

ORIGINAL

BUREAU OF MILITARY HISTORY 1913-21

BURO STAIRÉ MÍLEATA 1913-21

No. W.S. 25



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Statement by

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STATEMENT OF PATRICK HIGGINS,
1, WASHINGTON STREET, WEST, CORK.

PERIOD: 1900 TO EASTER 1916.

UNIT: CORK BRIGADE, I.V.

The whole Volunteer movement in Cork and the position it created grew out of the activities of a relatively small group of men and women who had been working in different ways to promote one or other of the various aspects of the Irish Ireland movement. Between 1900 and 1913 the Gaelic League was an active and growing organisation, which had numerous Branches in the City. It was a body that anyone could go into, and people with only the mildest interest in national affairs did come into it. There were a number of small organisations with limited membership and slight resources, such as the Young Ireland Society, the Celtic Literary Society, Inghnidhe na h-Eireann, the Industrial Development Association, Sinn Fein, the Fianna, and the A.O.H. American Alliance. Somewhere in these organisations, in the Gaelic League, and, to a lesser extent, in the G.A.A., and often in more than one or two of them, a small group was active and forward in every activity. Tomas MacCurtain, Sean O'Hegarty, Martin Donovan and Miceal O Cuill would be representative of that group. They were particularly strong in the O'Growney Branch of the Gaelic League.

Inghnidhe na h-Eireann provided a social side to these varied activities, as well as doing good work themselves in other directions. They had a room over Kellehers in Washington Street where they held dances, socials and meetings. Terence MacSwiney was active on the Literary and Dramatic aspects of the revival. I remember he took me to a room in Washington Street where he was himself giving a lecture to some body - probably the Celtic Literary Society. He was concerned in an incident connected with the King's visit to Cork. With others he wanted to hold a room in Washington Street and put out a black flag, but they were prevented by the owners of the premises from using the room.

I was in the South Parish Branch of the Gaelic League in those years, and knew most of those active in any national organisation in the city. James Connolly came to Cork and was given the Dun for a lecture. The priests who were in the Gaelic League objected strongly to this action by the League. Connolly had a strong Belfast accent and was talking straight Socialism at the time. The priests objected to Socialism, but Connolly got the Hall. One result of this action was that the priests tried to get control of the Gaelic League but the result of their effort was that they were thrown out. Even the mildest Gaelic Leaguers would not have it.

The Dublin meeting for the formation of the Volunteers electrified all Gaelic League and Irish Ireland circles in Cork, especially because McNeill and Pearse were associated with it. There was immediate activity and discussion of the new movement in all the above-mentioned groups. I suspect that the I.R.B.

men in these bodies were the prime movers in starting the Volunteers in Cork. They brought in men well known to them in the existing organisations to make it look representative, men such as J.J. Walsh, then Chairman of the Cork County Board, G.A.A: Jerry Fawsitt, then Secretary of the Industrial Development Association, and Sean Jennings, who was a strong and respected member of the A.O.H.

I do not know if the I.R.B. in Cork got any directions from their own Headquarters in regard to the formation of the Volunteers. I was never a member of that organisation, though I was asked by Fred Murray to join it after 1916 and I refused. (I told Tomas MacCurtain later about the invitation and my refusal and he said I was quite right.) My own experience was that I found the I.R.B. very fair, and not prejudiced against a man because he was not a member.

I was in the City Hall at the first meeting for the formation of the Volunteers. I don't remember if I got a card, but I went because I was interested. I thought the Cork audience extremely stupid not to see McNeill's joke about the Ulster Volunteers; Galway saw it, but the Cork audience was stampeded by an organised A.O.H. party waiting for any pretext on which to wreck the meeting. I think it was a good thing for the Volunteers. Big splashy movements usually end in bubbles. As it was, the leaders had to build up the movement slowly brick by brick; they had to work hard to convince people they were right and honest.

I did not join the Volunteers at once. There was some opposition to the movement in the Gaelic League. It was argued that it would take men away from the important work the League was doing, that it would eventually fizzle out and that the men would be lost to the Gaelic League. Daniel Corkery was the chief protagonist in this view. I agreed with him at the time, but when those who were active both in the Gaelic League and in the Volunteers set out to prove that the Volunteer organisation would help rather than hinder the Gaelic League, and when they did it in a practical way by bringing a number of Volunteers into the Gaelic League, I was converted and I joined the Volunteers in May, 1914. That, I think, may be typical of a number of men at the time. We were doing serious and important work in the Gaelic League; we felt a sense of responsibility to that organisation; it was a big job and some of the work would have to be dropped if we went into the Volunteers. Volunteering was a bit of a joke at first. We were not hostile but we were critical.

The women were a big factor in influencing the slow swing over of even national opinion to the Volunteers after the start. Over and above the appeal the colour and martial spirit of the movement had for them, they seemed to have appreciated better than the men the great significance of an armed and disciplined force.

The A.O.H. was then the most powerful political organisation in Cork. It was entirely loyal to the Irish party and it controlled everything - except the Volunteers.

The Volunteer Committee had been carefully selected, and it had an absolutely safe majority against the Redmondites, but A.O.H. men were coming into the Volunteers in large numbers, and the threat that they would swamp the movement was becoming very real. I greatly feared Redmond's control of the Volunteers, and I thought it right to oppose that control in every way I could. I knew Delaney, the Secretary of the All for Ireland Club. I went to him and asked him to do something amongst his members to balance the growing weight of the Redmondites, but he would not touch it.

When I joined in May, 1914, the territorial division of the City into four Company areas was the cause of a certain amount of grumbling. Pals were separated. There was a method in it, of course; it prevented the A.O.H. men being a completely solid block anywhere. Recruits were not posted to Companies until they had got a certain amount of training, and I was posted to 'D' Company. Later, I was a Section Commander in the Company and at an election was proposed, without my consent, for the position of Captain. I got only five votes.

The Redmondites eventually forced the split in August, 1914. There were about 700 or 800 men in the City Companies then, as against about 250 when the Redmondites came in. Seán Jennings, who was Treasurer of the Volunteers in Cork, had been a strong A.O.H. man up to that time. He fell out with them at the split, and brought a good number of A.O.H. men with him. There was a big row in the A.O.H. Jennings was the head and front of it. It did a lot of damage to the A.O.H. at the time and eventually to the National Volunteers. Jennings was a Mayo man and he had a great regard for the McBrides.

I was at the Training Camp held in Wicklow in August, 1915, immediately after the Rossa funeral. Others who were there included Daithí Barry, Sean Nolan, Diarmuid Lynch, Tom Ashe, Pierce McCann and Joe McGuinness.

About the middle of 1915 I was appointed Brigade Communications Officer, and given the job of organising lines of communication from the city to all Companies in the County. This job carried some rank and membership of the Brigade Council. I organised these lines, linking up the different Companies with cyclists. It was not very speedy or efficient, but it was necessary to have our own lines on which safety and secrecy would be ensured. No matter how easy it would be to get messages out in other ways, it was insisted that this method would be used fairly frequently to test the organisation and practise the men in the work. We organised some railwaymen also and opened a line to Dublin through them.

From mid 1915 to Easter, 1916, I did a good deal of organising and training work throughout the County. I visited or organised Companies at Ballinhassig, Gurteen North, Kilpatrick, Kilmona, Waterloo, Courtbrack, Donoughmore and Ballynoe. I was out frequently with these Companies in 1915 and early 1916. Daithí Barry was often with me, Sean Nolan on a few occasions, but generally I was alone. Another man who went with me sometimes on this training and organising work was

Pat Barrett, of Gurranedarragh, Wilton. He was one of the most faithful and interested men I knew. He was well off, and although in very poor health he worked untiringly for the Volunteers. Both himself and his brother, Joseph, were at Macroom on Easter Sunday, 1916. A bicycle was my mode of travel. I could reach Ballinhassig, Waterloo and Kilmona on week evenings, but when I went to the more distant Companies I had to remain overnight. Daithi Barry was the first Brigade Adjutant. He held the post from the appointment of the Brigade Staff until he had to leave his employment in 1915. Sean Nolan was then appointed and held the post until after 1916.

I had close contact with Tomas MacCurtain and Terence MacSwiney for several months before Easter, 1916. I remember a conversation between them when the three of us were walking up the Western Road about three weeks before Easter. The subject matter of the conversation was the aid promised to us from Germany. I am unable to recall the words, but I remember clearly the impression their discussion made on me at the time. I took little or no part in the conversation. Tomas and Terry were agreed that the people in Dublin were being fooled by the Germans, and they were disturbed because they believed the Germans were just using the Irish Volunteers in their own interests. Neither Tomas nor Terry had any faith in the Germans, and both of them disapproved of the policy of seeking aid from them. I got the distinct impression from the conversation that there was division of opinion on this subject in Dublin also, that Terry had been in Dublin about it, and that there had been an agreement on some line of action for which McNeill was to give the order. I think both of them were greatly influenced by McNeill, but had lost almost all faith in some of the Dublin men.

When a copy of the Dublin Castle document, which was afterwards read by Alderman Tom Kelly at the Dublin Corporation meeting, was sent to Cork, I met Tomas in Sean Jennings's shop. Tomas produced the document and asked me to read it out for Sean. I did so. He then asked my opinion of it. I had no definite opinion and said so. Tomas then expressed his opinion very definitely that it was a fake got up to rush the Volunteers into action.

From a number of discussions with them before Easter, I got the impression that Tomas and Terry believed the Dublin men were going to fight whether anybody else did or not. They did not approve of that. Tomas was a very practical man, and he would not undertake a thing that he believed had not a reasonable chance of success. In plain language, the two of them thought the Dublin crowd were daft. Tomas always dominated Terry, though Terry did more talking.

The plan on which the Brigade was to be mobilised on Easter Sunday was not a Cork plan - it was what we had been ordered to do by Dublin. The positions we were to occupy were designed for us. I never knew in detail what the plan was, except that we were to concentrate roughly along the Cork-Kerry border from Newmarket South West, to cover the landing of arms somewhere on the Kerry coast. I do not know what the subsequent intentions were. It may be that the Brigade had no orders beyond these, and the movement of the

Brigade to the West in accordance with these orders was, of course, carried out.

Tomas and Terry had been sleeping in the Hall in Sheares Street during Holy Week. I had been sleeping there also. I was very busy on Easter Saturday, but was in and out of the Hall frequently. Knowing the state of their minds about the general position I could sense that there was considerable tension and uncertainty. It was agreed, or taken for granted, that I would take charge of Ballinhassig Company on Easter Sunday. I had organised it.

Before I went out to Ballinhassig on Saturday night, I had a conversation with Tomas and Terry in the Hall. They were in complete agreement, but Terry did most of the talking. I think they knew then that the "Aud" was lost. They had decided that the safest thing to do was to carry out the exercises on Sunday as an ordinary parade. Terry had his mind made up that it was to be an ordinary parade and nothing more. They instructed me to march the Ballinhassig and Ballymartle men to Bealnablath where he and Tomas would meet us. There was to be no hostile action on our part, but if we were attacked we were to defend ourselves as well as possible. My opinion is that he did not expect anyone to attack us, and I did not expect it either. Ballinhassig Company had already got the instructions issued to all Companies to parade with all arms and equipment and rations for two days. My job was to keep them up to scratch. I left Terry with the feeling that he had no expectation at all that anything would happen on Easter Sunday. To him it was an ordinary route march.

Dan Hegarty of Mallow and another Volunteer came into the Hall on Saturday. They had a hand grenade which they had made. It had a fuse which would have to be lighted with a match. Some men from East Cork also came to the Hall.

I cycled to Ballinhassig late on Saturday night and stayed at Hyde's. I had the impression that the police were a bit more than usually active in town that night. Willie and Bob Hales were at Hyde's when I got there. They stayed, but left early in the morning to join their own Company.

We mobilised at Ballinhassig about six o'clock on Easter Sunday morning and marched to Upton where we had 8 o'clock Mass. We then marched on to Bealnablath. Our orders were to wait there for instructions and we did so. We had breakfast while waiting. Tom Hales' Battalion passed on towards Kilmurray while we were at Bealnablath. Tomas and Terry arrived in a car driven by Davie O'Callaghan. There was nobody else with them. Tomas told me the Cork Companies were coming up and that we were to join them and go on to Macroom. When the Cork men arrived we joined them and marched on to Kilmurray where we picked up Tom Hales' Battalion and the whole body marched to Macroom. We had approximately 50 men from Ballinhassig and Ballymartle and three Scotch cars. A number of cyclists, including Ballynoe Company, overtook us at Coolcover and, these, together with the odd cyclists who were attached to the other Companies, were collected and put in my charge. We brought up the rear of the column going into Macroom.

An old Fenian - Bill Connors from Crookstown - came alone and joined us near Coolcower. He marched to Macroom, and was the oldest man in the whole parade. I said to him, "You have no gun" and he answered "Well, I'll stop a bullet anyhow".

I was not at the meeting of Officers that was held in Macroom. No special reason was given to us for the cancellation of the parade, and we were just told it was off and we were to return to our own areas.

We came back on the train to Dooniskey. I marched the Ballinhassig and Ballymartle men to Bealnablath, and most of us stayed the night in a hayshed at Murray's farmhouse there. It was very wet. On Easter Monday I got a train from Crookstown and arrived in Cork about 1.30 p.m. I went home to bed, and was called about 5 o'clock to go to the Hall. I got there about 6 o'clock. Walter Furlong was on duty with a rifle and full equipment, marching up and down Sheares Street. There may have been other men on duty outside the Hall also. I went in, and Con Murphy handed me a rifle and told me to take up duty as he had to go and look after arms. I was on duty until Tomas and Terry came in about 8 or 9 o'clock. I think they came in a car. At this time there were not many Volunteers in the Hall, but it was known vaguely that something was on in Dublin.

Tomas and Terry called me upstairs. I am not quite sure if there was anyone present at the discussion which followed except the three of us. If there were more than three it was not more than one or two others. I cannot recall the details of the discussion, but the impression made upon my mind by it, and by their reactions to the crisis, is quite clear. They appeared to be in complete agreement. They were in a terrible mood, frustrated, puzzled and anxious.

Two messages had come to Cork from Dublin that day, one of which was Pearse's - "We start here at noon to-day". I do not know when these messages had come, or who had received them. I got the impression that Tomas and Terry had not been long in the City before coming to the Hall, and I do not know when or where they received these message, but it was clear that they were aware of the position in Dublin.

It appeared to me that they had fully discussed the matter between themselves before coming to the Hall. It may be also that they had discussed it with others. I felt that they had made up their minds not to call out the men again, and that they were justifying that decision by a recapitulation of all the arguments against such a course. They felt that the men would not turn out if called upon. They seemed to have sensed the position in Cork, and to be to some extent influenced by consideration for the men, and the weakness of the arms position. There was the further difficulty that the Country Companies had all been demobilised, and no speedy means existed of remobilising them. They felt their own responsibility very keenly. The whole thing looked odd and mad at that moment. We discussed what would be done if they decided on mobilisation. There was no plan; there never had been any plan for Cork except the concentration on the previous day, and they did not know what to do. Terry said something to the

effect that he could not stand for the city being bombarded and people being shot down. Before I left they had definitely made up their minds to take no action, but, of course, they could have made a different decision afterwards.

I was very tired, having had almost no sleep for two nights before. I asked was there anything I could do or anything which must be done. They said no, that I was to go home to bed. I had left before the Bishop arrived.

After the agreement had been made with the Bishop about the surrender of arms to the Lord Mayor, Terry sent me to Mitchelstown to investigate a complaint from the Military that the Mitchelstown Volunteers had done something in breach of the agreement. I went in a taxi, and had a British Military Pass which had been procured for me. I found that the Mitchelstown men had cut a few wires.

After that Willie Crowley came in and told me Sean Hales was being hunted by the police. I went to Bandon on Tuesday, 2nd May, on my own initiative, using the Military pass I still had; hoping to fix matters up with the police in accordance with the agreement that there would be no arrests. I went to Gurteen first to find out what had happened. They told me there that police had attempted to arrest Sean Hales at Bandon fair, but that he had escaped and the police were looking for him. The Gurteen men were anxious to know what to do themselves in view of the likelihood of raids. I went to Bandon R.I.C. Barracks and complained of their action in the case of Sean Hales. The Bandon police had a grievance; one of their men, Sergeant Crean, had been searched and a baton taken from him by the Ballinadee men some days previously. They threatened that if the Ballinadee men did not behave themselves they would blow them off the map. I suggested that I would go out to Ballinadee and explain matters. I did this and later returned to Bandon, but I did not see Sean or Tom Hales at all. On my way back I was met by a friend who told me the police were looking for me in town. I did not come in until a few days later when I got a message that the men who had been arrested had been released.

I was not at the meeting that was held in the Hall on the Monday after Easter Monday in reference to the surrender of arms. I took my own arms to Ballinhassig and concealed them there. I have no personal knowledge of arms being sent out of the city to the County Companies during Easter Week, but Will Herlihy of Berrings told me afterwards that some arms were brought out to his place.

I remember the enquiry held in the Grinan, Queen Street, in January, 1917, into the action of the Cork Leaders at Easter, 1916. I was not present at the sworn part of the enquiry, but was present at the subsequent discussions. A dance was arranged in the Grinan that night as cover for the enquiry. There was discussion about the failure of the Cork men to do something at Easter, 1916. John and Tom Hales were the people who criticised MacCurtain and MacSwiney most severely. I thought they were concerned to advertise the fact that they (the Ballinadee men) wanted to fight and others did not. That point of view got little support, and the general

feeling was in favour of reorganising and carrying on the movement under the same leaders. There were about twenty people present. Up to that time the County Companies preferred to be under the control of the City men; they did not want to be bossed by locals.

signed: Patrick Higgins

Date: Sept 13th 1947

Witness: Florence Donohue

