

ORIGINAL

BUREAU OF MILITARY HISTORY 1913-21
BURO STAIRE MILEATA 1913-21

No. W.S. 395

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BUREAU OF MILITARY HISTORY, 1913-21.

STATEMENT BY WITNESS

DOCUMENT NO. W.S. 395

Witness

Mr. Thomas Fitzpatrick (Bob McDonnell)
Supt. Registrar's Office,
Dublin Board of Assistance.

Identity

Captain C/Company 2nd Battalion Belfast Brigade;
O/C. Antrim Brigade 1921-22;
O/C. Belfast Brigade June-October 1922.

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- (a) National activities Belfast-Antrim 1919-22;
- (b) Belfast Pogrom July 1920;
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FITZPATRICK

STATEMENT BY COLONEL THOMAS FITZPATRICK

(Robert McDonnell)

I was born in Co. Cavan in the year 1897. In 1914 I was a student in St. Patrick's College, Cavan, and when the Great War broke out I joined the British Army and served in Gallipoli, the Dardanelles, Serbia, Salonika and Palestine. I was commissioned as a Lieutenant, and before the end of the war I held the position of acting Major. I was wounded twice during my British army service. I returned to Ireland in December 1918, and was demobilised in February 1919.

I went home to Cavan on demobilisation and, after a few months, I went to Belfast to do electrical engineering. I worked with an engineering firm and attended technical classes.

I joined the Volunteers in Belfast about August, 1919. I joined C/Company, Belfast Battalion.

I joined the I.R.B. also, as I was told I would have to join. Seamus Keating, the Company O/C., told me that to be in any position of responsibility in the I.R.A. you had to be a member of the I.R.B. I did not know at the time whether he was telling the truth or not. I actually took the oath, but they never bothered about me afterwards.

About this time, two months or so after I became attached to the Company, the O/C., Seamus Keating, fell into bad health and asked me to take charge of the company. Keating did not return to the company and I remained on as O/C.

Some time after that, it was decided to form a second battalion in Belfast, and I got the job of organising the battalion. We formed one company at Ballymacarrett, one at Carrick Hill and one in the Low Market. There was a fourth company organised, but I cannot think where it was. By this

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time a brigade was formed and Sean O'Neill was in charge of it. There were two battalions in the brigade then and I was appointed O/C. of the 2nd Battalion. Roger McCorley was O/C. of the 1st Battalion.

On a number of occasions Joe McKelvey asked me to give lectures to a number of brigade officers from both battalions. I gave the lectures in a hall in Rathbone Street. We had lectures in musketry and general military tactics.

I think Sean Cunningham was in charge of C/Company and Seamus Timoney was in charge of another company; I do not know whether he was in our battalion or in the 1st Battalion.

Some time about February or March 1920, after the military had taken over a place in the Low Market, where they kept a lot of vehicles, we threw a few bombs into it. That was a battalion job and it was done very quietly. There was no sanction from the brigade for it. At that time the brigade were averse to activities in Belfast for fear of reprisals on the Catholic population. Some of the younger men did not agree with this policy at all, especially Roger McCorley, and we carried out this operation without getting sanction. As it was an isolated incident, there was very little notice taken of it by the British authorities.

Income Tax offices in Belfast were burned, but the 2nd Battalion was not asked to take part in the burnings.

The Pogrom started in July 1920. At that time we had a lot of trouble with the corner-boy crowd on both sides. There was a threat that St. Malachi's Church was going to be burned, and the Parish Priest got in touch with some of the Volunteers and, through them, he asked me to provide a guard for the church. We sent over about 12 or 14 armed men, and they maintained a guard on the church for a couple of nights and opened fire on the mob a couple of times during the few nights.

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St. Malachi's was beside the Orange quarter. One morning at about 2 a.m. the P.P. arrived at the hall where the armed guard were and told them to clear at once, as he had arranged with the British military to guard the church for him. I was in the hall at the time. We had to evacuate the position during curfew time.

We had to keep patrols on the streets all the time during the Pogrom, and during curfew time we kept men posted all over the area. The Orange mob used to come out regularly during curfew hours, but they were not interfered with by the authorities.

After the start of the Pogrom in Belfast, a Protestant organisation was got together under the care of a man named Callow. I do not remember the name of the organisation he controlled, but its principal purpose was to shoot Catholics in their homes and in workshops where they found a Catholic man working in a Protestant district. We tried to deal with the members of this organisation, but not very successfully. Seamus Timoney got a couple of them one day.

The Specials were beginning to appear in October or November.

About October 1920, I took a party out to the Castlereagh Hills, an Orange quarter. We had a local guide with us and he pointed out to us the houses of armed Orangemen. We raided these houses that night, one after the other, and got about 8 or 9 rifles and a number of shotguns. This area was in the countryside outside Belfast. We had no clashes with these Orangemen; we just went into their houses and got them unawares. A few shots were fired only as we were leaving. We got the arms safely into the city.

The Special Constabulary were organised from the

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Ulster Volunteers, composed entirely of Protestant Unionists. This force was put into uniform, and sent out on the streets, armed. Their usual procedure was to attack Catholic houses in the Catholic districts.

Shortly after this new force came on the streets, C/Coy. of the 2nd Battalion attacked a patrol of them in Arthur Sqr. and one of the enemy party was wounded. There were about four or five in the party and they ran at once.

There was one disastrous operation about two days afterwards. The 2nd Battalion were to carry out a job in connection with the boycott of Inglis's breadvans which were to be held up in the early morning outside the city area on Lisburn Road, where a fleet of them used to go out. C/Coy. of the 2nd Battalion under Billy O'Brien were sent out to occupy an Orange hall on the Lisburn Road before curfew. They were to hold that hall until the following morning, when they were to intercept the convoy of lorries and burn them. During the night the Volunteers were attacked by a combined force of military, police and Specials. I left the city after attending a Brigade Council meeting, and arrived out there at about 1 a.m. I was held up by patrols of Specials and military. I posed as an insurance agent cut off by curfew and was brought to an Orange hall, where I was interrogated. I was sent back with an escort towards Finaghy, and on the way back snatched a bicycle from one of the escort and got away. About eleven of the C/Coy. party, practically the whole party, were captured and were subsequently sentenced to penal servitude for life.

My name and address were got on one of the men who were captured, and when I succeeded in getting back to Belfast the following morning, the area I was living in was cordoned off, but they made no further captures. Battalion headquarters was also in that district.

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The following day I was told by Brigade headquarters that I was being transferred to Antrim to take charge of the Antrim Brigade, and I went there about the middle of March, 1921. The Antrim Brigade consisted of three skeleton battalions over a widely scattered area, from Ballycastle on the north to Lough Neagh. There was a little company on the shores of Lough Neagh.

Prior to my appointment, Tom Glennon, the previous O/C. of the Brigade, had been arrested. He was arrested about a fortnight previously. He was the second O/C. who had been captured in that area inside a couple of months, and I was told to reorganise the whole brigade. I established brigade headquarters in approximately the centre of the area, at a place called Glenravel, south of Ballymena.

When I arrived in the brigade area I first took stock of the available arms. This was not hard to do. I found that there were about 18 or 20 serviceable rifles and a small number of revolvers and small arms. The rest of the brigade armament consisted of shotguns.

There was no method of communication between the various battalions, so we organised a system of houses, with the Cumann na mBan girls connection the different parts of the brigade area.

The first active operation was an attack on Loughguile barracks. This barracks had been successfully attacked and captured about five months previously, but the second attack was a failure. Inside a few days the R.I.C. evacuated the barracks and took possession of a newly built house as a permanent barracks, two miles further up the Glen.

At this time we sent out parties and succeeded in getting a fair amount of the rates which had been levied on the county. Some of the cash was used for brigade purposes,

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and a proportion was handed back to the people who had paid the rates. That was in April, 1921.

The post offices were raided on the same night, and all government property was taken away. The proceeds of the Postal Orders were used for financing both the Belfast and Antrim Brigades. During the night that the post offices were raided, a few Volunteers were wounded in clashes with local "B" Specials, because practically every house was connected with the "B" Specials. We had considerable difficulty in keeping the wounded men hidden and attended to. The doctor who attended to them was Dr. O'Boyle or Boylan. This doctor was not a member of the I.R.A., but he was willing at all times to turn out and give us any assistance he could.

When I was sent to Antrim I was given the name of Robert McDonnell.

There were a few rounds-up in the district, and the different areas were continually being raided for arms by the authorities. About May 1921, they made one very extensive raid, employing about forty lorries and a couple of hundred military and police. They combed the area from Glenravel down to the sea coast and made a number of arrests, but no I.R.A. men were captured.

We had not a lot of military activity around Antrim; it was mostly Specials. The headquarters of the Specials were at Ballymena and Ballymoney.

Around Ballycastle area, there were a number of incidents where shots were exchanged quite frequently, and around Loughguile it was practically a weekly occurrence for the local Volunteers to snipe patrols and barracks.

One Sunday evening a number of local Volunteers, unarmed, were sitting on the road when a lorry of Specials came along.

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One of the locals, who was a simpleton and had no connection with the Volunteers, started to run away and they shot him dead. As a reprisal, there was a local "B" Special shot and another wounded a few nights later.

A number of Catholic houses were burned, but immediately a Catholic house was burned, we burned something at least ten times the value belonging to the other side. Immediate reprisals. As a result, indiscriminate shootings and burnings were stopped, because the bulk of the compensation which had to be paid fell on the Unionists as they were in the majority.

There was nothing else of any importance before the Truce, on 11th July 1921.

At the time of the Truce, the strength of the Antrim Brigade was roughly 140 or 150 active Volunteers. Like every other brigade, the strength went up with a bound immediately the Truce came. The Truce was not observed by either side in the north.

A couple of weeks after the Truce was declared, we started a training camp in the mountains near Ballycastle. We kept it very quiet and were in a very isolated position, but we arranged that the Belfast Brigade would take it over. While they were there, several attempts, but never any actual attack, were made on the camp, and several times we had to send out patrols to keep back the "B" Specials who were preparing to make an attack on the camp.

About three weeks or a month after the Truce started an attempt was made to shoot me in the house in which I was staying at the time. My attention was drawn by a noise outside and, when I opened the door, they opened fire on me. They riddled the door with bullets, but I dropped and returned the fire and was uninjured.

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During that time one or two houses were burned, and shots were fired at local Volunteers.

We had our engineers and we had a Brigade chemist. He taught some of the local men how to manufacture war-flour and gave them lectures, but he was taken by the Division to work for them. We succeeded in making a certain amount of explosives, war-flour and cheddar, which were only fairly good.

We had one man in Scotland trying to get arms, but the expenses were too high. The cost of keeping him in Scotland was not worth the returns we were getting.

At the time of the Truce we had about 20 or 21 serviceable rifles, and we had shotguns and police carbines which we had captured from Loughguile and Ballycastle barracks.

I could not actually say when the breaking point of the Truce came, because every time there was anything happening in Belfast there were repercussions in Antrim. Shortly after the Christmas of 1921, the "B" Specials got very active all along the borders of our area. Not only had we the ordinary police, but the "B" Specials used to penetrate into the area on patrol. Things that they never attempted to do before the Truce they did during the Truce. As far as possible we ignored the infiltration after the Truce, because they used to come in in small parties, but on a couple of occasions they were fired on and they kept more to their own areas after that.

The only worth-while consignment of arms we obtained was one hundred rifles which came from south of the border. They only arrived a few days before the big operations in May 1922. The Brigade Adjutant was sent south of the border to contact the arms. He succeeded in bringing them back through Belfast and along the coast road to the rendezvous in Cushendall. On the journey the lorry broke down through some mechanical defect about a mile outside Larne. He immediately went back

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to the British military authorities in Larne, told them he had a load of petrol and that the lorry had broken down. The officer in charge, Colonel Steele, gave assistance to have the lorry of arms towed back to the military barracks, believing it was a lorry-load of petrol. He lent him some mechanics to repair the lorry, and helped him on his way next morning.

The arms arrived safely at Red Bay and were distributed that night to parties from each battalion who were waiting for them. That would be about the 12th or 14th May 1922.

At this time we were preparing for a general attack all over the brigade area in accordance with instructions from the Division, and the day for the attack was fixed for 17th May 1922. During that day instructions were received from the Division to stand fast and await further instructions. Final instructions were received on the morning of the 19th to go ahead that night, and all operations were timed to start at 11 p.m. There were all four battalions engaged in this operation.

The first battalion attacked Ballycastle barracks, threw up road blockades around the town and sent parties to snipe other barracks and "Specials' strongholds in the battalion area. Two lorry-loads of police had been visiting the barracks in Ballycastle earlier the same night and, unfortunately, the men who were blocking the roads put down the barricades before the lorries got outside the area. Immediately the occupants of the lorries saw the barricades they dashed back to Ballycastle barracks and actually pulled up under the ladder which our men were using to get on to the roof of the barracks, as the attack was on when they came back. One Volunteer, when jumping off the ladder, fell into the lorry amongst the military, jumped out again and, although he was seriously wounded, succeeded in getting away. Considerable

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damage was done to the barracks. The I.R.A. dropped a bomb down the chimney, but reinforcements poured in from Ballymoney, and the 1st Battalion unit was compelled to evacuate the town after fighting for a couple of hours around the town.

That night the 2nd Battalion were detailed to burn Ballymena station, making a feint attack on the barracks in Antrim town. They were to burn Masserene Castle, which at that time was guarded by a force of "B" Specials. During the attack on Masserene Castle they carried out Lady Masserene, who was pretty old, and had her wrapped in rugs on the lawn, while the Castle was being destroyed.

The 3rd Battalion that night were to attack Cushendun police barracks, send a small party to make a demonstration around Larne and blow up the bridges between Larne and Cushendun. They were also ordered to burn down the house of Sir John McNeill, who was the Speaker in the British House of Commons at the time. They failed to capture Cushendun barracks, owing to lack of explosives, but successfully blew up three bridges on the Larne-Cushendun coast road, and burned the house of Sir John McNeill. During these operations they had about three or four men slightly wounded.

The 4th battalion were told mainly to concentrate on the Belfast-Derry railway line and destroy the main railway line bridge at Dunloy. This was successfully done, and all main line railway traffic was held up for about one week.

There was one unit we kept separate, Brigade Headquarters Company. To Brigade Headquarters Company was allotted the task of attacking and capturing Martinstown barracks, about eight miles south of Ballymena. This barracks was very heavily garrisoned, and after a fight lasting about three

hours, reinforcements from Ballymena succeeded in getting through in large numbers and the attackers were compelled to withdraw. South of the barracks, a party detailed to hold a road between Martinstown and Ballymena set fire to Rathkenny creamery and succeeded in capturing the local O/C. of the "B" Specials, a clergyman. They were attacked by a very large party of "B" Specials who had been marching from the various areas around immediately the attack on Martinstown started. After a short fight, the Volunteers withdrew without loss, having killed one "B" Special and wounded a number of others. As they were withdrawing, the Commandant of the "B" Specials was released after a severe warning.

During the night we had commandeered and captured a large number of cars over the Brigade area, and for about 48 hours we had complete freedom of movement practically throughout the whole area, although British reinforcements were pouring into the outlying towns, particularly Ballymena and Ballymoney. All the barracks in the area were then heavily reinforced by military and "A" and "B" Specials, and the Brigade was forced into the hills in a number of columns, but no attempt was made for about ten days to penetrate deep into the Brigade area.

After that, large sweeping movements of British military were made in the different areas, and a number of skirmishes took place, but the columns managed to evade the encircling movement.

One small column in the 3rd Battalion was attacked, and three men, who were cut off from the main body, were captured and butchered to death. Their bodies were dragged behind the lorry.

A few days afterwards a strong party of military and Specials entered Cushendall. On their way there they picked up a number of young men and, after shooting up the town,

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they shot four of these men, only one of whom was connected with the Volunteers in any way.

From that on the situation deteriorated very rapidly. Most of the men who could return to their homes were ordered to do so, and only the men who were well known to the British military and police authorities were kept on active service.

This Rising in May 1922, was supposed to have been a general rising all over the Six Counties, and was planned for the 17th May originally, but eventually took place on 19th May. The operation was countermanded, but the orders did not reach our Division before we actually started fighting. That meant that all the enemy forces which would otherwise have been engaged in different centres were concentrated in our area, and rendered our objective impossible to attain. Roughly, 4,000 troops and Specials were concentrated in our area.

On the day before our attack started, a number of wounded men arrived from the South Derry Brigade. About four or five of them arrived there for safety. We had considerable difficulty in getting these men sent across to Scotland.

The four battalions took part in the operations in May. The 1st Battalion consisted of the Ballycastle area; the 2nd Battalion was Ballymena; the 3rd was Cushendall area, and the 4th was Dunloy area.

On the night of 18th May, a number of men from the Brigade area, including the Brigade Adjutant, were detailed to the Belfast Brigade to take part in an attack on Musgrave St. barracks. Amongst these men were some expert drivers whose job it was to take control of any armoured cars captured in Musgrave St. and rush them down to the Antrim area where a force of Volunteers was waiting to take them over. As the attack on Musgrave St. barracks did not succeed in its

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objective, no armoured cars were available for the night of the 19th May. After leaving Musgrave St., the men had considerable difficulty in escaping capture and re-joining their units for the operations on the following night, but they all succeeded in reporting back.

About the end of May, after we were driven up to the hills, I was with a column of about eighteen men. We were in a farmhouse and the area was surrounded by about thirty lorries of police and military, who proceeded to search the area. I left an officer in charge of the column and, with two Volunteers, proceeded down the mountain towards where the enemy were concentrating their main forces. My intention was to get to the other side of them and draw them off from the column towards the sea coast, as we were hopelessly outnumbered.

I sent one of the Volunteers back to tell the officer in charge to withdraw the column, under cover, up the mountain side before they were completely surrounded.

At about two o'clock in the evening - this had started at about eleven o'clock - I ran up against a small patrol of military and police and they opened fire. I was hit in the knee, and I do not remember very much about it. I was lying in a quarry until some time the following morning when some of the local Volunteers picked me up and brought me to a farm-house.

In the meantime, the column had succeeded in withdrawing up the mountain, clear of the encircled area.

Some time after that, I was brought to Belfast to St. John's Nursing Home attached to the Mater Hospital.

Soon after I was taken to St. John's Home, Roger McCorley was very seriously wounded while he was on his

way to see me. After a few days he was put in the private ward along with me. He was still unconscious.

While we were in the Nursing Home an attack was made by lorry loads of Specials on the Mater Hospital, which was immediately opposite. During this attack, practically all the windows in the Mater Hospital were shattered by rifle fire, as well as a number in the Nursing Home where we were.

When I came out of hospital some time in June, I was transferred as O/C. of the Belfast Brigade to replace Roger McCorley.

About this time it was recognised that further fighting in the area was futile, owing to the fact that the Civil War had broken out in the south. Men who were unable to return to their homes were transferred to Dundalk military barracks and to the Curragh Camp. Dumps were prepared, and arms which were not actually needed were put away, and brigade documents were destroyed mostly.

When the affairs of the brigade, financial and otherwise, were wound up, I came down myself to Dublin about October 1922. Both the Brigades were non-existent at this time.

Signed: *J. FitzPatrick*

Date: *19. 6. 50*

Witness: *John Mc Boy*

