

ORIGINAL

BUREAU OF MILITARY HISTORY 1913-21
BUREAU STAIRS MILITARY 1913-21
No. W.S. 173

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BUREAU OF MILITARY HISTORY, 1913-21.

STATEMENT BY WITNESS

DOCUMENT NO. W.S. 173

Witness

Cathal McDowell

Identity

Capt. A/Coy. I.V. Belfast 1916.

Subject

- (a) I.V. and I.R.B. Belfast 1914-1916.
- (b) Easter Week 1916. Belfast district

Conditions, if any, stipulated by Witness

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STATEMENT OF CATHAL McDOWELL, 20 ST. MERYL
PARK, BELFAST.

The first organisation of a semi-military nature I joined was the Catholic Boys' Brigade formed by the Passionist Fathers, Ardoyne, Belfast.

In March 1914, I joined the Irish Volunteers "A" Company. My memory is not clear as to the exact date I joined, but I am certain that when John Campbell - who came in with Devlin's crowd into the volunteers - was appointed Officer in charge, the Company was close on full company strength.


Before the breach which resulted in the Devlinite crowd leaving the Volunteer Organisation, the Irish Volunteers had a difference on matters of importance with the National Volunteers and they left St. Mary's Hall and met and drilled at Willowbank Huts. During the time we were at Willowbank Huts, and before the meeting was convened to decide the question of policy which resulted in the split, I was only an ordinary volunteer and was not conversant with any events that led up to the split. The only thing that I am definite about is that there was some difference of opinion that prevented us from associating with the people that were using St. Mary's Hall.

After the split we were short of officers and Peter Burns was Commandant. After a few nights drilling there I was made a Section Commander, also Musketry Instructor in the Irish Volunteers. About a few months after that I became a member of the I.R.B. I was proposed by Peter Burns and introduced to Frank Booth who was in charge of the Circle.


When I joined the I.R.B. I was appointed Captain of "A" Company. I got a considerable amount of training from Sean Cusack and I am indefinite as to the period these classes of his took place, but I believe it was before he was mobilised as a reservist in August, 1914. Peter Burns took over the training of the Officers when Cusack left.

From the Devlinite crowd left the Volunteers in or about October 1914, up to the eve of Easter Week 1916, the Belfast Volunteers had considerable difficulty in carrying on the organisation. Any attempt at recruiting was being dealt with by the people who opposed us, and there were several instances of our meetings being broken up at street corners and stones being thrown at us. The deflexion caused by the organised split reduced our members to approximately 200, whereas immediately prior to the split there was over 1,000 men in the Brigade.

During the period from June 1914, up to October 1914, when the split occurred, the Volunteers was run by two committees - one was a civil committee and the other a military committee composed of officers. Denis McCullagh was Chairman of the civil committee and officer in charge of the Volunteers. He was recognised in Dublin as officer in charge of the Belfast Brigade of the Volunteers. After the split occurred, Peter Burns and I were co-opted on the committee of the Irish Volunteers. Denis McCullagh was officer in charge. Peter Burns was appointed Commandant under Denis McCullagh and Sean Kelly and I were officers.




Shortly before 1916 Denis McCullagh was asked to attend a meeting in Dublin summoned by Pdraig Pearse. Mr. McCullagh was unable to attend this meeting and also his deputy, Peter Burns, found it was impossible for him to attend. I was selected by Mr. McCullagh to attend this meeting. Pdraig Pearse addressed the delegates at the meeting. He reviewed the state of the country and the preparations the Volunteers were making to combat the state of affairs then existent. He suggested that armed camps be set up for Easter, and his words conveyed the impression that something serious was afoot. There was no definite statement made as to what his plans were. Before the meeting I had a private conversation with Pdraig Pearse, as I was the bearer of a note to Mr. Pearse from Denis McCullagh explaining his reason for sending me as his substitute. I can't remember now if what Mr. Pearse told me was during this private conversation or at the meeting where he addressed the general body of delegates, but anyhow, I know he stated that somebody might make an effort to call off this mobilisation for armed camps during the Easter holidays, and that no notice was to be taken of such cancellation, except it came direct from himself. I can't place the exact date of this meeting whether it was days or weeks before Easter, but there was a large crowd of delegates at the meeting from all over the country. As this was the first meeting I attended, I did not know any of the delegates, except Mr. Pearse, to whom I had an introduction. After the meeting I returned and made a report to the Executive in Belfast. After I returned to Belfast the usual routine work of the Volunteers was carried out.



From Tuesday or Wednesday previous to Easter Week we had orders to march to Coalisland, Co. Tyrone. The rifles were transferred by taxi on Holy Thursday, and the contingent for Coalisland was divided up into three batches. The first batch to move were unemployed men and men who had the weekend off - I had charge of this batch. The second batch was under the command of Archie Heron who had been made an officer a short time previously. The last batch was under the charge of Peter Burns and Sean Kelly.

The first batch left midday on Saturday; the second batch left about 5 or 6 o'clock on Saturday, and the third batch arrived around midnight. There was a further batch to leave on Sunday morning - men who were working late on Saturday night such as barmen - and also a contingent that was expected by boat from Scotland. This Scotch contingent did not arrive in Belfast, and the Sunday morning contingent did not travel.

On my arrival in Tyrone I met a man whom I met previously in Belfast. His job when I met him in Belfast was a travelling inspector who visited the different circles, and it was in this connection I had met him. I can't remember his name just now, but he walked with a limp. I discussed with this man the problem of billeting the men in Coalisland. He made arrangements for billeting and the protection of the district where the men were to be billeted. I informed him that there was 114 men in all due to travel from Belfast. My first contingent numbered 30 men. The second contingent numbered about 20/25 and the remainder of the 114 were due to arrive on the last train.




The 30 men who travelled with me were to occupy billets three miles outside Coalisland. The second contingent under Archie Heron were to occupy billets about a mile from Coalisland. The third batch were to occupy the town of Coalisland. This batch was under the command of Peter Burns and Sean Kelly. Shortly after our arrival, I took my men out to the billets assigned to me. We were accompanied by 2 R.I.C. men. Their names were Hanraghan and Kelly. Every man of my contingent was armed with a revolver or an automatic pistol - the majority had automatic pistols. These arms were of different calibres and all fairly serviceable.

When we arrived at the billets assigned to us, which was a farmer's barn, the two policemen returned to Coalisland. When the second contingent arrived in Coalisland, Archie Heron came out and made contact with me. We arranged for a patrol between Archie Heron's billets and my billets. This contact of patrols was carried out the whole night through. Archie Heron also arranged to keep contact with the batch who were to occupy Coalisland Town.

Early on Sunday morning Denis McCullagh, Herbert Moore Pim, Dr. Patrick McCartan and Seamus Dempsey - who was in charge of the Fianna Eireann - arrived at my billets. When Denis McCullagh arrived he informed me that I was to mobilise my men and take them into Coalisland in preparation for return to Belfast. He informed me he was taking this step as a result of cancellation orders he received from Eoin McNeill. I reminded him of my ~~reverse~~ interview with Pearse in Dublin, and Pearse's instructions

to me that any cancelling of orders should not be obeyed except they came direct from Pearse himself. Denis McCullagh informed me that he was in supreme command of the Belfast men and that he was obeying the countermanding orders, and that I must obey his orders, as he was my superior officer. I told him that as he was in charge in a civil capacity, and as Peter Burns was the officer in charge during military operations, that Burns was the competent authority to issue military orders to me. Mr. McCullagh informed me then that Peter Burns was not in a state capable of issuing orders as he was intoxicated.

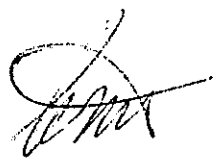
After my refusal to obey the countermanding orders Denis McCullagh left me and went over to the car where Dr. McCartan and Herbert Moore Pim were and he had a conversation with them about the position. Denis McCullagh, Dr. McCartan and Herbert Moore Pim came over to me from the car. Dr. McCartan said that he was prepared to obey McNeill's orders. I then informed Dr. McCartan of the definite instructions I had received in Dublin from Padraig Pearse. He questioned me as to how I made personal contact with Pearse in Dublin and I explained that I was sent to Dublin as a member of the I.R.B. when Denis McCullagh and Peter Burns were unable to travel, that I received those instructions from Pearse as the representative of the I.R.B. and the Irish Volunteers in Belfast. He told me when he considered the matter that this information was new to him, and under the circumstances he would be prepared to disobey Eoin McNeill's orders.



After this conversation with Dr. McCartan, Denis McCullagh suggested to me that I should take control of the Belfast Volunteers. I refused, as I looked upon Peter Burns as my superior officer, and I suggested that the whole matter should be discussed with Peter Burns and all the other officers of the Belfast contingent. I got into the car with him and we started for Coalisland. On this journey into Coalisland, the car contained Denis McCullagh, Dr. McCartan, Herbert Moore Pim, Seamus Dempsey and myself. Dr. McCartan and I discussed my meeting with Padraig Pearse in Dublin in more detail. During this conversation in the car, Seamus Dempsey, who was a very young man, when he heard the details of what heppened in Dublin expressed his determination to fight.

As soon as we arrived in Coalisland, Denis McCullagh called a meeting of the available officers together, and also the civil committee of the Volunteers. Immediately I arrived I made contact with Peter Burns. I told him about Denis McCullagh's attitude, and his countermanding orders from McNeill. I also told him of my instructions at the time I met Pearse in Dublin. I told him I was not going to obey the orders received from McNeill and was prepared to fight. He expressed his willingness to take McNeill's countermanding orders as official and was not prepared to take the responsibility of disobeying them. I told him then that Denis McCullagh was calling a meeting of the officers and the civil committee to have a decision taken on the matter. The meeting of the officers was held at Peter Burns' billet. When I returned to the place of the meeting the following officers were present:-

Sean Kelly, Peter Burns and myself.



The civil committee members who were at the meeting were:

Denis McCullagh, James Smyth, Sam Heron, Herbert Moore Pim and also Dr. McCartan attended the meeting.

There is a possibility that Jerry Barnes was also present, but I am not sure of this. Amongst the officers absent was Archie Heron and Liam Gaynor. Liam Gaynor was at my billets when I was leaving with Denis McCullagh and the other man in the car. I informed Liam Gaynor that he was to remain in the billets and take charge of the men there in my absence.

I was ordered by Peter Burns to go to Archie Heron's billets and get him to come along to the meeting. I took a bicycle and went for Heron. I could not find him at his billets and I returned to the meeting after about half an hour absence. When I got back I found that Archie Heron had turned up during the time I was looking for him and that the meeting had considered the question of obeying or disobeying the countermanding orders issued by Eoin McNeill, and that the majority were in favour of returning to Belfast.


On learning of the decision made during my absence I asked Peter Burns why the matter was rushed and this decision come to in my absence. He informed me that as the contacting of a train in the event of the men returning to Belfast was a matter of urgency the decision had to be made very quickly. He then told me that I was to go to my billets, mobilise my men and bring them into Coalisland. I went out to the billets and met Nora Connolly O'Brien who informed me that the



countermanding orders by Eoin McNeill were issued on his own initiative and that her father and Pearse were not in agreement with those orders and were determined to go out and fight. She did not inform me when they intended to start. She also informed me she was returning immediately to Dublin to see her father and to inform him of the position in Tyrone.

I called the men in my billets together and told them that Peter Burns ordered me to take them back to Coalisland. I informed them also of the decision arrived at at the meeting. Liam Gaynor expressed himself dissatisfied, and I believe that if the decision had been to fight, the men would have been all willing to carry out orders to that effect.

When we arrived in Coalisland, Peter Burns came to me and told me that he was feeling unwell and that he was putting me in supreme command of all the Belfast contingent, and that I was to take the men to Cookstown - the distance there was 12 miles and the time to contact a train for Belfast was only 3 hours. I informed him that I would not obey this order and my reasons for refusal were that the decision to return to Belfast was arrived at during my absence, and that I would not take his responsibility of taking control of the entire Belfast contingent in carrying out orders to return to Belfast, of which I was not in favour. Peter Burns then ²threatened me with disciplinary action if I did not carry out his orders. The situation this placed me in was extremely delicate. The responsibility of defying the orders of Peter Burns seemed to me at the time to be rather grave. I was young and was a



junior to some of the other officers who were present at the meeting. I reluctantly decided to carry out Peter Burns's orders. I believe my decision was prompted to some extent at least by the information that Burns gave me during this conversation, that the Tyrone men had decided on obeying McNeill's countermanding orders.

Looking back on the whole thing, I believe that if the mixup caused by Eoin McNeill's countermanding orders had not occurred, that the Belfast men would have gone into action without any misgivings. The situation created by the countermanding orders had a very bad effect on the morale of all the officers and men including myself. When the meeting, such as it was, decided against fighting there was no great inclination by the men to disobey the meeting's decision.

Barth McLowell

14/10/48

Witness. John Meboy
14/10/48.

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