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COSANTA.

BUREAU OF MILITARY HISTORY, 1913-21.

STATEMENT BY WITNESS

DOCUMENT NO. W.S. 525.....

Witness

Michael J. Stack,
11 Parnell Square,
Dublin.

Identity.

Member of 2nd Battalion Irish Vol's. Limerick 1917 - ;
Member of A.S.U. Dublin 1920-1921.

Subject.

- (a) Activities of 2nd Battalion, Limerick,
1917-1920;
- (b) The Active Service Unit, Dublin, 1920-1921.

Conditions, if any, Stipulated by Witness.

Nil

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STATEMENT OF MICHAEL J. STACK,
11, Parnell Square, Dublin.

New Battalion formed in Limerick City:

Early in 1917 a second battalion was formed in Limerick City in opposition to a battalion that had been in existence there, known as the "City Regiment", since pre-1916. The handing up of the arms by this battalion after the surrender in 1916 caused a lot of resentment in Limerick City. This resentment was largely responsible for the formation of a new battalion, i.e., the 2nd Battalion. When this battalion was formed I joined it immediately. The battalion staff at the time were Peadar Dunne in command, Peadar McMahon and Johnie Sweeney, who transferred from the City Regiment, and Mick Hartney also transferred. The Battalion originally started with four Companies with a total of about 100. As time went on, the strength increased to about 400. Peadar McMahon, who was at the time employed in Madge Daly's bakery, became its second-in-command and Adjutant. In fact, he was responsible for its complete organisation and training.

Rescue of Battalion Adjutant from R.I.C. custody:

Up to about 1919 the activities of the Battalion were confined to organising, training and the procurement of arms. In February or March of that year, Bobby Byrne, who was Battalion Adjutant at the time, was arrested by British military and sentenced to 'twelve months' imprisonment for being in possession of arms. He resented very much the treatment he was getting and, as a result, went on hunger strike. This hunger strike was responsible for concessions being given by the prison authorities but, as Bobby Byrne had suffered considerably, he had to be

transferred from the prison to the Limerick Union (now City Hospital) for special treatment, where he was placed in the custody of an armed guard of six R.I.C. men and one prison warder. The Battalion staff decided that Bobby Byrne should be rescued from custody. With this object in view, a rescue party of five selected men from each Company was formed. The party was divided into two sections. A man named Jack Gallagher was in charge of one section and I was in charge of the other section. The only people who carried arms on that rescue were Jack Gallagher and myself. The others were unarmed. The arrangements made for the rescue were that I was, first of all, to visit the Union and tell him what we had intended doing. When I had finished my visit, I would leave his room and go out of that particular ward, travelling round the hospital and by a roundabout way come back to the same ward again. While this was happening, the remainder of my party were to visit patients in the ward and pose as friends and so work their way near the armed guard over Byrne. The whole rescue was timed and, on the blast of a whistle from me, they were to rush the R.I.C. guard and pin them down. At the psychological moment when this was happening Byrne was to jump from the bed. Things went very well up to my sounding the whistle. The party were already in position but, immediately the whistle went, a general melee seemed to have taken place and, at the same moment as I was approaching Byrne's bed, I saw Constable Spillane attack Byrne and I threw myself on the bed on the top of Byrne. When I saw this happening, I fired at Spillane who fell over Bobby Byrne on the bed. I had then to pull Spillane off Byrne to get Byrne out of the bed. Thady Kelly, one of the unarmed men of the rescue party, was to take Byrne away and arrangements had been made to have a horse-drawn carriage available at the front entrance. Through a

mistake, this carriage drew up at the back of the hospital. As Byrne was being taken through the ward, Constable O'Brien freed himself from the unarmed party and drew his gun and was about to fire when I shot him. He died immediately and I relieved him of his arms. Owing to the mistake in the carriage drawing up at the wrong entrance, Byrne was taken in a pony and trap to Ryan's near Meelick. It transpired that he was badly wounded and he died that night. This exploit was really the start of I.R.A. activities in Limerick city.

Martial Law Proclaimed:

The British then proclaimed martial law and a permit was necessary to enter or leave the city. To hamper the activities of the British forces against the Volunteers who took part in the rescue, there was a general strike organised amongst the people with the object of upsetting them entering and leaving the city in the execution of their work. The whole strike was engineered by the Battalion staff at the time, and Councillor James Casey, who was Chairman of the Trade Union Councils at the time gave us his whole-hearted support as far as the labour organisations were concerned. The strike lasted a week but it served its purpose as the proclamation was withdrawn as a result. The Battalion officers never came under any suspicion, as it was arranged that they would deliberately allow themselves to be seen by the R.I.C. at the time when the rescue was due to take place. The rescue incident was a great impetus to the movement and was responsible for considerably increasing the strength of the 2nd Battalion.

Activities against R.I.C. Limerick City:

After this the activities of the Unit increased considerably. I organised a party which was continually raiding the houses of returned British officers and ex-

service men for arms. In this mission we were pretty successful. Our raiding party consisted approximately of six, and there was naturally a great spirit of comradeship between us. Three of the party were very active and three more acting as Intelligence officers. To co-ordinate between the two parties, some means of communication had to be thought of. The problem was we could not wear flags or make any signs in the street, so I decided that we'd whistle the bar of a well known song and the one we selected was, "Home To Our Mountains". On hearing this from the Intelligence men, we usually whistled back a bar of another tune, "Wait, My Love, And I'll Be With You". Incidentally, I should mention that that tune is very much in prominence even to-day in the area around Limerick city where "E" Company operated.

On the 2nd February, 1920, a Sergeant Wellwood of the R.I.C., stationed at John Street, was going into William Street Barracks when we fired on him and he fell wounded but not fatally. He got inside the gate before we were able to relieve him of his gun. About a fortnight later, a second R.I.C. man was attacked by us at Thomas Street. We fired on him and wounded him. He, likewise, got into the house where he was lodging and we were unable to relieve him of his arms.

During that summer an R.I.C. Sergeant by the name of Conroy was stationed in Edward Street Barracks. He made himself frightfully obnoxious and troublesome and it was felt that, in the interests of Volunteer activities generally in the city, this Sergeant should be put away. The Battalion Commander did not issue any instructions to this effect but a few of us took it upon ourselves to watch him and, when an opportunity presented itself, we were to liquidate him. No sooner had we come to this decision when

word was sent to us by one of our Intelligence people that this Sergeant Conroy was leading a British military patrol in O'Connell Street. Tim Murphy and myself took up positions at the corner of Cecil Street and, as the patrol came along, we fired right into them. The military immediately took up positions and returned the fire. We knew then that the police would return to William Street Barracks, so we withdrew from our original positions and travelled round the block of buildings to Roches Street. The police crossed Roche's Street en route to William Street. We fired again and Conroy fell wounded but not fatally. The police then returned the fire and three civilians (one a woman) were fatally shot. One was a man named Dwyer who was the proprietor of a publichouse. The shot actually ricocheted through the fanlight. However, the ambushing of Sergeant Conroy had the desired effect as it rendered him inactive for a considerable time.

Attack on Doon R.I.C. Barracks:

An attack was arranged by a North Tipperary Battalion on Doon R.I.C. Barracks. The matter was discussed with my Battalion O/C., and he arranged co-operation. It was decided to send six of us to act as a storming party on the barracks during the attack. The attack was timed for sometime in the winter of 1920 and it was to take place at 12 o'clock and did not actually come off until 2 a.m. The six of us detailed for the attack cycled from Limerick to Doon schools where we met Pa Keogh, a Company officer in the Doon area. He arranged to have the National Schools opened where we could park our bicycles. The North Tipperary men did not arrive in time as it snowed heavily that night. We moved over to the barracks and took up our positions near the gable end. The Tipperary men placed a charge of gelignite against the gable end. When this was in position, the fuse

was lighted but no explosion took place and we considered that the gelignite had become frozen owing to the extremely low temperature. Seeing that nothing could be done by way of blasting in the wall, we withdrew a short distance from the barracks and opened fire with rifles and revolvers at the barrack windows and threw what grenades we had with us. The police returned very heavy fire and sent up Verey lights. The officer in charge of our party decided that the attack by our people could not succeed, so we were ordered to withdraw. We cycled home through Kilcoman, Rearcross and into Limerick.

Procurement of Arms:

One of our chief ambitions was to equip our unit with as much arms as we could possibly lay our hands on. With this object in view, we contacted a friendly British soldier who was then stationed in Limerick Barracks. He promised to hand us out a dozen rifles and two Lewis guns provided that he was well paid for them. We now found ourselves in a predicament as we had no money. It occurred to us that it would be a good idea to hold up the Railway Paymaster who came from Kingsbridge, Dublin, to Limerick every Thursday with cash to pay the railway employees there. However, we decided that it would be too long to wait another week for the arrival of this Paymaster so, in the meantime, we approached Madge Daly for a loan of £25 but she refused to advance it. Another source of easy revenue then suggested itself to us, that was the holding up of the proprietor of the Tivoli Picture House, the idea being that whatever money we would take from him would be repaid to him from the funds that we had hoped to take from the Railway Paymaster. On a certain night, a party of us set out to hold up the cinema proprietor. We divided ourselves into two groups; one group was waiting in the drive leading from his house to relieve him of the attache case when he stepped

from his car. The other group were to intercept him in case he would change his mind about going home. The group that waited for him in the drive relieved him of his case and, when the other group were aware that it was in their possession, both groups assembled to check the proceeds. To our surprise, when we opened the attache case, we found that it contained nothing but a huge collection of foreign coins which, of course, were useless to us. We learned later that the wily proprietor deposited the takings in a shop nearby and always carried the attache case with the foreign coins as a decoy. However, we stuck to our original idea of holding up the Railway Paymaster and, on the following Thursday evening, he was held up at Killonan and relieved of his cash, approximately £2,300. The method adopted for holding up the Paymaster was that, as he was travelling by train, one of our men stood on the railway line, took off his coat and picked up a shovel which he waved to the engine-driver to stop. The latter complied with the instruction and the train was boarded by an armed party and the Paymaster was relieved of his money. To our amazement, Headquarters looked on it as a crime while we regarded it as a military necessity at the time, as we felt that it was necessary to procure cash if we wanted to succeed in our mission to purchase arms. The Mid-Limerick Brigade had been formed at the time and an inquiry was instituted. Seán Finn of the West Limerick Brigade was authorised to inquire into the whole affair. The result was that the money had to be returned through the Brigade to the Railway Company. The arms deal with the friendly soldier consequently fell through.

Raids on Mails:

It was our policy in Limerick as elsewhere to give as much trouble as we possibly could to the occupying forces. With this end in view, we decided to raid the

mails which were at that time carried by horse and car, the idea being that, by doing so, the police would be forced to provide either an armed police escort to accompany the mails or, alternatively, to requisition British military. In such an eventuality, we expected that opportunities would be provided for us to attack them.

On the 5th February, 1920, we carried out a raid on the mail van at Baker Place and removed the mails in a confiscated car to Rathban. We sorted out the Government letters and found that they contained cheques in payment to landladies accommodating members of the police force and military. Mails of a private nature were re-posted. The information contained, even in the Government letters, was not of much value to us. However, this raid served the purpose for which we intended it because from then on the mail van was escorted by an armed party of constabulary.

On the 9th March of that year we arranged to ambush the armed party accompanying the mails. Unknown to Battalion headquarters, two of us selected a number of men from the rest of the Battalion to carry out this job. The only officer notified was Captain Joe O'Brien. When arrangements were finally discussed and decided on, the party moved into position at the back of the railway known as 'Thump's Field'. Our first disappointment, however, was to learn that transport to take the arms away was not available. Alternative arrangement then had to be made to procure another car. When this was done, Tim Murphy and myself drove it to the railway to the vicinity of Thump's Field, where we were to join the remainder of our comrades. On reaching there, we found that we were confronted with a major disappointment which was, to our great amazement, Captain Joe O'Brien had called the job off as he considered it would have been disastrous to attack an armed party from

the position selected.

Disagreement with Brigade O/C on military policy:

While a number of us were actively engaged in harassing the British forces in every possible way, we could, the Brigade and Battalion staffs were most inactive. As a result of the engagements in which we took part, the Brigade O/C, Peadar Dunne, sent for me one day and severely admonished me for carrying out activities without any instructions from Brigade or Battalion Headquarters. He said that, by our actions, we had spoiled the chances of Brigade in carrying out much bigger engagements that they had in mind. I told him that I could not see it from his point of view and that, if he was not satisfied with the way I was acting, I would leave the Limerick City area and go either to East Limerick or Mid-Limerick Columns, which units were at that time very active, and that, if I did not succeed in this, I would in any case go to Dublin. At all events, the position, as far as I was concerned, in Limerick had become intolerable as my house was constantly raided by the British and I had to sleep out in the open. Peadar Dunne gave me no satisfaction with the result that I transferred to Dublin and, as I was an engineer student at the time, I thought that I would be able to serve the Volunteer cause simultaneously with my engineering course at the Inchicore Works.

Service with the 5th Battalion Engineers:

I was not long in Dublin when I contacted Liam O'Doherty who was at that time in charge of the 5th (Engineer) Battalion. After serving with the Engineers for a short time, Liam O'Doherty asked me on parade one evening if I would like to join the Active Service Unit as a full time member. To this I agreed, and he arranged for my transfer to that unit. As a preliminary to my transfer

he told me to meet a party, I think on Monday, that was going to Rathfarnham for some practices in shooting. On our way to the Pine Forest we were overtaken by a Crossley tender of Auxiliaries and brought back to Rathfarnham Barracks where our names were taken. I gave my name as Robson. The following evening we were transferred to Portobello Barracks guardroom. We were there for three days and transferred to Arbour Hill. I was a fortnight in Arbour Hill and, during that time, I was interrogated about seven times. I was asked about my connections with the I.R.A. which I denied. The interrogating officer, who was an Intelligence officer of the East Lancashire Regiment, had much sympathy for me being arrested by these men, that is, the Auxiliaries, but he could do nothing for me except I could get some information from the men I met on the road at Rathfarnham. These would, of course, be the five men who were interned with me. After being detained there for about four or five weeks, information reached me, through Dr. Leo Cox, who was also a prisoner, that word had come in to the prison that all men were to try to get out of prison by any subterfuge they might wish to use. I approached the O/C of the Prisoners, Liam O'Carroll, to whom I told the information I had received, and that I was going to try and get out. Liam informed me that I was safer in. A week later I was brought to Kilmainham Courthouse and tried on a charge of being in illegal possession of arms. I should mention that, when I was arrested, I had only one round of .45 ammunition on me, but no gun. I pleaded "not guilty", not being a member of any illegal organisation at the time. The remainder of the prisoners refused to recognise the Court and, for that reason, I was tried separately. On recognising the Court to try me, I was acquitted of the charges. I was released immediately then. On being acquitted, the police Sergeant of Rathfarnham Police

Station, who was giving evidence against us, asked me would I come out to his Station to collect my bicycle. I went the following day and collected my bike, and that evening I went to James's Park where I met Liam O'Doherty at a fete that was on. The latter wondered where I had been for the last five weeks since I did not report to the Active Service Unit. I explained to him what had happened and that I was just out of prison. He then told me to see Padraig O'Connor immediately who would get me in touch with the O/C of the Dublin Active Service Unit. On meeting Padraig O'Connor, he introduced me to the O/C of the Active Service Unit, Paddy Daly, who posted me to No. 4 Section. On the following Sunday I was to take part in an ambush on the same police who had arrested me at Rathfarnham Church coming from Mass. This ambush, for some unknown reason, did not take place.

While serving with the Engineers, a number of us were selected to take part in the burning of the Custom House. We were detailed mainly for the destruction of communications. My particular task was to cut the main telephone cable on the pole at Liberty Hall, after which I was to proceed to the Custom House and help at the unloading of the petrol lorry. At two minutes to 1 o'clock on the day the Custom House was burned, I climbed the pole and cut the main cable going up, thus cutting telephonic communication with the Exchange completely. When this job was done, I rushed across the road and helped in the unloading of the petrol lorry and then mingled with the crowd and got away safely.

The Active Service Unit:

The section to which I belonged had many points of assembly or meeting places; the more commonly used were "the tenters" and "the ramparts" (now Sundrive Avenue),

Mount Jerome Cemetery and Mount Argus. Padraig O'Connor was in charge of the section. Any orders for his section were given to him by the O/C of the Active Service Unit. Prior to any engagement taking place or in the case of an individual enemy agent being earmarked for elimination, it was usual for a number of the G.H.Q. Intelligence Staff to contact the section or sections and give full information regarding the job that was to be carried out. This happened more especially in the case of individuals who were to be executed on orders. The main idea was that the Intelligence officer would establish identity so as to prevent an execution of an innocent person.

On the 24th June, 1921, the section was detailed to take up positions in Grafton Street before 6 o'clock to wipe out any Tans or Auxiliaries who might be in Grafton Street in or around that time. The whole unit were in Grafton Street but Padraig O'Connor and myself were on patrol between Wicklow Street and Clarendon Street. As already stated, the task of the A.S.U. on this evening was to eliminate members of the Auxiliary and Black and Tan forces but, as a number of these would dress in civilian attire, we would not be in a position to identify them; consequently members of the G.H.Q. Intelligence staff were available to point out to the Active Service Unit Tans and Auxiliaries whom they would identify. Six o'clock was the zero hour and a minute or two to that hour O'Connor and I started moving up Grafton Street. Before we reached Anne Street we heard shooting at the top of Grafton Street and, by the time we had reached the end of our patrol, Grafton Street was completely cleared of people. So we then saw that there was nothing for us to do but to get away.

Two evenings later Padraig O'Connor selected a few of us and told me that we were being chosen to carry out an

execution of two Auxiliary officers who were staying at the Mayfair Hotel in Baggot Street. Six of us assembled at the Museum at about 3 p.m. No sooner had we assembled when Frank Saurin came along and I heard him say that the maid in the hotel to which we were going was friendly and would give us all the help we required, adding that the Auxiliaries were then in the hotel. We moved off straight away. The section leader and myself were the first to go to the door which was answered by the maid. We asked her what room the Auxiliaries were in and she told us the second room on the left where they were then having lunch. I asked her where the telephone was and she directed me to it, so I told a member of the section to dismantle it. The section leader and myself opened the door of the dining-room and fired at the two Auxiliaries seated at the table with their families, the section leader taking the left-hand man and I taking the man on the right. Both men collapsed on to the floor where they were then approached by the Section leader who searched them for any documents that may have been of use to us. I think their names were Hunt and White. On leaving the dining-room, I was about to re-load my gun and as two rounds had been extracted from it, I remained looking at the empty gun. On seeing me, the section leader said, "What are you going to do now?". I replied, "I am after losing two rounds of ammunition". So he asked did I want him to find them for me. I said, "I have only four left now if I lose these two". So he said that we'd have to lift the sideboard out from the wall to retrieve the two rounds, which we did. This incident may have saved us from walking into a trap for, as we left the hotel, two tenders had just passed in the direction of Stephen's Green. We walked out and down through the tram line in Holles Street and got back into College Green where we took a tram to O'Neill's of Francis Street where we

dumped our guns.

On the evening of the 30th June we were detailed to take up positions at Dolphin's Barn to ambush a private car returning with Auxiliaries from the Curragh. The time was 7 o'clock. Up to 8 o'clock there was no sign of the car but a short time later an alarm was given of the car's approach, and everyone got ready. When the signal was given again, it was the wrong car. At this time the people were leaving the church and, seeing what was happening, some of them stared but we remained in our positions. Nearing 9 o'clock the approach of the car was signalled when we opened fire as it passed. At this time the section leader got out on the centre of the road and emptied his parabellum at the flying car. Further down the road the grenade party of our section bombed the car and they were later complimented for it. Two of the occupants of the car were killed and two wounded.

Later a raid took place on the Metropolitan Laundry, Inchicore, to destroy material that was sent in there by the British for cleaning. The manager of this laundry cut across the fields to Richmond Barracks where he warned the military that we were raiding the place. His action resulted in four or five men of the section being caught in the laundry. That evening the Section O/C and myself decided that the manager, Bert Elliott, would have to be shot. As he played golf in Robinhood at that time, we went to that golf links. We only knew the man from a description that he had a limp or halt. We collected an individual who answered to this description and paraded him on the golf links to identify him before shooting him. However, a member of the club, whom we knew, informed us that Elliott was not in the club that night and that we had the wrong man. Later, it transpired that Elliott had gone

to Belfast and did not return until after the Truce.

The last engagement of the squad was carried out by No. 3 and No. 4 Sections on the Friday before the Truce. This was the ambushing of a military train at Ballyfermot Bridge. Positions were taken up on the bank of the railway line, twenty yards from the bridge. The Section O/C, Padraig O'Connor, and myself took our positions on the bridge. Jim McGuinness took up his position at the corner of the bridge with his Thompson gun. The remainder of the section took up positions on the bank of the railway line. When the train, which we were expecting, passed Inchicore, a signal was given and, when the train entered the tunnel at Ballyfermot, I poured the petrol on to the roof of the train. O'Connor then threw the lighted sacks on to the petrol-soaked roofs and McGuinness opened fire with the Thompson gun as the train emerged from the tunnel. The section on the bank opened fire with their revolvers. By this time, the train was well ablaze. The grenade men then came into action. The casualties were heavy on the British that day.

This was a glorious send-off for the A.S.U. after a hard struggle against an enemy that was superior in strength and arms but not in courage. The Truce was declared the following Monday.

To the best of my recollection, I have recounted my experiences as far as major engagements were concerned while I served with the Active Service Unit. There were, however, many more engagements but, due to

circumstances and disappointments, they were never brought
to fulfilment.

SIGNED: W. J. Stace

DATE: 8th June 1951

WITNESS: William Ivmy Landt

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