the parapet of the iron railings in an attempt to break it.

We were marched from the Four Courts to O'Connell Street, very heavily guarded. The appearance of O'Connell Street gave us our first idea of what had happened in the city, and we realised on seeing it how bad things had been down there. It certainly looked to be completely in ruins. There was a smell of burning buildings and the tram wires were down and strewn about the streets.

We were halted in Upper O'Connell Street, about opposite the Gresham Hotel, where I think we were joined by some other units of ours, perhaps from the G.P.O. There was quite a big crowd of us there.

I should say that we were feeling rather disheartened as we were marching from the Four Courts, and a number of fellows started shouting that we should whistle or sing something to raise our spirits. As well as I can remember we did whistle "The Boys of Wexford" or some such marching song, and we felt a little better.

Standing up at the top of O'Connell Street, the British military faced us at both sides with fixed bayonets, and it appeared to me as if they would not require very much provocation to use their bayonets. We were eventually moved from there into the small grass park opposite the Rotunda Hospital where we were put sitting or lying down on the grass, surrounded by a military guard. At some time later the D.M.P. were brought in and were put around us as a guard. We thought as well as I remember, that they did not fancy that sort of job, and as a matter of fact we did not either as we thought it was rather lowering to our dignity as soldiers that we should be placed under a police guard.

In charge of the enemy forces there was Captain Lea-Wilson, who was dressed in the usual military uniform, but wore a smoking cap with a fancy tassel hanging out of it. He kept walking round and round, stopping now and again to speak to his soldiers, saying "Whom do you consider worst, the Boches or the Sinn Féiners?" and, of course, they always answered that we were the worst.

With the number of us lying in the small area of grass we were cramped for space, and it was damp and uncomfortable so that I got a bad cramp in my legs. As Lea-Wilson was passing, Piaras Beaslai said to him, "There's a young fellow here who is not well", explaining what was wrong and asking if I could stand up. Lea-Wilson said, "No, let the so-and-so stay where he is".

I remember that evening that those of us who wanted to relieve ourselves had to do it lying on the grass alongside our own comrades; there was nowhere to go and we had to use the place where we lay. As well as I can remember a number of our men, including Tom Clarke, were during that time brought to the steps of the Rotunda Hospital and were there searched. Some people say they were stripped in the process and if my memory is reliable at all it is my impression that that did happen. Lea-Wilson was responsible for having them stripped as he was responsible for whatever ill-treatment was received there. I know that when he refused to allow me to stand up I looked at him and I registered a vow to myself that I would deal with him at some time in the future.

We stayed in the Rotunda place until, I think, the following day, Sunday, when we were marched across the city to Richmond Barracks. Here and there were numbers of people who were supporters of the British - soldiers' wives and so on - who came to watch us pass, and they



gave us a hostile reception.

On reaching Richmond Barracks we were put into a big building, I think it was a gymnasium, where we were all lined up on one side of it. I think it was on the right-hand side, according to my recollection. A number of detectives came in and began walking up and down, surveying and looking at everybody. A number of our men had already been picked out and put sitting down or standing at the other side of the hall. Beaslai, who was near me again at that time, was taken across to the other side. Then a detective, I think his name was Smith - it was not the Sergeant Smith who was afterwards executed - told me to come on and get across to the other side. I said, "Why?" and he said, "Come on, get over. What do you think you were doing for the last <sup>week</sup>?" The reason I bothered asking at all was that I was just an ordinary "rank and filer" and I could not understand why he should have picked me out.

While I was on that other side of the room, the officer, already mentioned, whom I had taken off the sidecar and brought into the Four Courts, came in, accompanied by another officer, and as he was passing me I said "hullo" or some remark like that. He recognised me seemingly, and having looked around the place he went out.

I do not know how long we were left in the gymnasium, but eventually I found myself being brought to another room, where I suppose there may have been a dozen of us or more. Peadar Clancy was there with us as far as I remember, and also Paddy McNestry.

The food we were getting was the usual Army food, tinned stuff, bully-beef and the like. There was one iron bucket or tub which we were supposed to use as a urinal and such purpose, and altogether, it was not a very nice experience there. I cannot remember how long I was there either, but eventually I was brought out with, I think, Peadar Clancy and Paddy McNestry, and we were put lying on a bit of grass out in the square. We understood that we were being brought out for court-martial and there were a number of us there on this grass patch, amongst whom as well as I can remember were the brothers Pearse at the head of this party. I forget who else was in that group. I should say that Jim Sullivan was one of the party. He is married to one of the Dalys of Limerick, and was a personal friend of Ned Daly's.

Eventually Paddy McNestry, Peadar Clancy and myself were brought under escort into a room. It was a court-martial. I think there were three officers of the court, and there were a couple of other officers, one of whom did all the talking. He was the prosecutor.

The prosecutor explained to the court that we were charged, under some Act or other, with being taken in arms against the King and with helping the enemies of His Majesty the King and so on. He finished up by saying that the penalty for this was death, but the President of the court contradicted him on this point and said that the wording of the Act was "maybe death". I was hoping sincerely that the President was right but there appeared to be some doubt about it. They turned over the leaves of books and papers to see which was right and I must say that while the trial went on it was not clear to me which way it had been decided. I was not informed whether they had decided that the death

sentence was mandatory or at the discretion of the court, but anyway, it was settled to their satisfaction, and the first witness called was the officer whom I had arrested and taken off the sidecar. He came in and removed his cap. This vexed the President of the court, who asked him did he not know how to conduct himself at a court-martial. To my mind he upset the President, which was something I did not want. I wanted the President to remain calm. This Lieutenant gave evidence to the effect that I had taken him prisoner, and that he had seen me many times carrying arms while he was a prisoner. He was asked specifically if he identified me, if he was quite sure, and so on. We were asked if we wanted to cross-examine him or to ask any questions, and I decided to do so. I tried to shake him in his evidence of identification, particularly about seeing me armed in the Four Courts, a small point, but I did think that when I was speaking to him in the Four Courts - when I had brought him cigarettes and things like that during the week - I was not armed. It was a small point, but I did not succeed in shaking him in his evidence.

The next witness was the Major who had been in the car with Dunsany. He, as well as I can remember, was an Englishman but a very fair-minded man, and I think he said that he failed to recognise any of us. It became general talk amongst ourselves afterwards that he was a very fair man who did not want to help in the conviction of anybody. I think he afterwards wrote to the papers in our favour, at least in Ireland's favour. I have forgotten his name.

There were no other witnesses produced at the court, I think, and we were just informed that that was all and marched out of the room. I think we were then put into

another room, the three of us with Commandant General Joe Plunkett. The four of us were marched from the Richmond Barracks to Kilmainham, the same day. I do not remember the date, but it may be got from the "Irish Times Handbook". I do not think we stayed the night in Richmond Barracks, I am nearly sure we did not. We were brought to Kilmainham Jail where we were put into one large cell together. I must say that Plunkett impressed me as an extraordinary man. He did everything possible to convince us that we were not going to be executed, that we would live, and live perhaps to fight again. For himself, he was quite sure that he was going to be executed.

I suppose it was only a matter of some hours perhaps that we were left together, then Plunkett was taken out. Later we were brought out for exercise in the jail yard where a number of <sup>FELLOW</sup> prisoners were, some of whom I knew, others were complete strangers. They were walking around in circles and there was quite a number of soldiers there acting as a guard. The English fellows allowed us to speak, but warned us about some Irish soldiers who were there, that they were a bad lot. We did manage to have a chat, and the talk was generally about the beating up and ill-treatment of the prisoners. We came in from that exercise, and as far as I can remember, I was for the first time put into a separate cell on my own. There was no bedding or any other furniture in that cell. Being very exhausted I slept heavily and I can remember nothing except that during the night I was awakened by being shaken by a British officer and a couple of armed soldiers, who had a lantern. They got me off the floor and put me standing up. I was completely dazed with

sleep. The officer asked me my name and I told him. He said, "You have been sentenced to death", reading from a document he held. With that he left, brought his soldiers with him, and closed the door. In a matter of minutes, as far as I can remember, he re-opened the door and said, "and the sentence of the court has been commuted to ten years' penal servitude". He repeated this practice with the other prisoners too, apparently considering this procedure as a rather good joke.

I suppose it was on the following day a number of us were taken in the Black Maria, I think, to Mountjoy Prison, where we were received by warders, had a bath and the usual prison routine gone through. Our uniforms were taken from us and we changed into ordinary prison uniform. I met a warder there named Berry, whom I had known through people in Kilkenny. He made himself known to me again, and I asked him to bring word to my parents as to where I was and what was happening to me. During all that week they had been down in Cork at the burial of my grandfather, my father's father. Berry afterwards gave great help to us in the Black and Tan time.

I cannot say how long we were in Mountjoy, but I suppose it was some days afterwards that about a dozen of us were given back our own clothes, or uniforms, and under military escort we were marched to the North Wall, via the North Circular Road and across Dorset Street, down Seville Place and that direction. I remember that just at the end of the North Circular Road, a man, obviously he was a baker judging by the flour all over him, ran out of a shop and pushed his way through the surrounding guards. He loaded my hands up with packets of cigarettes, Woodbines for which I was very grateful. I never heard of him since

Having got to the North Wall we were put aboard a vessel, and brought down very far in one of the holds. It was some sort of a collier or something. The quarters that we had were very uncomfortable, very dark and smelly. Just as we got down there the officer in charge of the guard came along and said that I was wanted on deck and I was brought up. Very decently he allowed me to meet my mother and say goodbye to her. The warder, Berry, had succeeded in informing her of what was happening.

The crew of that vessel, as far as I can remember, were mostly Welsh, and were very hostile to us. We made the journey to Holyhead, and certainly it was not a comfortable journey. There were no lights or anything like that permitted on the ship, and there was anxiety regarding possible action of German submarines.

On arrival at Holyhead we boarded a train, but we had no idea where we were being brought to. I think we travelled for about two days on the train. At one or two stations our carriage was surrounded by gaping curious crowds, and I remember that at one place where they discovered who and what we were, the women spat at the windows.

I should imagine that there were about twelve of us in the party, including Ned Duggan, Joe McGuinness and maybe Fionán Lynch. It was surely a two days journey, because we seemed to be going and coming all over England, shunting backward and forward, until we got to Portland. The exterior aspect of Portland prison was anything but inviting but we were marched in.

I should say that our military escort had relieved us of our buttons and other ornaments off our uniforms, as souvenirs, but we had given them willingly.

At Portland, names and particulars of each prisoner were taken, and we were lined up and addressed by a higher warder or a ranking officer of the prison, who told us that we were now in penal servitude and that it was up to ourselves to make it hard or easy for ourselves, according to the way we acted. It was a threatening kind of speech.

I have very little to say about Portland. I think we remained there for six months, when we were transferred to Lewes Prison, and then we joined up with our people who had been jailed in Dartmoor. We were all together again.

There was no other class of prisoners in Lewes but ourselves, and we more or less took over the place. We talked all day to each other and generally made our own arrangements. For all practical purposes the disciplinary system of the prison no longer functioned. We decided, after being there, I suppose, some months that we would demand prisoner-of-war status and treatment. This, I believe, was done with the concurrence of our people at home. Unfortunately for our intentions to destroy the locks of our cells and make them unworkable, our plans were discovered. Some of the instructions or plans for this strike, as you would call it, were put in writing, and during a search a copy of the plans had been discovered. The result was that we were kept locked in our cells, and there was no possibility of creating a mass demonstration outside the cells. In retaliation we were then instructed by our leaders to create as much damage as we could, by breaking our windows and so on. This we did, and kept up all-day and all-night concerts, singing patriotic songs out through the windows. Communication between us at this time was by means of shouting to each other from cell to cell.

Now and again, for some days afterwards, prisoners shouting to a comrade would get no reply from his cell, and somebody else would shout "He is gone. I heard the door open and shut. He is gone". We then realised that the prisoners were gradually being removed elsewhere. Eventually the day arrived when I was called out from my cell and brought to the main hall, where I was handcuffed to a rather heavy chain. There were six of us altogether in that batch. I think there were three on each of two chains, and we were brought by wagonette from the prison to a railway station and put on board a train. The sight of us created great excitement and curiosity among the people. We thought we should do something, so we sang "The Watch on the Rhine", which was not at all popular in England at that time. Our warders remonstrated with us, but we kept up the singing.

When we were put on board the train we were not told where we were going or what would become of us. Eventually we were put on board a boat and landed on the Isle of Wight. We were brought to Broadmoor prison. This was a criminal lunatic asylum situated on the Isle of Wight. We were addressed there by a senior prison officer, who told us that now our trouble-making was at an end, they were not going to put up with any more of it, and a lot more to this effect. We were then placed in <sup>separate</sup> cells.

It transpired that some number of our people, perhaps a dozen or so, had been brought there some days previously and were occupying the punishment cells there. They had continued their strike attitude since they arrived and we continued the strike also, refusing to take orders and so on. Having refused to obey some command I was brought before the Governor, my boots having been removed, which I was told was because there was a likelihood I might use them on the Governor. There were so many of



our fellows on punishment that there were not enough slippers to go around, so I was left in my stockinged feet. The Governor listened to the warder's complaint, and I got three day's bread and water. I was due to be brought before the Governor a second time, or a third time, having finished my three days' punishment, when word came that we were being transferred to London and that we were being released.

We were brought to London by train, and at whatever railway station it was that we arrived at, the glass of the car which we were getting into was broken by stone-throwing, seemingly a hostile crowd had gathered.

Pentonville, I think, was the name of the jail we were now brought to. The following day we were measured for civilian suits and so on. Then we were brought to Euston station, where we entrained for home.

