

ORIGINAL

BUREAU OF MILITARY HISTORY 1913-21

BURÓ STAIRÉ MILEATA 1913-21

No. W.S. 128

ROINN



COSANTA.

BUREAU OF MILITARY HISTORY, 1913-21.

STATEMENT BY WITNESS

DOCUMENT NO. W.S. 128

Witness

Captain Ralph P. Keyes

Identity

Member of Bantry Coy. I.V. 1913-1916.

Subject

Bantry Coy. I.V. Easter Week 1916.

Conditions, if any, stipulated by Witness

File No. S. 768

Form B.S.M. 2.

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BUREAU OF MILITARY HISTORY
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STATEMENT OF RALPH P. KEYES, BANTRY, CO. CORK.

UNIT: BANTRY COMPANY, I.V.

PERIOD: 1909 to MAY, 1916.

W.S.
128

A Branch of the A.O.H. American Alliance was established in Bantry about 1909. It continued in active existence up to the time the Volunteer organisation was started. It had club rooms and a membership of about thirty. From the national point of view it was the most advanced organisation functioning in Bantry in those years.

The local members of this organisation took the initiative and were responsible for the initiation of the Company of Irish Volunteers which was formed in December, 1913. The following Officers and Committee, all of whom were members of the American Alliance, were elected to organise and control the Volunteer Company:-

Michael Hurley, Chairman.
Mark Sullivan, Main Street, Secretary.
Michael O'Donovan.
David O'Mahony.
Dan MacSweeney, Ardnageehy.

These Officers and Committee continued in control of the Volunteer Company up to Easter, 1916. No Officers holding military rank were elected or appointed during that period.

Between 40 and 50 men joined the Company at the start, including most of the members of the American Alliance. During the Winter of 1913-14 drills were held in the Town Hall. Denis Crowley, an ex-serviceman, was the first drill instructor. Later Sergeant Gordon, a Scotchman and a Reservist of the Marines, took on the job and was a very good instructor. He continued to drill the Company until he was called up in August or September, 1914. When he was leaving Bantry the local band, some of whose members were Volunteers, played him to the train. The tune they played was, "Let me like a soldier fall".

After about March, 1914, drills were held in the open at Seskin on two or three nights a week. We had no arms at that time and the training consisted mainly of close order foot drill and marching. The number of men in the Company was steadily increasing, and at the peak period, about June, 1914, about 150 men had been enrolled. There was a Signalling Section, instructed probably by Gordon. The only member of the Company who occasionally gave drill instruction was Joseph Murphy, who acted as Assistant Secretary.

There were two rival political organisations in Bantry at the time - Redmondites and O'Brienites. A good deal of hostility existed between them. No active supporters of the Redmondite party had joined the Company. About June, 1914, they started a separate Company with about 40 to 50 men. Both Companies continued in existence up to about the end of 1915 when the Redmondite Company gradually disintegrated. In the early months of their existence they had dummy rifles for training purposes and later got about a dozen Garabaldi rifles.

The statement made by J.J. Walsh in his book, "Recollections of a Rebel", that there were three distinct Volunteer organisations in Bantry on the occasion when he reviewed them with Captain

Talbot Crosbie is not correct. There were only two Volunteer Companies.

On the occasion of this review Walsh and Crosbie made an effort to amalgamate both bodies, but were not successful. Political feeling was intense. The I.V. Company, as the senior and stronger organisation, paraded on Wolfe Tone Square in the centre of the town; the I.N.V. paraded near Harbour View.

In 1914 the Company of Irish Volunteers marched to Kealkil on a Sunday. Michael O'Donovan was in charge that day.

There was little activity during the Winter of 1914-15. Numbers had fallen off considerably, but the organisation was carried on and parades were held in the Town Hall. At the end of 1915 the number of men in the Company had fallen to about twenty, and that continued to be the strength up to Easter, 1916.

About March, 1916, twelve or fifteen members of the Company went to Drimoleague on a wagonette. They met Terence MacSwiney there. He addressed a public meeting after Mass in an endeavour to form a Company of Volunteers, but no Company was formed that day. We went on to Caheragh with him, where he held another meeting and spoke. Some men fell in with us in the march round the village, but we did not succeed in getting a Company going.

On the Saturday before Easter Saturday Terence MacSwiney came to Bantry. He addressed all the members of the Company assembled at a parade. In the course of his speech he said the time had come to give up forming fours. What was needed now was to learn to shoot straight. Afterwards he had a conference with the Company Committee, at which he gave instructions for the parade on Easter Sunday. These instructions were to the effect that the Company was to parade after first Mass and proceed to Kealkil. We were to take all the arms we possessed and one day's rations. We would meet the Ballingearry Company at Kealkil; Seán O'Hegarty would be there and would take charge. He did not give us any definite information that this was to be anything more than an ordinary parade, and we did not anticipate that any action was contemplated. He did not suggest that there was to be a Rising or a landing of arms, but he left us with the impression that in the situation which then existed something serious may happen.

There were about 30 men in the Company at the time, but all were not mobilised for the parade. It is not possible to say with any certainty now why some men were not mobilised. I would expect that at least any man holding one of the few arms we had would have been certain to be mobilised, but, in fact, Mortimer O'Sullivan, who held a revolver and who turned up at Kealkil because he happened to be in the district that day, was not mobilised.

The following members of the Company paraded :-

Michael Hurley,	Scart Road.
John O'Sullivan,	Droumaclarig.
Patrick O'Sullivan,	do
Mortimer O'Sullivan,	do
Dan O'Regan,	Bridge Street.

Include

Alex McBarthay

Pearson Bridge

Cycled to Kealkil with
Bantry Volunteers
Easter Sunday 1916

Signed

R. P. Hayes

John J. O'Sullivan,	Market Street.
Ralph P. Keyes,	do
Liam Kearney,	Harbour View.
Thomas Waters,	High Street.
Mark O'Sullivan,	Main Street.
Christopher Walsh,	Parade Field.
Thomas Linehan,	Market Street.
Michael O'Donovan,	Wolfe Tone Square.
John Ryan,	New Street.
Dan Sweeney,	Ardnageehy.

The Company paraded at Dunamark Bridge, one mile outside the town, after first Mass on Easter Sunday. All had bicycles and all cycled to Kealkil.

The only arms we had were eight .32 revolvers with about 80 rounds of ammunition. There were no rifles, shot guns or pikes in the Company. We had no equipment.

We met the Ballingeary men at Kealkil. In a field near the village Seán Lynch, Captain of the Ballingeary Company, put us through some drill with his own men. We learned later that Sergeant Lonergan, R.I.C., Bantry, had brought an instruction from Bantry to the Sergeant at Kealkil to get as many names as possible of the men on parade. Lonergan and another policeman cycled from Bantry, and they were on the road when we came out after being dismissed. There was an attempt by the police to interfere with some of the Ballingeary men, but Seán O'Hegarty intervened and the police did not persist. The police were armed with revolvers and had carbines in the barracks. After we were dismissed the evening got very wet. We cycled back to Bantry, the police following us.

During Easter Week the Company mobilised each night in the Town Hall, but no instructions came to us from any source. ?

In the following week D.I. Cruise, R.I.C., approached Canon Coughlan with a view to getting the arms surrendered. No arms, the property of the Company, were, however, handed in, though it is believed there was some surrender of weapons in other hands. No members of the Company were arrested.

There were no I.R.B. or Fianna Eireann organisations in Bantry before Easter, 1916.

SIGNED: Raphael P. Keyes

DATE: 11/6/1948

WITNESS: Florence R. [Signature]

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