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BUREAU OF MILITARY HISTORY 1913-21

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BUREAU OF MILITARY HISTORY, 1913-21.

STATEMENT BY WITNESS

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Witness

Gerald (Garry) Byrne

Identity

Member of I.R.B. and 4th Bn. Dublin Ede.

Subject

Covering 1911-1916.

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ORIGINAL

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Bureau of Military History, 1916-1921.

Statement of Gerald Byrne, 130 Downpatrick Road, Dublin.

In my school days our Masters, P. O'Hare and Seamus Hallissey, were Irish Irelanders to the back bone. The Irish language was forbidden to be taught in the schools in those days. They tried to revive interest in the language by holding classes after hours.

After leaving school I joined the Gaelic League and the St. Kevin's Hurling Club. Through my activities in the furtherance of the study of the Irish language I was sounded about becoming a member of the I.R.B.

I joined the Mangan Centre of the I.R.B. in Parnell Square about 1911. Mr. D. Hannigan, Frank Fahy, George Ervine were also members. Ervine was "Centre" at the time. I remember Sean T. O'Kelly and Sean Murphy being present at meetings also. We got instructions in military subjects, some drill, and instructions in the use of arms there. The whole idea at that time was that there would be a "Rising", and we were left without any doubt about it. I remember a general Convention of the I.R.B. at Parnell Square during the 1913 strike. This was called to decide the attitude of the I.R.B. towards the strike. The Labour element in the I.R.B. wanted to have the organisation support the strike. This was refused, and nearly caused a split in the I.R.B.

I remember the King's visit to Dublin. The streets were decorated with poles draped in red, white and blue. We went around with bottles of paraffin oil setting the

drappings on fire. The people were generally hostile to anyone who displayed any patriotic symptoms.

On the formation of the Irish Volunteers we were instructed by the I.R.B. to join and to do everything possible to get hold of the key positions in the Volunteers. It was now perceived by the members of the I.R.B. that this was a chance to do openly what we had previously to do in secret.

I joined the Irish Volunteers at the first meeting at the Rotunda. Amongst those present that night were P.H. Pearse, Larry Kettle and McNeill. Our first drills were held in a hall in Camden Street. Our instructors were British Army men - a Mr. Whelan and ex-Sergeant Major Merrick. Merrick was later appointed drill instructor to the whole city area. These men were paid and were whole time officials. There was no Oath taken on joining. We filled in a form and were issued with a membership card. We paid a small weekly subscription to cover the rental of halls, etc., and also a subscription - any amount you liked - towards the purchase of arms, equipment and uniform. We had no rifles or armament at that time. Our Company was about ninety.

After some time certain men were picked out for training as Non-Commissioned Officers, and subsequently an election for Officers was held. I was picked out as a potential N.C.O. It was apparent at this time that the I.R.B. were succeeding in getting a good control of the Volunteers.

At the election for officers I was elected as First Lieutenant of our Company. We were now "C" Company, 4th Battalion, Dublin Brigade. The Captain was Tom McCarthy, a brother of Dan McCarthy, who was afterwards Director of Elections. The Battalion O.C. was Eamon Ceannt; Seamus

Kenny was Quartermaster of the Battalion. Seamus Murphy was Adjutant and also Captain of "A" Company. P.H. Pearse was Captain of "E" Company (Rathfarnham). George Ervine was Captain of "B" Company; Tom McCarthy Captain of "C" Company; French Mullen Captain of "D" Company, and Ned O'Neill Captain of "F" Company (Inchicore)

We now held our drills and training in Larkfield, Kimmage, at Count Plunkett's place. We were now collecting an occasional rifle and some small calibre revolvers. Some members had those small revolvers, their own property, and we succeeded in getting a couple of rifles out of the military barracks.

The next incident of note was the Howth Gun Running. We paraded that day at 6 a.m. near Ranelagh. We went to Mass, and as far as I can remember we joined the rest of the Brigade at Croydon Park and marched to Howth. Through my contacts in the I.R.B. I had an inkling that it was "gun running" we were on.

We arrived at Howth about 12 a.m. Our Company was put at the entrance to the pier, with instructions to allow no one on to the pier except Volunteers. Two police tried to get on to the pier but were refused. Our Commandant, Eamonn Ceannt, came and spoke to the police and they went away. Some coastguards also tried to get on to the pier but were not allowed. At this time rifles were being unloaded from a boat and handed out to the Volunteers. We were subsequently relieved and we were issued with rifles also. The rifles were handed to us, one by one, as we filed past the boat. We got no ammunition. On the completion we "fell in", and started to march back to Dublin.

Police passed us going towards Howth on the trams. As we were the 4th Battalion we were well in the rear of the parade, and at Croydon Park, where the military intercepted, the affair was over before we knew what happened. We were told to "Dismiss" and to get home in our own time, but to make sure we took our rifles with us. Five of us stayed in the fields until about 8 p.m. that evening. I came into Basement Lane and got a pony and trap and went back and collected anything we could find around, including some rifles and haversacks. We got the rifles into a house in Drumcondra. I cannot remember what house. We then went home.

The next important incident was the split in the Volunteers. Only about six men of the Battalion left and went to the Redmond side, and, as far as I can remember, only one officer, Walsh of Harold's Cross. These were all the defections in the 4th Battalion.

At this time British soldiers coming home on leave brought their rifles with them. We succeeded in getting hold of some of those rifles by various ruses, including setting some of them drunk. We also succeeded in getting a few rifles out of Wellington Barracks.

Training went on the same as heretofore. We got quite a lot of lectures. McDonagh and other officers gave us lectures and instruction. A special examination for officers was held. We had a number of exercises for officers without troops in defence and attack. These exercises were held in the country around the city. We had Brigade exercises in North County Dublin, and at Ticknock in the Dublin Mountains. The N.C.Os. were receiving special instruction also. At this time an officer would be engaged at least four nights per week.

About two months before the Rebellion I was asked by Eamonn Ceannt would I, in the case of a fight, be prepared to go down to the country. He said they wanted men to go to the country to take charge of operations there. I said I would prefer to remain in the city. He asked me again about a month before the Rebellion. In fact he told me that it was decided that I should go. I then more or less agreed. About three weeks before the Rising he sent for me, and after a discussion it was decided I was to go to Meath. About a fortnight before the Rebellion I went up to St. Enda's to see Pearse. He told me that he had pretty reliable information that the British were going to make a wholesale collection of arms in the country, and that they were going to resist. I was to see McDermott for final instructions.

I saw McDermott and he told me that Donal O'Hannigan was in Dundalk and that as soon as possible I was to get in touch with him, and that Meath and Louth would work in conjunction. He gave me a sort of a rough outline of the activities we would undertake. That was to get control of the district, to get to know the officers, and to get the men together. He gave me five pounds towards expenses and a closed envelope which I was to deliver to Hannigan, who, he informed me, would have final instructions.

On the Saturday prior to Holy Week I travelled to Kells, Meath, and got in touch with my brother who was working there. He took me to Drumbaragh, where I met a number of local Volunteers, including Sean Hayes, Frank Higgins, Peter Higgins, a chap named Power and Sean Hayes's father.

On Sunday I went to Dundalk to contact Donal Hannigan. He had left Dundalk for the city. I left the envelope I

had got for Hannigan with Paddy Hughes of Dundalk, and came on to the city as it was impossible to get back to Kells on a Sunday. I left word for Hannigan that he was to contact me in Kells. I could not find Hannigan in the city.

I travelled down to Kells on the Monday of Holy Week. Hannigan came to Kells on either Tuesday or Wednesday of that week and he told me that from his instructions things would come to a head inside a few days, and if things happened I was to mobilize the men quietly and have them come together in a very short time.

Frank Higgins was in charge in this area. Paddy Burke, who was a teacher in Kells, had gone away for Easter - he was from Tipperary. Hannigan gave me a code word "Sarsfield". When I got this word I was to mobilize. On Holy Thursday night I got the word (code) and to get the men to Tara by 7 p.m. on Easter Sunday, as quietly as possible and without drawing any attention on our movements.

I got in touch with Higgins and Hayes and told them to be prepared for Sunday. I also sent word to Carnaross to parade on Good Friday night, that I wanted to speak to them. On Friday night I went to Carnaross to attend the parade I had ordered. Most of the Drumbaragh men were there that night also. I told the men on parade that night that there was a grave danger of something happening, and that I wanted them to be at Tara on Sunday (Easter) evening by 7 p.m. I said I would like to get an idea of the number of men that would come. I said I would come to Carnaross again on Saturday evening, and that in the meantime they should make arrangements about their domestic affairs. One lad stepped forward (he was one of the Dalys) and said he did not think

that was necessary as he was always prepared to be called out at any time. Nearly all the men agreed there and then to turn out on Sunday. I instructed them that they would travel as if they were going to play a football match, and to carry football boots and togs with them. I instructed them to bring all weapons, ammunition and equipment they had and to carry all the rations they could.

On Sunday I left Kells in a motor car with Sean Hayes and Frank Higgins. We had one Lee Enfield rifle, the remainder of our armament were .22 rifles and shotguns and a couple of small automatics. We got to Tara about 6.30 p.m. In all, about 25 or 30 men mobilized there. We had to more or less keep under cover while there. I despatched Hugh Smith, who had a motor cycle, to Slane Bridge as a connecting link to get in touch with the Dundalk men who were to come to Slane. He never came back from Slane, having failed to get in touch with the Dundalk men.

At about 12 p.m. that night (Sunday) I saw the lights of a car coming towards the hill and I got the men under cover and Frank Higgins and I went out on to the road. We halted the car. It happened to be a Mr. Benson and Mr. Sean Boylan from Dunboyne. I had them identified, and they, Benson and Boylan, told me that the thing was all over and that they had instructions from Headquarters that it was called off. They said I was to dismiss the men and to get them home. Boylan told me he had dismissed his men and that a messenger had gone to Louth to contact Hannigan with similar instructions. There were no instructions about any further mobilization.

I asked Boylan to go to Kells and get some cars from Battersbys. He sent two or three cars, which took the Carnaross men home and were to return for the remainder.

The rest of us decided to set out on foot towards Kells and meet the cars returning for us. On the road to Navan we met Boylan's car returning from Kells. I tried to stop it but they would not stop. It was my intention to return to the city and get instructions.

On Monday evening in Kells I heard that the Rising had started. I decided to stay as I expected Hannigan to contact me. I sent word to the men to stand to at their homes and await instructions.

On Wednesday, as no contact with Hannigan had been made and no instructions received from anyone, Hugh Smith volunteered to go into the city on his motor cycle to get instructions. His uncle, Paddy Daly, objected to his going and the matter got no further. I sent word to the men that I would try and get into the city myself. I borrowed a bicycle and started for Dublin. I was stopped by the police in Navan and questioned as to where I was going and so forth. I told them I was on holidays in Kells, and that I was trying to get back to the city. I was again stopped by the police at Lismullen near Tara, but again told the same tale and it worked.

I got to the Dunboyne area and met two girls outside the village, who, on having satisfied themselves that I was alright, brought me to Boylan, who was at Tyrrellstown House near Dunboyne. I found Donal Hannigan and eight or ten Louth men there, together with some Dunboyne men. In all, there were about fifteen or twenty men there, including Sean Boylan, his brother, and a chap named Mullaly. They had five or six Lee Enfield .303 rifles, some shotguns and some small weapons. Hannigan gave me an outline of what

happened to him. Boylan, Hannigan, Paddy Hughes of Dundalk and I held a conference. Hannigan had sent scouts towards the city and those men reported that it would be impossible to get into the city. Sean Boylan's sister volunteered to go into the city. She got to the G.P.O. and brought back instructions from Pearse in writing. Pearse in this communication said it was possible they would have to evacuate the city, and if so they would fall back in the Meath direction and that we were to hold on until we got further instructions. I then decided to send word to Kells to my brother to get as many men as possible mobilized, and to keep together at Drumbaragh or at Carnaross and await further instructions. I got this message to Kells by a doctor who called into the Camp on his way to Kells. I cannot remember his name.

My brother arrived in Tyrrellstown House from Kells on Thursday morning. He remained with me to act as a runner when further instructions came.

On Saturday night Hannigan went into Swords and while there he saw British troops with artillery moving towards the city. We took precautions and the garrison took up positions to defend the camp. We remained in those positions nearly all night but nothing happened. We had scouts out on bicycles patrolling the roads.

Nothing further happened until Monday, when Miss Boylan got into the city again. When she returned she was able to tell us that the city had surrendered. A conference was called to decide what we would do. Some were for carrying on and for going out through the country. Finally it was decided to dump all arms we had, and to find billets for the Louth men locally, the Dunboyne men to return home.

Hannigan said he would travel South West through the country and try and get in touch with where the fight was continuing, and send us back word so that we could join him. Hannigan set out and I returned to Kells to be at hand. Nothing further happened. There was no further contact, and no further instructions arrived from anyone.

I remained in Kells with my brother for about three weeks, and then returned to the city. It was a much changed place now from the day I left it. I was not arrested.

After a couple of days in the city I got a message from Joe McGrath, who had gone on the run. I contacted him and we used to go for walks together.

When Cathal Brugha, who was wounded during the fighting in the city, came out of hospital, we set out again to organize the Volunteers and by the time of the general release we had the organization going well in the city again.

Signed Gerald Byrne

Date 15/9/48

