

ORIGINAL

BUREAU OF MILITARY HISTORY 1913-21

BURO STAIRÉ MLE·TA 1913-21

NO. W.S. 212

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BUREAU OF MILITARY HISTORY, 1913-21.

STATEMENT BY WITNESS

DOCUMENT NO. W.S. 212.....

Witness

Comd't. Gen. Sean Boylan,
Dunboyne,
Co. Meath.

Identity

- (a) Captain, Dunboyne Co. Irish Volunteers
1914-1916.
- (b) O/C. 1st Eastern Division I.R.A.
1918-1921.

Subject

Activities of Volunteers in Co. Meath
prior to and during Easter Week 1916.

Conditions, if any, stipulated by Witness

Nil

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STATEMENT BY COMDT. GENERAL SEAN BOYLAN,

DUNBOYNE, CO. MEATH.

My ancestors took a prominent part in the '98 Rebellion and also in the Fenian Rising. Some of them were transported to Van Diemen's Land. My parents told me this and infused a patriotic spirit into me from my earliest days. My father often and often said to me that nothing good ever came from England. "Even the wind" he would say "that blows from there is a foul one". He meant of course the east wind. My uncle took a particular pride in asserting that during his whole life, which was a long one, that he never spoke to a policeman. This was the atmosphere in which I was reared.

When the Irish Volunteers were started in Dunboyne sometime in 1914, I and some 30 others did not join. My reason for this was that I had no faith in the Irish Volunteers as then constituted. I knew that most of the men, and particularly the influential ones amongst them, would never fight for Irish freedom. Instead, we formed our own distinct Volunteer Unit and had no connection with the local "Irish Volunteers" as they then were. I started this separate Volunteer Unit. We did not ask our members to take any oath on joining. We signed a register and each man was issued with a membership card. Each man paid threepence per week by way of subscription towards the purchase of arms and equipment and general expenses. Amongst the members whom I can remember now were Christopher Lynam, Jas. Maguire, John Kelly, Michael Kelly, Peter Byrne, Aiden Crean and Owen King and my two brothers Peter and Ned, Peter, James, Christopher Keating.

A man from Chapelizod named Larry Murtagh was our instructor. We did drills with dummy rifles. We had no arms of any sort. We were not affiliated at this period to any unit and had no connection with the "Irish Volunteers". An extreme section, you might call us. Through Murtagh we had contact with the extreme elements in Dublin. At this time we had a good hurling team in Dunboyne and I was in touch with all the G.A.A. circles in the city. It was through this

means that I secured Murtagh to give us instruction.

At the time of the split in the Volunteers most of the Irish Volunteers in Dunboyne area went on Redmond's side. A few of them, however, disagreed with Redmond's policy and they joined us. We now became the Irish Volunteers, Dunboyne Company, and affiliated at Headquarters at No. 2 Dawson St. I was appointed by P.H. Pearse to look after the Meath area on the General Council of the Irish Vols. which met once monthly at No. 2 Dawson St. This general council consisted of Eoin MacNeill (President), Pearse, Plunkett, McDonagh, Ceannt, Sean McDermott, Bulmer Hobson and a representative from each county.

The Dunboyne National Volunteers had their headquarters at Courthill House, Dunboyne. They had arms there. Mr. M. Carthy, who owned this place and was a National Volunteer, had been in Africa. He had some big game rifles which were used for training the National Volunteers. We raided the place and secured four or five rifles (big game pattern) which we handed over to Capt. Larry Murtagh who was still our instructor. We were to get rifles instead of them, but never got any. Our strength was now about 32 or 33 with about 18 really effective. We had no arms yet of any sort. We did drills and field exercises on a small scale. We got a .22 rifle with which we had some firing practice. We bought our own ammunition. We did some training with the Chapelized Company in their area.

I joined the I.R.B. and started a Circle in Dunboyne. I cannot remember who came down from I.R.B. headquarters to start the Circle. I think it was a man called Benson. Peter Byrne, Michael and John Kelly, Peter Keating, Christy Keating and my brother Ned were members.

On joining we took the oath of the I.R.B. and paid a subscription of one shilling per month towards the purposes of the I.R.B. A man called Benson from I.R.B. headquarters used to visit us and keep contact between our circle and headquarters.

Nothing abnormal happened until approaching Easter Week, 1916.

On the Saturday three weeks before the Rising I had instructions from Pearse to report to him at St. Enda's. I reported there and was introduced by Pearse to Donal O'Hannigan. Pearse said "This is Donal O'Hannigan whom I have appointed Officer Commanding Meath, Louth, South Down, South Armagh and Monaghan Area". He told me I would come under O'Hannigan's command. Pearse told me that a German ship would land arms in the country. He instructed me that when I got the orders for mobilisation I was to mobilise my men and send out scouts and get in touch with Hannigan and await his (Hannigan's) arrival. Those were the only instructions I received on that date. I have no recollection of Pearse mentioning anything about English artillery coming from Athlone or about I holding Blanchardstown. In fact, I am sure he did not. Hannigan left Pearse before I did and I did not see or hear from Hannigan again until after the Rebellion had started, although I expected to do so.

At this time Dunboyne Castle was owned by a family called Murrough-Ryan, who lived there. Mrs. Ryan's brother, Major Bertie Kenny, a son of the notorious Judge Kenny, held a staff appointment in the British War Office. He was sent over to this country to obtain the views of the loyalists regarding the methods that should be adopted to stamp out the disloyalty that had sprung up and was increasing here. A meeting of Loyalists was held in Dunboyne Castle and was attended by, amongst others, Lord Frederick Fitzgerald, Charles Hamilton, Captain Fowler and Mrs. Maher.

At this meeting it was recommended that all the leaders of the Irish Volunteers, both headquarters and local - should be arrested at once and interned under the Defence of the Realm Regulations. There was a Valet by the name of John Moore working in the Castle and by a copious use of the wine on the occasion he was able not only to hear and get the gist of the discussion that was taking place, but was also able to get a look at the recommendations they had put in writing. This man was an agent of mine.

I saw Pearse again at St. Enda's on the Saturday prior to Holy Week and gave him this information. Pearse thought the information

very important and subsequent events proved it to be so. It would seem that the document read by Alderman Tom Kelly at the meeting of the Dublin Corporation on the 19th April was based on those recommendations. On this occasion Pearse was alone. I asked him on that day for permission to take my men into the city for the fighting when the Rising would start and to join up with the Dublin Brigade. Pearse took a map from the wall and placed it on the table and put his finger on it and said "Your task is communications, and under no circumstances must you go beyond that line". This was the village of Mulhuddart where he was pointing with his finger on the map. I understood I was to keep communication to and from the city open.

On Good Friday evening I got written instructions from Pearse to the effect that the Rising would start at 6 p.m. on Easter Sunday evening. I do not remember who brought me this dispatch. Two men came with it and I remember I had to acknowledge it. We made all preparations then and the mobilisation order was issued to the men. They were not, however, given any information of the intended Rising. We filled some cartridges with buck shot. Mobilisation was to be at my house. On Easter Saturday night I got two Service rifles from I.R.B. headquarters (Sean Tobin gave them to me). My intention was to seize Clonsilla Station and destroy the railway there.

At about 4 p.m. on Easter Sunday evening a man called Benson arrived with a verbal message to say that the Rising was off. He stated that Sean Tobin of I.R.B. Headquarters had sent him.

I had then to get some men and send them around to get in touch with the remainder to stop the mobilisation. Benson remained with me that evening. At about 6 p.m. I asked him what about the men who were to mobilise at Tara. I knew that some of the North Meath men were to mobilise there. Benson replied that that was my responsibility. This was a complete surprise to me. I tried to get a car in Dunboyne but could not do so and had to 'phone to Dublin for a taxi. When this arrived, accompanied by Benson, I set out for Kells. I met Mr. Battersby and he told me that the boys had gone to Tara. After some

persuasion he took his car and drove me to Tara. I instructed Benson to follow me on slowly and that when I had got the men away he could pick me up on the main road. I would signal to him by putting up my right hand. We got to Tara about 12 p.m. and I instructed Garrett Byrne, who was in charge there, to send the men home. We got some of the men away in Battersby's car and the remainder of us started walking towards Navan. On the road to Navan I met the taxi with Benson in it, but he refused to stop although I signalled him to do so.

We succeeded in getting all the men home, avoiding police observation in Navan. I stayed in Clarke's in Navan that night (Sunday). I got back home on Monday to Dunboyne to learn that there was a man looking for me. He left word at my house that he would come back again. He did not return. There were races in Fairyhouse this day and most of the local volunteers were there.

That evening (Easter Monday) I heard from local rumour that the Rising had started in the city. I collected all the volunteers I could get hold of. We mustered about 14 or 15 all told. We had two Service rifles and a few shotguns and a few small revolvers. We started to demolish the railway bridge at Dunboyne beside my house. We had some gelignite. We were also going to cut the telephone poles and smash the telegraph lines. When we had started to work Pat McKeown, who was a signalman at the local station, told us that he had a message from Dublin that there was only a local riot or row in the city. We stopped work as a result of this. As far as I can remember I had sent a messenger to Dublin to find out what was happening and this person got as far as O'Hanlon's corner in the city and on returning told me that there was fighting going on in the city

As a result of this information I decided to act. I now decided that I would destroy the railway bridge at Clonsilla and I despatched men on bicycles - Christopher Lynam, Francis Lownes and Peter Keating - to destroy the bridge with the gelignite. They had the necessary tools. The remainder of us trekked along the railway to Clonsilla Bridge. This was the Canal Bridge. When we reached

the Bridge a girl named Anne Rodgers from Dublin, but who was staying in Dunboyne, arrived there. She told me that a messenger had arrived from Maynooth with instructions that I was not to do anything, but to collect all the men and bring them to Leixlip Station to join up with the men from Maynooth. I came back and collected the rest of the men that I could find and set out for Leixlip. This entailed a journey on foot of about six miles. We got to Leixlip, but could not contact the Maynooth men. We stayed there for a considerable time but did not get into contact with them. I had about 13 or 14 men all told. Two rifles, a few small revolver and some single barreled shotguns. We returned to my place at Dunboyne and I decided to try and get in touch with the Louth men. I sent my men around the local countryside to scout for them. On Tuesday evening we succeeded in getting in touch with them and joined them at a place called the Red House on the Dunshaughlin Rd. The village of Dunboyne and surrounding area were at this time occupied by British Cavalry - about 500 strong. It was Tuesday night when we got in touch with Donal O'Hannigan at the Red House. We were joined there by Sean McGurrell from Athboy.

We moved from there to Tyrrellstown House near the village of Mulhuddart. Hannigan was able to supply some of my men with rifles and ammunition. As far as I can remember Hannigan sent scouts out to try and get into headquarters in the city. The scouts failed to get into the city as the British had by now established a cordon around it and they found it impossible to get through. He also sent scouts out to get in touch with Tom Ashe and the Fingal Battalion. Garrett Byrne and William Byrne (brothers) from Kells now joined us here. Comdt. Hannigan eventually succeeded - I cannot say on what day - in gaining contact with Tom Ashe. We had a fair share of food while at Tyrrellstown House. We commandeered a couple of sheep which we killed and my mother was able to supply us with eggs, butter and such things. Comdt. Hannigan kept a constant guard mounted on the place and scouts operating on all the roads in the vicinity.

As far as I am aware, Comdt. Hannigan did not get any

instructions from headquarters in the city. I have a recollection, however, that at one period we made preparations for movement into the city, but this was abandoned when our scouts reported the position. Nothing happened during the week. We were apparently awaiting instructions, but got none. On Saturday morning Comdt. Hannigan accompanied by Dan Madden set out to contact Ashe and I was placed in charge at Tyrrellstown House. It was late on Saturday night when Hannigan got back to us. I think he told us then that the surrender had taken place. He called a conference of the officers present. They were :- Pat Hughes, Garrett & William Byrne, Hannigan and myself. We discussed what we should do in the circumstances. No one was anxious to break up or disband. Finally it was decided that the arms should be dumped and that certain of the Louth men should go home. The Dunboyne men were also to return to their homes and the remaining Louth men were to find billets in the Dunboyne Area with the local volunteers. All were to hold themselves in readiness for further call, if necessary. Commandant Hannigan started for Galway, as it was understood that fighting was taking place there. We coated all our arms with oil and buried them at "Beggstown". They were subsequently discovered by the remaining local National Volunteers who brought them to Court Hill House, Dunboyne. Eventually they were handed over to Michael Collins, and I do not know what finally became of them.

I came home, I think it was on the Tuesday following the surrender, and was informed that the British military were looking for me. About 3 p.m. on that Tuesday evening my house was surrounded by the Lancers and my three brothers, Ned, Joe and Peter, myself and Christy Lynam, who was with us, were arrested and taken by lorry to the Richmond Barracks, Dublin, and put into the Gym. there There was a big number of prisoners including Eamon Ceannt, ~~John~~ ^{John} Sean McBride, Sean McDermott. We got some bully beef and hard biscuits to eat. We got no bedding and had to lie on the bare floor. We were there for a few days and we could hear the volleys for the first executions. After a few days we were paraded on the barrack

square. Sean McDermott was amongst us, but he was picked out and brought back to the Gymnasium. From the Richmond we were marched via Kilmainham to the North Wall and placed on a cattle boat.

When being marched through the city there was no hostility shown to us. Some people waved their hands at us. We were packed into the cattle pens in the hold of the boat, which were very dirty. We sailed to Holyhead and were taken from there by train to Wandsworth. We got no food and only a cup of water on the train down from Holyhead. We were met at Wandsworth Station by mounted police, foot police and military. The inhabitants were very hostile towards us, they booed and hissed and shouted "No Home Rule". We were taken to the prison at Wandsworth which was both a civilian and military prison at the time. There was supposed to be one thousand, seven hundred military prisoners there at the time. As we went up the steps leading into the prison, the military Adjutant was standing by and he shook his stick at us and said "You are the fellows I would like to deal with".

We were put into single cells by military armed with batons, who shouted at us and treated us as if we were wild animals. We were not allowed out of our cells for a couple of days. The food was thrown to us on the ground like pigs. For bedding we got one sheet and one blanket. Food was of very poor quality and altogether inadequate. After a few days we were exercised in the "Ring" four paces apart. No intercourse of any sort was allowed. If you spoke to your fellow prisoner you were confined in the black cells on bread and water. After three weeks we were issued with a mattress each. I was told by one of the prison staff that I was to be taken back to Dublin for trial. This did not happen, however.

After some weeks under those conditions there was a relaxation of the Prison Regulations. We were allowed to talk and exercise in our own time. Larry Ginnell, M.P., and Alfred Byrne, M.P., visited the prison. Food improved after this and extra food from outside sources was supplied. This was worked through the Irish

Parliamentary Party. I refused to have any of this food as I believed the Party would use it as propaganda against us. On one occasion I became so exhausted with hunger that I lay on the floor of the cell and slept.

We were always of the opinion that we were not getting the amount of bread which we were entitled to and that it was being retained by the Prison Staff. My cell was over where the bread was delivered into the Prison. One day I heard the man who was doing the delivery call out the number of loaves he had left. Later I heard one of the staff state the number that had been delivered. There was a big discrepancy in the number. I told him he was a "liar". He tried to strike me but was prevented. I was not punished, nor was any investigation of the incident made, which was rather significant.

After some time, I cannot now say how long, we were transferred to Woking Prison on Salisbury Plain. I was in the last party to be transferred. We had learned that the earlier parties to be moved had been stoned and illtreated by the English civilians. We planned that if this happened to us we would seize the rifles of our military escort and use them on the civilians. We did not get the chance, however, as this time they used buses to move us. On arrival in Woking I was asked by the Prison Authorities to sign a form that I was not given an opportunity to have a trial. I refused to sign the document. I was the only one who did not sign. Prison conditions here were fairly good - we were allowed to intermix and converse and food was fairly good. Bedding was the usual prison issue.

After about a month in Woking we were transferred to Frongoch (North Camp). Conditions here were better still. Food was good. We had our own canteen where you could purchase extras. We had football and other games. There were educational and language classes which you could attend. The instruction and organisation of this was done by the prisoners themselves and there was no dearth of teachers amongst them. When we paraded and the Camp Commandant came

on parade we were supposed to take off our hats. We objected to this but got over the difficulty by going on parade without hats. The Camp authorities also wanted us to dig trenches around the camp; we refused and no punishment was attempted on us for refusing

I was released in about three months after arriving in Frongoch. I was not asked to sign any documents on being released. I came home to Dunboyne. My brothers had been released earlier. I found the people in Ireland more favourable to us now. We started a little organisation to help the prisoners and we sent parcels of cigarettes, tobacco and food and clothing for them. We all subscribed all we could for this purpose and were helped by outsiders as well. The remainder of the prisoners were released before Christmas. The police kept tabs on us after our release. but the local Sergeant of the R.I.C. ^{B R A D Y S B} was a decent fellow and kept me informed of events. According to their Headquarters, I was supposed to be as active and disloyal as ever, but he contradicted this.

Signed: Sean Boylan
Date: 25-3-49

WITNESS: Matthew Barry

