

ORIGINAL

BUREAU OF MILITARY HISTORY 1913-21

BURO STAIRÉ MILEATA 1913-21

No. **W.S. 508**

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BUREAU OF MILITARY HISTORY, 1913-21.

STATEMENT BY WITNESS

DOCUMENT NO. **W.S.** 508

Witness

Dermot O'Sullivan,
39 Rathlin Road,
Drumcondra,
Dublin.

Identity.

Member of Fianna Eireann 1913 - ;
Member of 'C' Company, 1st Battalion,
Dublin Brigade 1919;
Member of A.S.U. 1920 - .

Subject.

- (a) National activities 1913-1921;
- (b) Formation of Active Service Unit 1920;
- (c) Ambush of Black and Tan Party at
Binn's Bridge, Dublin, 21/2/1921.

Conditions, if any, Stipulated by Witness.

Nil

File No. **S.1667**

Form B.S.M. 2

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Statement of Dermot O'Sullivan,

39 Rathlin Road, Drumcondra, Dublin.

I joined the Fianna in 1913 under Captain Seán Heuston and Madame Markievicz. I served in the Fianna until 1919 when I joined "C" Company of the 1st Battalion, Dublin Brigade.

During the Howth gun-running in July, 1914, I was attached to Captain Sean Heuston's Company of the Volunteers as a scout. I have nothing of particular interest to relate except for a few brushes with the D.M.P.

In the summer of 1915 several units of the Dublin Brigade and Fianna Eireann were mobilised and travelled by train to Limerick. Limerick City at that time was recognised as very anti-Irish in its outlook and it was felt that by a show of strength on the part of the Volunteers it might change the feelings and outlook of the people there. A number of the Fianna, including myself, travelled to Limerick on Saturday evening and the remainder of the organised party travelled on Sunday. We were billeted in various friendly houses throughout the city. At this time the Dublin Volunteers were armed with Howth rifles and we, of the Fianna, were armed with .22s which were purchased by weekly contributions. When the train arrived from Dublin with the main body of the Volunteers, the Volunteers and Fianna formed a parade and marched through the principal street of Limerick. During the progress of the march a certain section of the people of Limerick became very hostile and threw stones and bottles at us, and booed and jeered us. Despite this provocation, however, the Volunteers and the Fianna maintained a very high standard of discipline and no attempt was made, on their part, to retaliate. I know personally that this parade

served the purpose for which it was intended as a number of people who were openly hostile to the Volunteers before that became very friendly as a result of the display put up in Limerick.

From then on the usual drilling, week-end camps and aeriadheachta, etc. were the normal routine of the Fianna. We had definite instructions to report to our authorities the movements of the British troops within the city area and also to use our efforts to procure, by any means we could, arms or ammunition. At the time we were merely boys and we did not realise the significance of the instructions we were getting. One incident I remember quite well was the counting of the number of British troops on parade through the streets of the city on one occasion. The troops passed down the South Quay and I was on Guinness's wharf counting them. Whatever the figures were, I gave them to my Company Commander, Saptain Seán Heuston.

An Irish Volunteer Convention was held in the Abbey Theatre in 31-10-1915 at which I was present on duty. I remember the Volunteer Executive were accommodated on the stage and the delegates from all over the country filled the remainder of the hall. My duty was to take messages from the committee to various delegates. I am sorry to say that I cannot recollect the personalities present on that occasion or the nature of the business transacted.

While the Remains of the late O'Donovan-Rossa were Lying-in-State in the City Hall, "C" Company of the Fianna were detailed as a Guard of Honour. We were very young at the time and four of us performed this duty, one at each corner of the coffin and we were relieved at short intervals.

As this duty went on night and day the members that comprised the Guard of Honour were excused taking part in the funeral parade on the day that he was laid to rest.

Easter Week 1916.

The Fianna boys had no knowledge that a Rising was contemplated. The Fianna was, however, mobilised for a parade on Easter Sunday but late on Easter Saturday night the mobiliser came around and told us that the parade was off.

On Easter Monday I was in company with other boys playing football in a field at the back of Mountjoy when a warder's son came into the field and said, "Your bloody fellows have taken the G.P.O. and other buildings in O'Connell Street and there's a rebellion on". Somehow or other I believed him straight away because I thought he had no reason to make this statement and I went in and told my mother that I was going down to O'Connell Street to see what was happening.

About mid-day I went to O'Connell Street and when I got there I saw the 5th Lancers coming down O'Connell Street. There was a single strand of barbed wire across O'Connell Street which was between the Pillar and Cathedral Street. Firing was opened from the G.P.O. and the Lancers retired. I was not long in O'Connell Street when I met a Fianna Sergeant. I told him that I was going over to the G.P.O. to see if I could be of any assistance to the garrison there and he said he would come with me. When we called at the G.P.O. we were told that they were not taking any Fianna boys there. We inquired for the whereabouts of our Company Officer, Captain Sean Heuston, and we were told that he was somewhere in Stoneybatter. We made our way to

the Four Courts and we enquired there for Captain Heuston but they could not tell us where he was. We returned to the G.P.O. and again offered ourselves. This time we were told that they had enough riflemen in the building but that we could be useful in carrying dispatches. We were given a dispatch to take to the officer in charge of the Four Courts. On delivering it we returned again to the G.P.O. and this time we were told to take another one to Bolands Mill. On returning from Bolands Mill, we were dismissed and instructed that we were no longer required.

Transferred from Fianna to a Volunteer Company.

Following 1916, the Fianna was re-organised. Seán Prendergast was given charge of my Company - "C" of the 1st Battalion. Seán Kennedy and Tommy McGrane were the two Lieutenants. The Company's headquarters and mobilisation place was 28 North Frederick Street. I remained with the Fianna until 1919 when I was transferred to "C" Company of the 1st Battalion under Captain Seán Flood and the two other Company Officers were my old officers of "C" Company of the Fianna, i.e. Seán Prendergast and Seán Kennedy. At that particular time the Company was not very active. It paraded weekly at a house in Seán MacDermott Street where drilling, lectures in the use of arms and of First Aid were given.

Coming on to 1920, street patrols were organised by the Company. We worked in sections. Each section had a definite area to patrol. Our instructions were that we were to report the movements of British troops and to carry revolvers. We were, however, specifically instructed not to attack or provoke the British troops in any way except we were attacked ourselves and in such an eventuality we were permitted to use our arms. On one such occasion I was with

a Volunteer, Seán Quinn, when a policeman passed us on the far side of the street. Quinn was armed with a Peter-the-Painter which he pulled out and wanted to shoot the policeman. He said he wanted to see how it would work. But we had definite instructions to the contrary and I had to use all my powers of persuasion to make him see reason.

I can also remember on one occasion when the Dublin Brigade Council were holding their meeting in the old Keating Branch of the Gaelic League - we, of "C" Company of the 1st Battalion were on guard duty around the vicinity. I, myself, with one other whose name I cannot recall (Quinn or Eddie Flood) were stationed about where the Art Gallery is now. We were armed with revolvers and I was carrying a grenade. That was the first time I had one in my pocket and I can assure you that I was wishing the Brigade Council would come to an end quickly. Our function on that night was that in the event of the Brigade Council meeting being raided while in progress we were to open fire on the raiders in order to give members of the Council in session warning and time to get away.

Another incident while serving with "C" Company of the 1st Battalion, I recollect, was going out to Ballsbridge Post Office to seize a motor bicycle - Crown property - which was to be used by the Company. However, on going to the place we found the bicycle was not there on that particular night.

All through 1920 the Company was actively engaged raiding houses and collecting arms. I remember on one such occasion - I believe in the house of a retired Army Colonel on Botanic Road facing what is now Players' factory - collecting in the raid an aerial bomb. My particular job

when we got to this house was to collect the ladies and assemble them in the kitchen while other members of our party searched for arms. In some part of the house this bomb was discovered. We took it with us to the Company dump. Some time following that raid a number of the Company were ordered to report to the vicinity of Amiens Street Station, the idea being to make them openly conspicuous to the enemy to give the impression of Volunteer activity in the neighbourhood with the hope that a military patrol would be sent into the area. To meet such an eventuality I took up a position on Amiens Street viaduct with this aerial bomb and should an armoured car pass under the bridge I was instructed to drop the bomb on it. I am happy to say that no armoured car passed under the bridge as I would hate to think that if one did what the result of the bomb attack would have been.

Active Service Unit.

Some time in December, 1920, four of us were paraded by the Company Commander and were instructed that it was proposed to form an Active Service Unit and that he had selected us from the Company to attend the parade for the formation of this unit at a hall in Sherrard Street. On the night in question the four of us paraded as instructed and when we got to the hall we found that there was a big number of Volunteers from other units of the Dublin Brigade present. We were all lined up and asked by Commandant Paddy Houlihan if we had any objections to joining the unit which was to be formed that night. Of the four men of "C" Company I was the only one that joined the A.S.U. Two refused for family reasons and the other was not selected that night. When the final selections were made, approximately fifty men remained in the hall. We were

addressed by Paddy Houlihan who introduced to us in a fiery speech our new Commander - Paddy Flanagan. I cannot recall the gist of Paddy Houlihan's speech. Neither can I say if our duties, as members of the Active Service Unit, were clearly defined on that night. All I do remember was that I was to consider myself a full-time Volunteer from that night on, and that I was to be available for duty for twenty-four hours of the day, if necessary, and that I was to leave my place of employment in the Dublin Dockyards in order to leave my services free for Volunteer duties. We were to receive £4. 10s. a week by way of an allowance.

The unit was divided up into four sections, one and two on the north side and three and four on the south side. I was assigned to No. 1 Section and Frank Flood was my Section Commander. Our headquarters was situated off Johnson's Court. Instructions were issued to us either at Johnson's Court or at a hall where we used to play billiards in the Hammam Buildings, O'Connell Street.

On the 21st January, 1921, No. 1 Section was detailed to take up positions at Binn's Bridge, Drumcondra, at 8.30 a.m. and to ambush a party of Black & Tans which usually came into the city at that time from Gormanstown. We took up positions as ordered - two of our Section at the corner of Belvedere Road, two at the corner of North Circular Road, Tommy Ryan and myself at Leeches's public-house and two on the far side of the bridge on the short road that leads in the direction of Croke Park, and two at Fitzroy Avenue. The Section Commander's instructions for the attack on the Tan lorry were that the lorry was to be allowed to pass through our first pair of men and when it

came in line with the pair located on the north side of Binns Bridge they were to open fire on it. We were all to fire simultaneously likewise when it came abreast of our positions. The entire Section remained in position until 9.30 and as no Tan lorry came our way within that time the Section Commander decided to withdraw to a position further down the Drumcondra Road in the vicinity of Clonturk Park. His reason for moving to the new position was, that as the day was advancing at this time, pedestrians on their way to work were becoming pretty numerous and he did not want to endanger their lives unduly. He considered that Clonturk Park area was less populous. As we were on our way to take up our new positions the Tan lorry that we were waiting on passed us by. We could do nothing at the time as we were out in the open. Despite our disappointment, however, we did take up our new positions in anticipation of further Tan lorries coming our way. Tommy Brien and I were at the corner of Richmond Road. The remainder of the Section were behind a stone wall running along in front of Clonturk Park.

We were not long in position when a Sergeant of the D.M.P. came along. I suggested to Frank Flood that we should take him prisoner temporarily. He declined, however, as he said his instructions were definite that we were not to interfere in any way with the Dublin Metropolitan Police. The Sergeant's name was Singleton, and he was allowed to proceed on his beat. After about a quarter of an hour's wait in our new positions, the Section Commander decided that it would appear that there was nothing doing for that day and that consequently we were to disperse. We assembled in a group at the top of Richmond Road and we had no sooner done so when I saw a

military van approaching from the direction of Whitehall. I said to Frank Flood, "We might as well have a go at this", and he raised no objection. As the van came abreast of where we were assembled I threw a grenade into it. I believe we caused fatal casualties. Almost simultaneously with the arrival of the van we noticed that an armoured car and a few lorries of military were coming in our direction from the city and another armoured car and some lorries were also approaching our position from Whitehall direction. It was clear to us then that someone must have summoned the aid of the military and Tans as the place seemed to be surrounded. We saw there was nothing for it but to get out as quickly as we could, so we made our way down Richmond Road in the direction of Ballybough with the intention of cutting across country towards Clontarf. As we reached the junction of Gracepark Road we saw two tenders of Black & Tans approaching us from the Ballybough direction. We wheeled up Gracepark Road and into Gracepark Gardens. At that time Clonturk Park was open country. A Lewis gun which had opened fire at some of our section crossing Clonturk Park (which was not then a built-up area) could have brought us under fire. In fact, one of our men, McCee, was killed as he was trying to get away. On reaching Gracepark Gardens, Frank Flood drew his revolver to burst open the lock of one of the houses which we had intended passing through out to the back and escaping to the fields around the Blind Asylum. The lock of the door jammed and the two tenders of Tans drew up in front of the porchway in which we were standing and Frank Flood surrendered. Five of us were immediately taken into custody and brought to the North Dublin Union. We were placed under heavy military escort. On the following

morning we were visited by the Igoe gang from Dublin Castle. Each one of us was interrogated. They particularly wanted to know where we got our orders from and how we received them. We told them that we were just stopped on the street by someone and given instructions where to go. During Igoe's interrogation of Frank Flood one of his men struck Frank across the face with the butt of his revolver and told him to take the grin off his face. Frank was wearing a perpetual grin which had, apparently, an annoying affect. Igoe pushed him one side and told him that any rough stuff or shooting that had to be done he (Igoe) would do it. When they heard my name and that I happened to be a Kerry man one of his party said he was also a Kerry man and that he was ashamed of me and tried to get me to tell him where and from whom we received our instructions. Very late that night Igoe and his gang again returned, but the Sergeant in charge of the Military Guard refused to allow them into the room where we were in custody. We heard him say that they were going to take us off and finish us, and I think it was due to the Sergeant in charge of the guard that we were not taken out. We were transferred from there after midnight to Arbour Hill Detention barracks where we remained for two or three days and we were again transferred to the main guard room of the Royal (now Collins) Barracks. We were detained here for some time and then we were moved in pairs to Kilmainham gaol. Frank Flood was the last to be removed. When he arrived in Kilmainham he informed me that his cell door was left wide open and that he had gone as far as a small yard at the back but was afraid to make the attempt of crossing the wall to escape in case the opening of the cell door was a ruse. We were in Kilmainham for some time when Ernest O'Malley, Simon Donnelly and Frank Teeling were planning their escape.

Frank Flood knew of this and was negotiating that the five of us would leave after they had got away. Paddy Moran, who was also in Kilmainham at this time, refused to go with the escape party as he believed no Court could find him guilty. The day of the escape the five of us were transferred from our cells on the second floor to cells in the basement (known as the 'dungeon') floor, and when the escaped party were passing down our corridor they bade us good-night and good luck but would not delay to take the padlocks off one of our cells. The reason for our transfer to the basement cell was that Summaries of Evidence were to be taken in each of our cases pending our trial by Courtmartial. After the escape had been discovered we were transferred the next night back to Arbour Hill. From here we were taken each day to Collins Barracks for the taking of a Summary of Evidence. Up to this we had no idea of what the charges to be preferred against us were. During the taking of the evidence there was a doubt in the mind of one of the Black & Tans as to whether he took a gun from me when I was arrested. He asked me if he had taken a gun from me and I just laughed. The President of the Court told us that when we found out what we were being charged with the grin would be on the other side of our faces. The five of us were arraigned for each sitting while the Summary of Evidence was being taken. Those present were Frank Flood, Tommy Brien, Tommy Ryan, Pat Doyle and myself. Three military officers took the Summary of Evidence - a Captain and I think two Lieutenants. The proceedings lasted for about three days. This Summary of Evidence was taken in a room on the right as you go in the archway to the Square just north of the Officers' Mess. Some days later Michael Noyek came into

our cells; I think that was in Arbour Hill. Noyek told us that we were to be tried by General Courtmartial and that he had been instructed to represent us. We had the feeling all along that we would face a courtmartial and we decided between ourselves that when the charges were read out to us we would refuse to recognise the Court. Keeping this in mind when Michael Noyek approached us we thought that perhaps he was acting on instructions from our relatives. He made it clear to us, however, that he had not been instructed by our relatives, but by headquarters and that he was to instruct Counsel at the trial. Having received an assurance from Michael Noyek that he was acting for us on instructions of Headquarters we saw we had no option but to change our original plea and so recognise the Court. I cannot say if we knew definitely beforehand the day fixed for our trial. All I can recollect is that one morning at 8 o'clock the five of us were ordered into a lorry and taken to the Guardroom of Dublin Castle. On the way we had a feeling that this was the day for our trial. We were correct in this assumption as we were no sooner lodged in Dublin Castle when we were taken to the City Hall where courtmartial proceedings were opened against us. As we were being escorted from the Guardroom to the Courtmartial room at Dublin Castle we were handcuffed in pairs. I remember I was handcuffed to Tommy Brien. The handcuffs were removed in the Court room. I think the Court consisted of six British Officers. I cannot even recall who the President of the Court was. Anyway the charge was read out to us which was one of High Treason. The prosecuting counsel was a King's Counsel who was brought over from England and we, the prisoners, were represented by Mr. Woods, K.C. and Nolan Whelan, K.C. instructed by

Michael Noyek.

In viewing this trial in retrospect it seemed to me that the entire military Court were completely disinterested as some of them were 'doodling' and one member, I remember vividly, slept through the whole proceedings. He awoke, however, with a bang as during the Court session revolver shots rang out in the vicinity of the Castle. We jumped up and each member of the Court who had his revolver in front of him took it from the table and held it in his hand. It transpired later that the cause of the shooting was that two detectives from the Castle had been eliminated while the proceedings were in progress.

At the opening of the Court some of our relatives were present but they were ejected before the proceedings actually started. We, the prisoners, were not put into the box for examination. The only witnesses examined were the Police Sergeant (Sergeant Singleton) and the Tans.

(It was this Sergeant - Singleton - who was responsible for summoning the Military and Tans which caused our arrest. He was sent to England that very night for safety and we never knew anything further about him).

The trial lasted all day and late that night the Court finished and the President announced that the findings would be promulgated in due course. Late that night we were transferred back to Arbour Hill. On the following night a military officer entered a large cell in which the five of us were assembled at the time, and handed each one of us an envelope. On opening mine I read that the sentence of the Court was death. I turned round to

Frank Flood, saying, "Well, we have got it at last". On the following morning we were transferred to Mountjoy prison where we were placed in separate cells in "C" wing. One morning some weeks later Frank Flood said to me, "I am for the condemned cell." The other prisoners in turn came and told me that they were for the condemned cell also. When I heard this I got my bundle ready to go with them but just as I was ready to go I was taken to the Governor's Office and there a military officer read a long document for me which stated that my sentence of death had been commuted. As he was smoking a cigar at the time I told him he need not proceed any further with the reading of the document, that he could keep it and light his next cigar with it or send it to the Vice-Regal lodge for the Viceroy to do likewise. I told him that I did not want a reprieve. The mood I was in at the time was I felt I should also share the same fate as my comrades. However, this was not to be and I was returned to my cell.

The last I saw of Frank Flood, Pat Doyle, Tommy Brien and Tommy Ryan was their presence at Mass in a separate part of the church on the day preceding their execution.

Two other men were also executed with my comrades. They were Paddy Moran and Tommy Whelan.

About six weeks later roughly about 100 prisoners, including myself, were joined in groups of ten and taken from Mountjoy prison to the North Wall where we were put on board a boat en route for Wormwoodscrubbs prison in England. I remained in that prison for about a week and was transferred on my own to Portland gaol where I remained until about the end of August. This prison was then evacuated. The prisoners incarcerated there were

mostly the criminal type and I think it was regarded as a penal settlement. In addition there were about from 200 to 300 Irish political prisoners there. On the whole, conditions were fairly good there. In early September, when the order was given to have this prison evacuated, we were all put on board H.M.S. Renown and taken to Portsmouth at which place we disembarked and marched to Dartmouth. We were very well treated on board the battleship. There were quite a number of Irishmen amongst the naval crew. Prison conditions in Dartmouth were fairly good also. If we did suffer any inconvenience, it was our own making as we purposely failed to comply with prison rules and regulations.

I was finally released in the late autumn of 1921. I was one of the last prisoners to be released as some crux had arisen between Collins and the British Cabinet regarding prisoners who had been reprieved from the Death Sentence, or who were serving a long term service.

(Signed) Seamus E. Tuilleabhain

Date. 12th May 1951.

Witness: William Ivony Bondi.

