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COSANTA.

BUREAU OF MILITARY HISTORY, 1913-21.

STATEMENT BY WITNESS

DOCUMENT NO. W.S. 526

Witness

Eugene Loughran,  
15 Railway Street,  
Armagh.

Identity.

Member of I.R.B., Armagh, 1916-1918;  
Member of Irish Volunteers, Armagh, 1918-1924;  
Battalion Engineer, Armagh Battalion, 1920.

Subject.

- (a) National activities, Co. Armagh, 1916-1924;
- (b) Escape of Austin Stack and P. Beasley from Strangeways Prison, Nov. 1919.

Conditions, if any, Stipulated by Witness.

Nil

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Form B.S.M. 2

Statement by Eugene Loughran,

15 Railway Street, Armagh.

I joined the Irish Republican Brotherhood in the winter of 1916. James McCullough was Centre of the Circle I joined. I remained in the I.R.B. up to 1918 when I joined the Irish Volunteers. When I joined the Volunteers I ceased being a member of the I.R.B. I joined the Volunteers with Frank Donnelly who was also an I.R.B. member. He ceased with the I.R.B. when he joined the Volunteers. The only activities I had whilst a member of the I.R.B. were attending Circle meetings.

When I joined the Volunteers, the Armagh Company had only about twenty members. Sean O'Reilly was then, I think, Company Captain. During 1918, 1919 and up to early 1920 our principal activities were drilling, training and procuring arms. I remember cycling to Belfast on several occasions where I got parcels of arms and ammunition which I obtained through Paddy McLogan who was then serving with the Belfast Volunteers. I was then working in a shop in Armagh which was run by the late Senator McLoughlin who was a leading member of the Ancient Order of Hibernians and held a J.P.-ship from the British Government. This man was one of the principal recruiting officers for the British Army in Armagh during the 1914-1918 war. When the South Armagh Election campaigning started in January 1918, I became very active in the weeks previous to the election in attending meetings and running with messages wherever I was asked to go. My employer disapproved of my political activities and we had some words over the matter and the result was that we parted company and I found myself without a job.

After the election, as I had no work, I had lots of time on my hands and I became very active for the Volunteers,

running dispatches and opening up new lines of communications. My chum at this time was a young fellow named Dan Nugent who was arrested for drilling Volunteers during the South Armagh Election and was sentenced to six months' imprisonment in Belfast gaol. After his release from Belfast, Nugent went to Liverpool to look for work and in 1919 I joined him there. Nugent and I lodged with Neil Kerr, Bootle, Liverpool. Neil Kerr was a native of Armagh and an old I.R.B. member. He was very active in I.R.A. and I.R.B. circles in Liverpool and in the north of England. One of Kerr's principal responsibilities in the military side of the Republican Movement was the collection, dumping and shipping of arms and munitions passing through Liverpool.

Nugent and I, whilst in Liverpool, were only working occasionally. Our principal occupation was the carrying of arms from a dump in Kerr's house to cross-Channel boats at Liverpool docks. When we had to take munitions to the boats we went down to the docks carrying kit bags and acting as drunken sailors looking for a berth on a boat. The kit bags were filled with munitions - small arms and on some occasions even rifles which had been loosed down. Our pose as seamen looking for work enabled us to get through the policemen at the dock gates. Young Tom Kerr came with us on the job of transporting munitions on most occasions.

As far as I then knew the work of transporting arms and the traffic in arms in Liverpool generally was carried out by the I.R.B. The local Company of Volunteers in Liverpool knew nothing of our activities. From what I remember of this work, I have an idea that a lot of the arms we carried to cross-Channel boats went to Cork City.

Whilst staying in Kerr's place, I met many of the Volunteer leaders there, including Michael Collins. In November, 1919, Nugent, young Tom Kerr and myself took part in the escape of prisoners from Strangeways prison, Manchester, where Austin Stack, Pearse Beasley and some others escaped.

A fortnight before this operation we paid a visit to the spot at which the escape was planned for and viewed the layout of the streets in the neighbourhood and decided on the route our line of retreat should take at the conclusion of the operation, where we would hand over our arms to the local Volunteers and any other matter that would be useful to know.

On the day of the escape I, with five or six others dressed and equipped as window-cleaners pushing a hand-cart on which was an extension ladder and a rope ladder, arrived at the appointed place outside the prison wall at 3 p.m. An arranged signal was given to us by those on the inside when the prisoners were ready for escape. The signal was a stone thrown across the wall from the inside. We then proceeded to throw the rope ladder across the wall and as it was a new rope it did not uncoil when thrown and fell back on our side. Young Tom Kerr then took charge and succeeded in putting the rope ladder across the top of the wall. We then fixed the extension ladder against the wall and as far as I remember it was Mick Collins, who was with us, went up this ladder. The rope ladder was fitted to the top of the wall and the prisoners started to come up the rope ladder and to come down on the extension ladder on the outside of the wall. Motor taxis were made available near the scene of the escape to convey the escaped prisoners to a place of

safety. Old Neil Kerr was in one of these taxis.

We left all our window-cleaning equipment at the prison wall as soon as the prisoners had got across, and we proceeded to a pre-arranged spot where we, who were armed, handed over our arms to a Manchester Volunteer who was there to receive them. I think this man was Paddy O'Donoghue, now the principal official of the Shelbourne Park Greyhound Racing Track in Dublin. Tomma Kerr and I took the train in Manchester for Liverpool and arrived there without further incident.

Whilst the ladders were on the wall and the prisoners coming across the wall we had to deal with the civilians who happened to be on the street in our vicinity. We held all persons up at the point of the gun and prevented them from interfering with the work or getting away to raise an alarm. I was in charge of this part of our plan and I must say I had little trouble. The surprise we caused and the speed with which we worked seemed to have flabbergasted the local onlookers. As we were leaving the spot we walked into a big policeman smoking a pipe near a police barrack, and he bade us a friendly good evening. This showed that our plans for surprise in the operation was a complete success. About a week later in Liverpool I met a few of the escaped prisoners and at this time the hunt for them had petered out.

I left Liverpool early in 1921 and returned to Armagh. On my return I again linked up with the Armagh Volunteers. I became attached to the Engineering Section and was appointed its Section Leader. We procured Engineering handbooks issued by G.H.Q. and from them studied military engineering practice. In 1921 when an Armagh City Battalion was formed I was appointed Battalion Engineering

Officer.

From my return from Liverpool our main activities in Armagh were drilling and training and the continuous cutting and trenching of roads and the breaking of telegraphic and telephonic communications by cutting overhead wires. On the engineering side we made concrete cases for land mines. We filled some of these cases with explosives and exploded them for test purposes. Living, as we were, amongst a hostile Unionist population in which the Volunteers were a small minority and in which all the young Unionists were members of the Special Constabulary and were very well armed, our scope for carrying out military operations on any ambitious scale was practically impossible. We could only attempt things within our capabilities to carry them out successfully.

In September, 1920, we carried out the general raid for arms. The party I was with raided about six houses all Unionist. We did not meet any opposition in any of the houses raided. I cannot now remember how much or what type of arms we got, but I know it was worth while to carry out the raid.

There was a detective officer in Armagh named McLean whose record was bad. We got orders from Dublin that this man was to be shot. McLean was in the habit of meeting trains at the railway station and on a few occasions we went to the station and waited for him to turn up. We never got a chance of shooting him. He left Armagh for Belfast before the Truce.

On the night of the attack on the house of B/Specials, Brothers Georges, in or about May 1921 - known generally

as Todd's Corner - about six others and myself visited another house in the same locality and raided it for arms. We found no arms in it. The two young men belonging to this house were members of the B/Specials who habitually kept their arms in their houses. They were not at home when we called. It subsequently turned out that they were in Georges' house along with the Georges and other local B/Specials who had been on patrol that night and called into Georges' house for refreshments on their way home. The Armagh Volunteers detailed to attack Georges' house when approaching near it were fired on. This shooting came as a big surprise to the party fired on as it was not anticipated that any of the Specials would be in the house as they should have been then out on patrol. In the shooting at Georges' house a Volunteer named Gerry Hughes was severely wounded in the legs and the men with him had to carry him out of the range of fire and get him to a Doctor at once as it was evident that his wounds were serious. He was got from the vicinity of the shooting and a Doctor procured to attend him. Some of this party of Volunteers remained on at Georges' house and engaged the occupants. The result of this engagement was that the house was set on fire and completely gutted. No arms were captured as the defenders of the house were about twelve B/Specials all armed with rifles and had plentiful supplies of ammunition to expend. On the attackers' side our strength in rifles were three or four. Other arms used by the Volunteers were shotguns and revolvers. Lacking the element of surprise which we hoped for we could not match their fire strength and had to retreat when the operation was some considerable time in progress as military reinforcements were liable to arrive from the military barracks in Armagh, three miles distant,

at any time. As a matter of fact the military did arrive at the scene of the operation a short time after we had retired.

Later on that morning an uncle of mine, John Loughran, was arrested at his house and taken to the military barracks in Armagh. He had given blankets that morning to wrap up Gerry Hughes after he was wounded and the military later found the blood-stained blankets in his house and arrested him. He was subsequently released. This was the last item of interest which I have to relate before the Truce on the 11th July, 1921.

About September, 1921, a number of other Armagh Battalion officers and myself attended a Divisional Training Camp at Killeavey, County Armagh. I spent two weeks at this Camp and later I spent two weeks at a battalion camp at Derrynoose. The instructions given at these training camps were of a general nature embracing the use and safe handling of the various weapons, open order drill, advancing and retreating under fire, attacking and defending positions and was designed to enable the officers participating to impart the instructions they received to the rank and file.

From the date of the Truce onwards into the year 1922 I was on full time I.R.A. duty. I travelled to each Company in the battalion and gave lectures and demonstrations on engineering, mines, explosives, etc.

In preparation for a general rising which was planned for the Six Counties' area, a lorry load of arms and ammunition was sent on to us. We took over this consignment in Newry and took the stuff on to the Sinn Fein Club in Armagh. I accompanied the lorry with the stuff from



Newry to Armagh. Later on a second consignment came to us from Dundalk and was dumped at Ballymacnab. We distributed all this stuff to every unit in the Brigade without the loss of a single round of ammunition. Some of the munitions I took into Armagh and handed over in Armagh to Derry officers and were conveyed to Derry safely.

The Rising in the Six Counties was planned for the end of May, 1922. About the last moment before the Rising was to have taken place we got orders that the whole undertaking had been cancelled. In some areas in the North a Rising took place. The British Authorities in the six northern counties carried out a big and widespread round-up all over their area about the last week in May, 1922, and hundreds of I.R.A. officers and men and others of known republican sympathies were arrested in each county. None of our officers or men was on the 'run' before this general round-up. During the rounding-<sup>ups,</sup> some of our officers and men got captured and as raiding and arresting was continued for those who had escaped capture all our active officers and men were ordered to go on the 'run' to evade capture. A camp for men on the 'run' was opened in North Monaghan at a place named Castleshane in an unused castle and farm buildings belonging to Colonel Lucas. About 120 men from our Brigade area went into this camp. The camp was run on strict military lines and an intensive course of military training was carried out. The idea behind this camp in County Monaghan and other 4th Northern Division camps established in County Louth area at this time was to train a large number of selected men which, it was hoped, could be used as attacking forces against the British Crown Forces then occupying Northern Ireland. At the end of May 1922 it was hoped that agreement could be reached between northern and southern republicans for a joint effort against our enemy in the North. The split in the Republican Forces in the South

was spreading as a result of disagreement on the question of the acceptance of the Treaty position, and as a result a gradual worsening of the republican position in the North became evident.

When the Civil War started at the end of June 1922, the 4th Northern Divisional Staff and almost all the Brigades in the Division including our (3rd) Brigade adopted a declared neutral attitude towards the contending parties in the Civil War. This attitude was understandable as our interest was mainly Six County interest and the position created by the Treaty did not appear to us to affect the Northern Counties where a British Government was actually functioning.

About the middle of July, 1922, Dan Hogan invaded the 4th Divisional area with pro-Treaty National Army troops and captured all our military posts in the town of Dundalk, including the Military Barracks and made prisoners of our Divisional O/C., General Frank Aiken, and a lot of his officers and men.

After the capture of Dundalk, as we were actually occupying a camp within the area of the 5th Northern Division in County Monaghan whose troops had attacked and captured our Divisional Headquarters, we were faced with a rather serious position. We still wanted to maintain our attitude of neutrality and in order to do so we dumped our arms and made our camp an unarmed one.

We were allowed to remain on in Castleshane in a position of depending on the tolerance of the officers Commanding the 5th Northern Division of the National Army until about mid-September, 1922, when we were rounded up and taken into a National/<sup>Army</sup>Barrack in Ballybay and after a

few days sent on to Newbridge Internment Camp in County Kildare. In October, 1922, I escaped from Newbridge with a number of others through a sewer and in the company of Frank Hannaway and Charles McGlennon, who had escaped with me, we made our way into Dublin City. We remained with friends of Hannaway for a few days and then one evening we went to Amiens Street Station to take a train for the North. We were picked out at the Station by National Army spotters and rearrested and again taken into internment - this time to Harepark Camp, the Curragh.

I was in Harepark Camp when the Hungerstrike in October, 1923, took place, and I spent fourteen days on Hunger Strike. I was released from Harepark in December, 1923.

Signed: E. Laughman

Date: 5<sup>th</sup> June 1951.

Witness: John McBoy  
5/6/51

