

**ORIGINAL**

BUREAU OF MILITARY HISTORY 1913-21

BURO STAIRÉ MILEATA 1913-21

No. **W.S. 450**

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COSANTA

BUREAU OF MILITARY HISTORY, 1913-21.

STATEMENT BY WITNESS

DOCUMENT NO. **W.S.**.....450.....

**Witness**

Miss Brigid O'Mullane,  
50 B, Leinster Road,  
Rathmines, Dublin.

**Identity**

Organiser for Cumann na mBan 1917 - ;  
Member of Executive of G.H Q., Cumann  
na mBan 1918 - .

**Subject**

Organisation and activities of Cumann  
na mBan in provincial areas 1917-1921.

**Conditions, if any, stipulated by Witness**

Nil

File No. **S.1594**.....

Form B S M 2

STATEMENT OF MISS BRIGHID O'MULLANE,  
50B., Leinster Road, Rathmines, Dublin.

I had just left school in Sligo, after my mother's death, when the Roscommon election was held. I was asked to assist on the organising committee of a banquet that was to be given to Count Plunkett and his wife ~~immediately~~ <sup>Some weeks</sup> ~~30<sup>th</sup>~~ after the victory. The Corporation had decided to confer the freedom of the city on him ~~and~~ <sup>and B.O.M.</sup>, on that night, the banquet was given to them in the Town Hall. Mrs. Mulcahy of Sligo was president of the reception committee. It was then I first met Countess Plunkett who, during her stay in Sligo, had breakfast in our house every morning. She told me all about the Cumann na mBan organisation, and was most anxious that I should start a branch of Cumann na mBan in Sligo. On her return to Dublin, she sent me all the literature.

I immediately set to work. I was friendly with the Mayor of Sligo, Alderman Hanley, and his wife. He always gave me the key of his parlour, and it was there we held our first meeting. I was appointed Honorary Secretary of the Branch, and was asked by Headquarters to organise branches throughout the county.

I started on a push-bike and, after much effort, succeeded in forming branches in the following districts:- Collooney, Kilmacowen, Ballintogher, Screen and Dromard, Grange, Maugherrow, Rathcormack and Ballintrellick.

At the annual convention in the autumn of 1918, I

was elected a member of the Executive of General Headquarters although I was not present at that convention. Provincial members of the Executive were not expected to attend all the meetings but, from the time I became official organiser, which would be towards the end of 1918, I was in frequent attendance, as I reported progress in person to headquarters every month. The meetings of the Executive were fortnightly.

Towards the end of that year Cumann na mBan organised a flag day for the starving people of Central Europe. I was Secretary of the local branch in Sligo and took part in the flag day. Another member and myself were summoned for selling flags without a permit. We did not appear before the Court and were fined a sum of money with the alternative of a week's imprisonment. We refused to pay the fine and served the term in Sligo gaol.

From Sligo I went to form branches of Cumann na mBan in Co. Leitrim. I formed branches in Arigna, Drumshambo, Ballinamore, Dromod, Tullaghan and other districts. My activities were then extended to Roscommon, where I formed branches in Roscommon town, Boyle, Knockcrockery, Fourmilehouse, Cornascath and other districts. I re-organised a branch in Strokestown, where the Sharkey sisters were already active. I did the Ballinasloe area also. I stayed with Dr. Ada English in the Mental Home.

It was my custom to contact the Volunteer O/C. who gave me the names of reliable girls. Having got the names, I convened a meeting, generally at the private house of one of the girls; occasionally it might be at a local hall or even a barn. I first lectured the girls on the aims and objects of the organisation, and the work they would be asked to do. I had a good deal of prejudice to overcome on the part of the parents, who did not mind their boys taking part in a military movement, but who had never heard of, and were reluctant to accept, the idea of a body of gun-women. It was, of course, a rather startling innovation and, in that way, Cumann na mBan can claim to have been the pioneers in establishing what was undoubtedly a women's

auxiliary of an army. I fully understood this attitude and eventually, in most cases, succeeded in overcoming this prejudice.

At the inauguration meeting of each branch, having lectured the girls, I got them to elect a President, Captain, Honorary Secretary and Treasurer and committee members. I advised them to meet, if possible, weekly. Before I left them, I always tried to get the local doctor or nurse to give the branch a course of first-aid lectures, and an I.R.A. officer to instruct them in drill, signalling, despatch-carrying, cleaning and unloading arms. Each branch paid an affiliation fee of ten shillings to Headquarters and thus became entitled to send a representative to the annual convention at Headquarters. The branches then were in close contact with General Headquarters. While preserving their separate identity, the branches worked in close conjunction with the local I.R.A. companies, which constantly availed of their services in activities, such as, the carrying of arms and ammunition, despatch carrying, intelligence work, getting safe houses for wanted men, looking after the wounded, when necessary, seeing to the wants of prisoners, and collecting funds for the Volunteers. For the latter purpose, they organised concerts, céilidhthe, aeridheachta.

When I had formed the branches in the various areas of each county, I then formed a District Council in the following manner: I generally selected the two largest towns furthest apart in a county, and convened a meeting by summoning the Captain and Secretary of each Branch within a radius of fifteen to twenty miles of the particular town.

This meeting formed itself into a District Council, and elected a President, Secretary and Treasurer and a small Committee. The District Council controlled all the branches in their District, and issued instructions to the officers of the Branches. As an illustration of this, in County Westmeath I formed two District Councils, one in Mullingar and the other in Athlone.

Having organised those three counties and ensuring, by further visits, that the Branches were continuing their activities, I was sent by Headquarters to organise, in turn, the counties of Cavan, Fermanagh, Down, Armagh, South Derry and Antrim. Everywhere I went, I found the girls very enthusiastic on hearing the objects of the organisation. I had to be very careful in accepting into the organisation only girls that would be found reliable to meet the emergency occasions which were inevitably awaiting us.

I next travelled southwards to the counties of Meath, Westmeath, Kildare, Louth and Wexford. Having regard to the extent of the area for which I was responsible, I might say I was always on the road, re-visiting and reorganising the Branches which I had formed. Long journeys - say, from Dublin to Enniskillen - I would do by train, but the journeys within the counties were all done on a push-bike. These journeys were by no means all hardship, although I sometimes had to do sixty miles a day, as I made many friends who were always glad to see me on my return visits. The life was strenuous, as I generally worked in three meetings a day to cover the various activities of each Branch. My meals were, of course, very irregular, and the result of this sort of life, which I led for about three

years, i.e., to the Truce, was that my weight was reduced to 6½ stone. I got many severe wettings and consequent colds, which I was unable to attend to. The reaction to this came during the Truce when I broke down and had to get medical attention.

After Cumann na mBan was proclaimed by the British military authorities in July, 1918, I met with greater obstacles in my work, as I was, in fact, on the run and constantly in danger of arrest. I could no longer stay in hotels, which were always under observation by the military. I had to stay in private lodging houses or with people who were willing to take the risk of keeping me. If I did stay in a hotel, I assumed the guise of a technical inspector and a false name.

To illustrate the difficulties that an organiser had to face and overcome, I will cite the following example. I arrived in Athlone, having been previously given the name of a local I.R.A. officer with whom I was to get in touch. I did not know his address, and I discovered by chance, by overhearing a conversation in a restaurant, that he was a prisoner in Custume Barracks. I went to the barracks, represented myself as his sister and asked for a visit, as I had already learned by experience that a near relative could get a visit to a prisoner at that time - early in 1919. I succeeded in getting the visit and, when the prisoner came, I greeted him as his sister, and he quickly understood the situation. He was serving a sentence which was to be up next day, and he arranged to meet me on his release. During the intervals that the sentry was at some

distance from us, he gave me the name of a safe house to stay in, owned by an old lady, a Miss Delaney, who lived beside John's Castle and who was a great supporter of the movement.

In 1919, owing to the officiousness of the local police in supplying information to the British military, Cumann na mBan decided to have an extra activity, namely, the social ostracism of the police throughout the country. This I put into operation by getting the Cumann na mBan girls to refuse to dance with, or even to greet the police on the street, and further, to encourage shopkeepers to have no business dealings with them. I even got mothers to pull in their children from the doorways of the houses when the policemen were passing. This turned out to be a most effective method of preventing the police from supplying the British army with information. While enforcing this idea in County Fermanagh, I came up against an inspector of Police, called Nixon, who, I think, was the same Nixon that afterwards got remarkable promotion under the Six-County Government. He had previously made himself notorious in Strokestown by closing down and removing all the goods from the business of the Sharkey sisters.

I called a public meeting in the market square at Lisnaskea, where Nixon was now stationed, and exposed his tactics. I was the only speaker but there was a fairly good gathering, and, of course, the police attended and reported my speech. Nothing happened for some time and I continued my activities in the county. Then I got a wire

from home to return at once. I did so, and found that my father had been arrested and was being denied political treatment. I cycled over to Sligo Gaol and insisted on seeing the Governor. I asked him why my father was not getting political treatment and threatened to expose him by calling a public meeting of protest. He told me that, before according political treatment to Republican prisoners, he would have to get permission from the British authorities in Dublin, but promised to wire at once to Dublin, if I would postpone any action till next day when he would be sure to have a reply.

I left the prison and made for my bicycle, to find that a policeman was holding it. A Sergeant and two Constables then came up to me, and the Sergeant placed his hand on my shoulder, saying: "I arrest you in the name of the king".

I was marched off to the nearest police barrack, and kept there until the time of the departure of the train for Enniskillen. I was then brought to the station by the police and conveyed in the train, under an escort of seven policemen armed with rifles. On arrival at Enniskillen station, there were about twenty policemen waiting to meet us, and I was brought to the police barrack at Enniskillen. I was kept in the barrack dayroom all night, with a policeman present all night. Cathair Healy, M.P., was the only one allowed into the barrack, and he protested against a woman being kept in a police barrack without a female attendant, and offered to put me up for the night with his wife and himself, which offer was refused by the police. He brought in a stretcher and bedclothes but, of course, I

only lay down as I was. I did not sleep because I was listening all night to the sucking of the policeman's dirty pipe. Cathair brought me in my meals personally from the house, as nobody was allowed to see me, and he only by virtue of his membership of the Westminster Parliament.

Next morning I was brought under heavy escort to the Courthouse in Enniskillen, and charged with inciting the people "to murder the police". I refused to recognise the court and, accordingly, would have no defence. I was convicted and sentenced to two months' hard labour, and brought to Sligo Jail. I spent the two months - which included Christmas of that year - in solitary confinement. I refused to do any work, and so obtained no remission of my sentence. It so happened that my father was serving a three months' sentence in the same jail for sedition but we were not allowed to see each other. I would like to pay a tribute to Cathair Healy for the courageous way he came forward and took me fully under his protection during my detention in the police barrack and all through my forced sojourn in Enniskillen. Moreover, as I was young at the time, he insisted on and succeeded in getting permission for getting a friend of his to travel with me in the railway compartment with the police escort.

The Cumann na mBan girls in Enniskillen also came around the barracks and the Courthouse to show their sympathy but were denied access to me.

Shortly after my arrival in Sligo Jail, I found I was

left completely alone every night in a separate wing, which contained the condemned cell and the gallows, as the wardress was afraid to stay. I was equally afraid but was loth to protest lest I should be accused of cowardice. I need not add that the nights I passed on my plank-bed there were veritable nightmares. As a refinement of cruelty, when Christmas Day came, I was looking forward to some addition to my scanty prison fare and, at the usual hour of 12.15 p.m., I heard the rattle of the cans being brought to the criminal wing but nothing came to me, although I was feeling faint with hunger. Eventually, in the course of the afternoon, a lovely Christmas dinner arrived from the Ursuline nuns, who also provided my father and the other political prisoners with similar fare. The prison authorities, who knew this was to happen, did not acquaint me beforehand and cut off the prison rations from each of us, of which, of course, the nuns were unaware. That dinner stands out in my memory, and my gratitude to the kind nuns was unbounded.

On the 29th December, 1919, I was released and went home, and thence to Dublin where the Executive of Cumann na mBan organised a reception for me. The function was held in the residence of Mr. Seán T. O'Kelly in 19 Ranelagh Road, under the chairmanship of Countess Markievicz, and was attended by all the members of the Executive.

Cathair Healy wrote inviting me to Enniskillen, where the Cumann na mBan and Volunteers organised another reception for me, in the form of a supper and ceiliúche, under

his chairmanship. I was deeply moved by the reception I received at both functions, and found that my imprisonment had a most encouraging effect on the morale of the members, especially in the country. The fact of my imprisonment had so aroused the national spirit of Enniskillen, which was the centre of Orangism, that arrest and imprisonment henceforth held no fears for national sympathisers and, I believe, the police were given a hot time afterwards.

After these functions, I immediately resumed my work of organising, being now sent to Down, Kildare and Meath.

From now on, the situation for organisers became more dangerous because, in the early months of the year, the Black and Tans began to arrive. They patrolled the country in their Lancia cars, raiding, shooting and looting, and a solitary cyclist like myself, whose work entailed being out late at night, was in continuous danger. At night, of course, I cycled without a light as I knew the Black and Tan lorries would be travelling through the country. When I heard the sound of the approaching lorries, I had to take refuge in the dykes and hedges on the roadside until they passed. On one occasion, I was suddenly taken by surprise in the dark. The Tans jumped out of the lorry and set upon me. They asked me for information as to how far the nearest town was. I refused to tell them and they were about to attack me, drawing their guns. The elderly officer, who seemed to be in charge, called on two other officers to help him and forced the men to get back into the lorry while I made a getaway. Naturally, after that, I had to make very sure that such

incidents would not occur again, even if it meant the risk of getting injured by throwing myself into dykes at the approaching sound of the oncoming lorries.

I was determined to carry on the work of forming and reorganising branches, which was my main objective, although I would have had an easier time in jail if I had allowed myself to be arrested. I was increasing the membership of Cumann na mBan, with the result that, when the Truce came, there were 1,400 branches in operation in the country.

It must have been early in 1920 that the Executive found it necessary to have Cumann na mBan organised into areas corresponding to the I.R.A. battalion areas. Each company of the I.R.A. would then have a branch or squad of Cumann na mBan attached to it. Another thing that was to be done: the officers of each branch would select in their company area safe houses where the I.R.A. would be provided with food and sleeping accommodation. The Secretary of the District Council would forward to the O/C, Battalion, complete lists of those houses covering the battalion area. Another part of the scheme was that, as it was now impossible to communicate with the Executive through even covering mail addresses, a secret method of communication had to be devised. This was done through the District Councils, which I had already formed in the provinces visited by me. To put this new scheme into operation, I was sent by the Executive through Connaught, Ulster and five counties of Leinster. At this time, the Tans were in full blast.

Where there was an active company of the I.R.A., I had a Cumann na mBan branch or company working in conjunction with it under its own O/C and, where the numbers justified it, First and Second Lieutenants.

The District Council worked in conjunction with the I.R.A. battalion staff, and lists of food and rest stations would be sent on by the Company Captain to the Adjutant of the District Council. It should be mentioned that, to conform with the new military scheme, District Council Secretaries got the rank of Adjutant. I found the girls very enthusiastic over this new scheme, and they entered into the spirit of it whole-heartedly.

I also formed a secret line of communications between Dublin Headquarters and each District Council by which despatches were carried. For example, information from Athlone would be conveyed by a Cumann na mBan cycle despatch carrier to the nearest Cumann na mBan Company Captain on the route, who, in turn, would pass it on similarly to the Adjutant of Mullingar District Council. The latter would then take over control of the messages and ensure their safe and secret despatch to Dublin. In this way, most important intelligence work for the I.R.A. was done by Cumann na mBan. The Cumann na mBan had various ways of collecting information; some of the girls, being employed in local post offices, were able to tap wires from police barracks.

The Branches were always busy making field dressings and first-aid outfits. This was generally done in the girls' own homes. They also stored arms and ammunition in safe dumps, and kept the rifles and revolvers cleaned and

oiled. If required by the I.R.A., they were utilised to transport arms to and from the dump before and after engagements, while others of them attended in the vicinity of an ambush, fully equipped with first-aid outfits to treat the wounded, if any, after the ambush. All this entailed a certain amount of danger for the girls, and I know of a few occasions on which they barely escaped with their lives from the scene of an ambush.

While in County Louth I was informed of a proposed plan to burn all the coastguard stations on the coast, as it was rumoured they were to be occupied by the Black and Tans. A man was sent specially down from I.R.A. Headquarters to direct the operations of the I.R.A., while I took charge of the Cumann na mBan co-operation. The stations at Blackrock, Clogherhead, Glasslough and Termonfeckin were successfully burnt to the ground. At the last-mentioned place we were surprised by the Black and Tans who arrived in lorries just as the building was alight. I was present, and the Volunteers and myself, realising the danger, made a getaway from the fire which was opened by the Tans. Not knowing any house in the vicinity, I sought refuge in the presbytery. It was very late at night. I said to the priest who answered my knock that, as a Catholic, I sought refuge. He brought me in, called his housekeeper out of bed and I was allowed to stay there until the danger was passed. I then cycled back to Glasslough, where I was staying, which was the headquarters of the I.R.A. officer from Dublin. I felt that the priest associated me with the orgy of firing that was going on outside and, although he did not seem too sympathetic, he yet gave me refuge and

saved my life. At that time I had no contact in Termonfeckin and, accordingly, had no friendly house to go to.

All the other coastguard stations were successfully destroyed.

In the summer of 1920, I was sent on orders to Belfast. I arrived during the aftermath of the big pogrom in July, to find the Nationalist section of the city in a state of siege. On my way to the address in Falls Road, which had been given me, I travelled on the open top of a tram. While passing the Royal Victoria Hospital, the tram was stopped by a jeering Orange mob, who were assembled around the entrance gate of the hospital. I enquired the cause, and found that the military were bringing into the hospital a wounded I.R.A. man. He was, of course, under arrest, probably after taking part in some military engagement. He was being brought in on a stretcher, and the mob was jeering. I immediately jumped up, leaned over the rail of the tram, waved my handkerchief down at him and shouted: "Up the Rebels!". He seemed delighted to hear a friendly voice, he smiled and faintly raised his hand to me. The tram, of course, was full of Orangemen who immediately made a rush at me, shouting: "Throw her over!". The conductor rushed up the stairs and succeeded in getting me down to the platform, signalling the driver to proceed. I got off after a short time and continued my journey. This was the occasion of my arrival in Belfast where I was met at the station by a Cumann na mBan girl, who accompanied me on the tram and who got off with me. She was somewhat shocked

at my daring, knowing the Orange mob so well herself.

I should point out that the attitude of the Devlinites mob was scarcely more friendly to Republicans or "Shinners", as they termed us.

One day while travelling down Falls Road, I encountered a procession of these Devlinites women followers who were marching towards Shankill, carrying a green flag, where a procession of Orangewomen were mustered under a Union Jack. I was wearing a small tricolour button on the lapel of my coat, which one of the women noticed, and she yelled: "Look at the Shinner!". Thereupon they all made a dash towards me. I got my back against a wall and, putting my hand in my coat pocket, gave the impression that I had a gun in it and pointed it towards them, saying: "I'll shoot the first person that comes towards me". It had the desired effect of holding them back and I got away. Two priests who came on the scene, and to whom I related the incident, said that I was a lucky girl to have got my back against the wall and thus saved my life. Otherwise, they would have knocked me down and trampled me to death. Needless to add, I had not much sympathy with the Devlinites crowd after that and I had two enemies to take precautions against.

One Saturday I went to Downpatrick to form a Branch. On the way down, the train was filled with workmen from Harland & Wolff's. I wore my tricolour badge, chiefly for the purpose of seeing what would be the reaction of these Orange "toughs" to it. The compartment I occupied was filled partly with the shipyard workers and partly with armed R.I.C. I sat in a corner reading and, after a while,

one of the workmen evidently spotted my badge and sent the word round to the others. They all started singing the well-known Orange songs, The Boyne Water, The Protestant Boys and many others. They made no attempt to attack me; whether they were restrained by the presence of the police or not, I don't know. They got out a few stations down the line, and I continued my journey to Downpatrick. On this occasion I called on the young curate, Fr. Fullerton, whose name was given to me as being sympathetic. I informed him of my mission. After a short chat, he told me to come along with him to the Convent of Mercy where he would introduce me to one of the nuns who would help me out in selecting suitable girls. She was a wonderful nun, but I cannot recall her name. She gave me the greatest possible assistance. She told me who the reliable girls were, and I was able to summon a meeting. I have an impression that she contacted these girls herself and called them to the convent to meet me. After getting the Branch going, I returned to Belfast.

Another incident I can recall occurred in Portglenone, about ten or twelve miles from Maghera. I had made arrangements to hold a meeting there one night for the purpose of forming a Branch of Cumann na mBan. It was a very Orange district but I had obtained the names of some sympathisers from the volunteers in Maghera. The day I was to travel, a message arrived from some of the police to say that, if I travelled to Portglenone that night, I would be shot on the bridge over the River Bann at the entrance to the village. I was cycling and would, of course, have to cross the bridge. I felt that, as I was the organiser,

inducing girls to join a dangerous military organisation, it was up to me to take the risk. I started off after tea, in time to be at the meeting place at the appropriate hour - eight o'clock. Having cycled about ten miles, I approached the bridge to see about four policemen posted on it. I continued my way and, on reaching the bridge, I cycled past them, shouting: "Hello, boys!". Nothing happened, but I have an idea that one of them said in a pronounced northern accent: "She's a brave wee girl". We held our meeting secretly, as arranged, in a private house. The girls were greatly heartened, not only in Portglenone but in the surrounding area.

Another incident I can recall occurred while I was organising Westmeath during the Black and Tan time. I was staying at Dr. Byrne's, outside Ballinacargy, for a night to attend the inauguration meeting of a Cumann na mBan Branch. I was fast asleep in bed when I was wakened by the sound of English voices in my room. I opened one eye slightly, to see several Black and Tans in the room, one of them holding a lighted candle. I closed my eye again and pretended to be asleep. They were rummaging through the wardrobe and one of them said: "There are only lydies' clothes here". They came to my bedside and one of them said: "I'll see if she is asleep". He held the candle to my face but I did not budge. They said: "Let us come on", and left the room. I waited a while but, as I was worried about the doctor and his wife, I slipped quietly down the landing to their room. There was only Mrs. Byrne, as the doctor was downstairs under arrest and, probably, interrogation. Mrs. Byrne pulled me into the bed and covered me up with the clothes, saying: "I won't have it said that you were taken in my house", and

would not let me out of the room. I thought it extraordinarily unselfish on her part that she put my safety before her own and her husband's. After a while, the doctor, who was released, came up to tell us that the Tans had gone, taking with them all the silver they could find. It was lucky for us that the Tans were sober when they arrived at the doctor's house, which was outside the town of Ballinacargy, as they carried out all sorts of depredations afterwards, looting the shops, consuming the liquor and shooting all round them. They beat up some of the inhabitants too.

Funny enough, only that night Mrs. Byrne had been asking me what a Black and Tan raid was like. This raid must have had a terrifying effect on the people of Ballinacargy because, when I returned a fortnight after, as was my routine in such cases, to revisit the Branch, I met all the inhabitants on the road trekking out towards a wood to spend the night there. Word had been received that the Tans intended also to pay a return visit that night. I recognised my Cumann na mBan girls amongst the refugees and held them up. I told them I would have to hold the meeting and asked them to return with me. This they agreed to, and I held my meeting in the "deserted village". At the meeting I enquired if there was anybody left and, to my surprise, was told that there was a mother and two young children left behind. The mother had refused to risk her children's lives by taking them to the woods. I got in touch with this woman and volunteered to stay the night with her, while the girls resumed their trek to the woods. The woman was delighted to have company, and I asked her if she was a Westmeath woman. "No", she said, "I am from the West of Ireland". Then I

informed her that I came from the West too. Her husband, whose name was O'Connell, was away on business.

Needless to say, we did not go to bed, nor light any light. We sat beside the fire, chatting while the children slept. After a few hours - probably about 2 a.m. - I heard the sound of the Lancia lorries approaching. They stopped just outside the house, which was in the main street. I got the woman to take cover while I crawled across the floor to the window, to see what the Tans were doing. They did not get out of the cars, but shouted: "Come out, you b----- Shimmers, and fight!". There was no response and they fired a volley. They repeated this three or four times, but nothing else broke the silence, which seemed to have a frightening effect on them, for they remained in the lorries and made no attempt to attack any of the houses. They probably were afraid a trap was laid for them and that every house contained an armed guard waiting for them to come out of their cover before opening fire. After a while, they cleared off at great speed. It was well they did not know that the village was completely deserted except for ourselves. Next morning, the inhabitants returned and I left on my bicycle, after saying good-bye to Mrs. O'Connell. I never thought much of the Volunteers of Westmeath after that.

Unfortunately, I retain much the same impression of the Volunteers of County Meath. My reason regarding this county is that in one district - I can't now remember the name of it - I got information that the Tans were coming to hold up and search the men of the congregation as they left

the church after Mass. This information I passed to the local Volunteers, expecting them to prepare an ambush a few miles down the road, before the Tans could reach the church. I went to Mass as usual that Sunday and noticed that there were no Volunteers present. I felt confident that the ambush had been arranged and that the Tans would be wiped out. Much to my surprise, the Tans arrived, took possession of the yard surrounding the church and searched all men coming out. I can't remember that they arrested anyone. We women were not interfered with. To my disgust, I afterwards received a message from the Volunteers, thanking me for having saved their lives. It was the local priest that told me - casually, as it seemed - that he believed the Tans were coming to his church on that Sunday; and I should mention that I had been previously told that this priest was not in sympathy with the revolutionary movement. In the course of my interview with him, I gathered that he did not think much of the military prowess of the Volunteers of the district either. He got this information, incidentally, in the course of conversation with one of the local police.

Probably the most extraordinary and unexpected experience I had in the course of my organising was when I was almost shot by the I.R.A. as a spy. This happened in County Kildare during the Black and Tan war.

I arrived in Naas one afternoon, with the intention of reorganising the surrounding area. Having booked my room in

the local hotel, I went to contact Paddy Moran, who was a senior officer of the local Volunteers. He had a butcher's shop in the Main Street. On entering the shop, I saw a Black and Tan standing in the back doorway and could hear the noise of other Tans moving through the house. The shop-girl, who, I found, was a sister of the man I was looking for, was standing in the shop. On seeing the situation, I immediately asked for a pound of steak and, when she went to the display window, which was some distance from the Tan, I succeeded in conveying to her my business with her brother and asked where I could find him. She whispered back that Paddy was under arrest in the yard and that the Tans were in possession of the house. She asked me to rush to Harristown and warn the I.R.A. Commandant, Tom Harris, of the raids. I undertook to do this, and started off on my bicycle, throwing the pound of steak in the first ditch, but not knowing my way, I had to make inquiries several times to locate the house. Finally reaching it, through a tree-lined avenue, I came upon another Tan lorry containing about four Tans - the rest of them were inside the house raiding. I immediately made a right about-turn on the bike and went hell-for-leather down the avenue again. The Tans shouted: "Halt, halt!", and on my refusing to stop, they fired a rifle volley after me. The bullets whizzed around me, but I wasn't hit. I got safely down to the road and, looking for cover, saw a graveyard which I made for. I hid my bicycle and, creeping down behind a large tombstone, waited to see what would happen. After some time, the Tans came out with the Commandant as their prisoner, climbed into the lorry and

drove off. When all was clear, I cycled back to Naas, to find that Moran had also been taken by the Tans. I stayed on in Naas, which I made my headquarters, and reorganised the local Branch, of which Claire Moran was an active member. I started to get Branches going in the surrounding areas, having got from Claire Moran names in each district where there were Companies of Volunteers. I sent a despatch down to an area about six or seven miles from Naas - I can't now recall the name of it - that I was coming on a certain evening to hold a meeting and to have the girls assembled at some suitable house at, say, eight p.m. or after. I got a despatch back, telling me that all was arranged.

To my surprise, on the afternoon of the day fixed for the meeting, I had a visit at my hotel from a strange young man. He begged me not to go to that particular district that night, as the Volunteers had arranged to shoot me while I was crossing a certain bridge on the way. It appears that information had been given them that a woman spy was operating in the area and they believed that I was that spy. The coincidence of my presence in Naas with the raids and arrests of the two prominent Volunteers convinced them.

I replied that I certainly would go, as I had on a couple of occasions received similar threats from the police and was not deterred by them, adding that, as the threat was from the Volunteers this time, I could explain everything at my courtmartial and, if they wished to keep me under arrest, I could put them in touch with Cumann na mBan Headquarters in Dublin. The young man, who was himself a Volunteer and had been present at the meeting at which my death was decreed, replied: "Oh, there is to be no courtmartial, nor will the

fellows show themselves. They have decided to crouch behind the ditch near the bridge with only the rifle barrels protruding" - and I was to get a volley from each side of the road which would riddle me with shot; and the label, "Spy", was already prepared to be attached to my body after death, while they made a getaway. I was somewhat shocked by the summary methods they proposed to employ, and I promised him I would not go, when it was clear that I should have no chance to defend myself. I felt, naturally, grateful to the young Volunteer, who told me he was not a native of the place. He told me he was Seán Kavanagh, the Gaelic League teacher of the district.

I learned afterwards that there was a woman spy in the county and, on my return to Dublin, Máire Comerford came to me to say that she had information that this girl was now in Balbriggan. Naturally, we were determined to capture her and laid our plans as follows: Máire and I cycled out to Balbriggan one Sunday and located her in the house of a Republican who believed she was bona fide Cumann na mBan. We interviewed her and found that she was most anxious to contact members of Cumann na mBan Headquarters in Dublin. We promised her to facilitate her in this way and, on our return to Dublin, we arranged a plan. Máire, who at this time was secretary to Mrs. Stopford Green in St. Stephen's Green, arranged to bring her along there one day. Myself and four other senior members of Cumann na mBan were waiting at Madame McBride's house in 75, Stephen's Green on the same day, while two other members of Cumann na mBan were waiting in a taxi in the vicinity of Adelaide Road. We had a courier waiting at Mrs. Stopford Green's to tell us when the

spy arrived. This courier informed us, in due course, of her arrival and we cleared out of McBride's to intercept her as she was being brought by Máire to the rendez-vous. One or two of our party were armed, as we expected that the spy would be armed also. In due time, they came along and our party divided into groups of two and three, two of them holding up Maire, as we did not want her to be suspected of having any complicity in our plan for fear of possible reprisals. Another Cumann na mBan girl, Máire Deegan, and I caught the spy under the arms as she had her hands in her pockets. The fifth girl dived into the spy's pocket and drew out a Webley revolver. We blindfolded her and, the taxi coming up, we bundled her into it. To keep up the pretence of Máire's ignorance of the matter, we made her accompany us too.

We brought them to Cullenswood House. We had arranged that Paddy Sheehan, who was later de Valera's secretary, should be there to try her. I can't recall whether it was a Dáil Éireann civil court or a courtmartial, but it was a properly constituted court. There were other men there too. When we removed her black waterproof coat, we found she had a Cumann na mBan uniform - we had heard about this previously. She gave her name as O'Neill but we believed it to be false, and we never discovered who she was. She made no defence and was found guilty. She was given twenty-four hours to leave the country. We took the uniform coat off her, and I gave her my own costume coat. We all then made a getaway before she could remove the bandage from her eyes, and we never saw or heard of her again. Personally I felt very pleased to have participated in the capture of

this spy, in whose place I was very nearly shot myself; also, I was very pleased she was not executed. After that, we were very much on our guard. Her capture had its effect, as we never afterwards found any spy masquerading as Cumann na mBan.

*Brigid O'Sullivan*  
*November 13<sup>th</sup> 1950*

WITNESS:

*J. M. Collins*

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