

ORIGINAL

BUREAU OF MILITARY HISTORY 1913-21

BURO STAIRÉ MÍLEATA 1913-21

I.C. W.S. 94



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ROINN COSANTA.

BURO STAIRÉ MÍLEATA 1913-21

(Bureau of Military History 1913-21),

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Statement by: Captain Michael Leahy,
Haulbowline,
Co. Cork.

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STATEMENT OF CAPTAIN MICHAEL LEAHY, HAULBOWLINE,
CO. CORK.

PERIOD: 1912 to MAY, 1916.

UNIT: COBH COMPANY, I.V.

For some time before the start of the Irish Volunteers in 1913 there were three I.R.B. men in Cobh, viz. Patrick Curran, Manager of the Co-Operative Society, Liam O'Brien of Galbally, who was a chemist's assistant in the town, and myself. Curran took O'Brien and myself into the organisation. I do not remember the date, but we were distributing "Irish Freedom".

Immediately after the public meeting for the formation of the Volunteers in Dublin in November, 1913, and before the public meeting in the City Hall, Cork, on 14th December, 1913, a group of us who were attending a Gaelic League class in a room in the A.O.H. Hall, Cobh, decided to hold a meeting to form a Volunteer Corps. The following attended that meeting:-

Michael O'Brien.
Michael Hennessy.
Dan Cashman.
Dan Collins.
Maurice McCarthy.
Michael Ware.
Liam O'Doherty.
Jimmy O'Connor.
Paddy Whelan.
Jim Ahern.
Patrick Monahan.
Liam O'Brien.
Daiti O'Brien.
Dick Hayes.
Ned Butler.
Michael Leahy.
Jim Fitzgerald.
Dave Fitzgerald.
William Ralph.
Donal Quaid.
James Downey.
Liam Murphy.

We held that first meeting in the Gaelic League room in the A.O.H. Hall without asking any permission from the A.O.H. Authorities. All who attended were members of the Gaelic League class. Liam Murphy acted as Secretary. McNeill's article, "The North Began" was read, and it was decided to form a Volunteer Corps. I acted as Secretary for some time afterwards.

It was decided to send a deputation to wait on the A.O.H. Committee and ask for permission to use the Gaelic League Room for drilling on nights when the Gaelic League was not using it for classes. I was a member of the deputation. Joseph Healy was Chairman of the A.O.H., and he told us that while he himself thought the Volunteer movement a good thing, Mr. Redmond had made no pronouncement about it, and, pending that, we could not have the use of the room. We then applied to the Urban Council and that body gave us the use of a field near the town. An ex-Naval man, Warrant Officer James Downey, who was an enthusiastic Gaelic Leaguer, started

drilling us. We had about 25 at the first public parade. A large crowd looked on and jeered. The parade had been held before the public meeting in the City Hall, Cork, and when Cork started I attended the City Hall meeting and put our group in touch with the Cork Committee.

Another ex-serviceman, Jerry McGrath, R.E., volunteered to drill us and we accepted his offer. John Garde gave drill instruction also. We had no arms at first, but used staves. At no time up to Easter, 1916, did we get any arms except what we procured ourselves. Our strength did not vary very much from the start up to the time the Redmondites came in; it was always between twenty and twenty-five.

In May, 1914, Redmond's supporters came in and our strength jumped to over 500. Five Companies were formed then. Control was vested in a Committee of which Joe Healy was Chairman. O'Callaghan was the first Secretary and was followed in a short time by John Riordan. We got the Baths Quay for drilling and wooden guns were made. A Company was formed in Belvelly and a Section in Ballymore. I drilled both of them. During the period there were route marches to Carrigtwohill and Midleton in which about 400 men took part. Some members of the Company also went to a parade in Mitchelstown.

The split came in September, 1914, at a meeting called by the Committee at the Baths Hall (now the Tower Cinema). Joseph Healy was Chairman and he put the Redmondite point of view to the meeting. It was to the effect that the Volunteers would join the British Army. The meeting seemed unanimous. I attempted to speak but was struck by a man named Charlie Finn. The Chairman, however, secured me a hearing and I was put upon a seat. I objected to recruiting the Volunteers for the British Empire, and said they had been established to fight for the freedom of Ireland. I asked any man who believed as I did to follow me out of the Hall. Fifteen of us walked out. We were jeered and hissed, and barely escaped being beaten up. That meeting was on a Sunday. We held a meeting outside the Hall and I was appointed a delegate to go to Dublin and get in touch with the Provisional Committee.

We held a parade the following Sunday and went out to Lindsay's Quarry. I had a B.S.A. single shot .22 rifle and we did target practice. From then until Easter, 1916, we continued to parade regularly, though attendance varied from three to eleven out of a strength of between fifteen and twenty. That was the total number of Irish Volunteers on the Island. The Belvelly Company and the Ballymore Section all followed Redmond. The National Volunteers maintained a strong organisation up to Easter, 1916. Only two of them joined the British Army. We discovered that they had given up the bolts of their rifles to the British Authorities before 1916 and they faded out completely after the Rising.

During 1915 we had a Committee running the affairs of the Company. I do not think any particular officers acted continuously in that period. There were a number of changes, but, in effect, I was in charge and drilled them. For all practical purposes Seamus Fitzgerald and I ran the Company. We had armed ourselves with five rifles and a number of revolvers which we bought locally. We had also got a .22 Winchester repeater from Terence MacSwiney. Strength remained unchanged. We attended the St. Patrick's Day parades in Cork in 1915 and 1916, and the Manchester Martyrs' parade in November, 1915.

In July, 1915, Patrick Curran, Manager of Cobh Co-Operative Society, and John Dowling, fitter, Haulbowline, were served with orders by the police to reside outside the County Cork. Both of them left Cobh at the time.

In January, 1916, I attended the Course for Officers carried out in the Hall in Sheares Street by Captain J.J. O'Connell. After the Course I was formally appointed Captain of the Company. The Committee system continued up to Easter, 1916, and there were no other Officers.

My orders for Easter, 1916, were to report to the Volunteer Hall in Sheares' Street on Easter Saturday night with my unit, all available arms and equipment and to be prepared to be away over the week-end. I do not remember how I got these orders but it must have been in Cork as I was there frequently at that time.

On Easter Saturday afternoon thirteen of us mobilised in Cobh and marched to the Hall in Sheares' Street, Cork. A few had bicycles but we all marched. Two other members of the Company, Liam Ahern and Jack O'Connell, cycled to Cork later, arriving in the Hall about 3 a.m. on Sunday.

The following are the names of the men from the Company who paraded on Easter Sunday, 1916:-

Michael Leahy.
James Fitzgerald.
Patrick Whelan.
John Stack.
Joseph Reid.
Ernest Fowler.
James O'Connell.
William O'Regan.
Daniel Healy.
William Ralph.
"Bunny" Reid.
John P. O'Connell.
Liam Ahern.

The arms which we had were:-

Five rifles, some of which were Lee Enfield, and one at least a Martini. Approximately 250 rounds .303.

Fifteen revolvers, mostly .32, but some .38 and .45, with about 180 rounds of ammunition.

Five bayonets.

We had no shot guns, pikes or explosives.

We had no complete uniforms but most of us had breeches and leggings; all had haversacks, belts, bandoliers, ground sheets, water bottles, blankets, spare socks, and green Volunteer hats turned up at one side.

Before leaving Cobh I had heard from the local pilots that a German ship had been sunk or scuttled near Daunt's Rock Lightship that morning and I reported this to Tomás MacCurtain when I arrived in the Hall.

A guard was being maintained on the Hall at the time and the Cobh Company was detailed for guard on Saturday night. I took over guard duty about 11 p.m. Before and after that hour some members of the Company were engaged in bringing petrol and other stores from somewhere in the city to the Hall. I was on this job

for a time before taking over charge of the guard. There was a driver with us, but I do not know who he was. On one journey we were stopped by police and I had to threaten to use my revolver before we were permitted to pass. Jim O'Connell was out with Denis McNeilus collecting electrical stuff. All the men were advised to go to Confession and did so.

I think Tomas MacCurtain and Terence MacSwiney slept in the Hall that night. There were also in the Hall a number of East Cork men from around Dungourney and Clonmult. Maurice Ahern was in charge of them.

On Easter Sunday morning we were formed up outside the Hall ready to move off when the messenger from Dublin came. There was some discussion between the Officers and I think the impression got about amongst the Officers that the parade was cancelled. The men had no information; no announcement was made to them. Three members of the Cobh Company who had bicycles, James Fitzgerald, John P. O'Connell and William O'Regan, went with the Cyclist Company which cycled to Macroom, the remainder of us marched to Capwell Station with the Cork Companies and went by train to Crookstown. There were about 24 to 30 cyclists altogether.

We marched from Crookstown to Kilmurray where we were joined by Companies from Ballinadee and elsewhere in West Cork under Tom Hales. Some of these men carried pikes. We all marched to Macroom and halted at the Square where we were dismissed. The day got very wet. I cannot remember any formal meeting of Officers being held, but I do remember that the inclemency of the weather was given to the men as a reason for the cancellation of the parade.

We all, with the exception of MacCurtain and MacSwiney, returned to Cork by train and marched to the Hall in Sheares' Street, where we were dismissed. The city men went home and the Cobh men remained in the Hall. I think the other East Cork men went home. On Easter Monday we remained in the Hall. There were a number of rumours but no definite news. Tomas MacCurtain and Terence MacSwiney arrived in the Hall on Monday night. There was some discussion, as a result of which all the Cobh men, except myself, went home that night. We left our five rifles in the Hall, having got a guarantee that they would be alright.

I have no clear recollection of a meeting being held in the Hall in Sheares' Street during Easter Week to consider the question of surrender of arms, but Tomas MacCurtain and Terence MacSwiney were in the Hall and some consultations were going on. I remember that it was during that week I introduced Terence MacSwiney to his future wife. I had met Miss Murphy previously at Liam Russell's book shop and she had expressed a wish to be introduced to him. One night during Easter Week she came to the Hall with some information about movements or intentions of British forces and asked to see me. I introduced her to Terence MacSwiney and she gave the information to him.

On the following Monday I went back to work in Haulbowline. On May 3rd Seamus Fitzgerald, who also worked in Haulbowline, and I were told to report to the Chief Engineer's office. We were both arrested there by police and military and questioned separately. I was asked if I was the leader of the Sinn Feiners. I said no, I was the leader of the Volunteers. The interrogator, a British Army Officer, said, "Sinn Feiners is good enough for me". We were taken to Cobh where we found that Liam O'Brien had also been arrested. The three of us were taken to the Detention Barracks in Cork.

In the Detention Barracks we were questioned separately several times, mainly for the purpose of finding out where our five

rifles were. An argument that was used in an endeavour to get us to give up our rifles was that the Cork men had handed in their arms and none of them had been arrested. Why should we hold out? We continued to refuse to give any information.

The day Tom Kent was shot in the Detention Barracks we were transferred by train with a large number of other prisoners to Richmond Barracks, Dublin. It was crowded with prisoners and there were about 90 of us in one room. A friendly sentry posted a letter home for me and that was the first news that reached Cobh of our whereabouts. The Cobh Urban Council sent the Chairman, Grogan, and the Town Clerk, Campbell, to see the Cobh prisoners. I had a visit from them in Richmond Barracks and they also got special permission to see Count Plunkett. A few days later Mary and Annie MacSwiney and Miss Murphy got a visit to Terence MacSwiney.

Tomás MacCurtain, Terence MacSwiney and I were held in Richmond Barracks for Courtmartial. The Courtmartial did not take place and we were taken to Wakefield Detention Barracks in Yorkshire. Later we were transferred to Frongoch and to Wandsworth before release at the end of the year. Tomás MacCurtain was for a time Commandant of the South Camp at Frongoch.

It may be of interest to record that the trolley on which the gun to bombard Galway in 1916 was carried is still in Haulbowline at this date.

SIGNED:

M. Pearcy

DATE:

Jan 7th 1948.

WITNESS:

Florence Donoghue.

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