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COSANTA:

BUREAU OF MILITARY HISTORY, 1913-21:

STATEMENT BY WITNESS

DOCUMENT NO. W.S. 846

Witness

Dominic Doherty,
63 B. Great James' St.,
Derry City.

Identity.

Member of Fianna Eireann, Derry, 1910 - ;
Member of Irish Volunteers, Derry, 1914 - ;
Member of A.S.U. Derry, 1921.

Subject.

- (a) National activities, Derry, 1910-1921;
- (b) Escape of Frank Carty from Derry Prison,
2nd February, 1921.

Conditions, if any, Stipulated by Witness.

Nil

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ORIGINAL

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STATEMENT BY DOMINIC DOHERTY

No. 14 Eglinton Place, Derry City.

63B, Great James's ^{now} St., Derry City.

When I first joined the National Movement, as far back as 1910, I was about to leave the Christian Brothers Schools, Brow of the Hill, Derry. I first joined the Fianna under Joe Flanagan, our monitor. I remained with them back and forward until 1915. In that year I had the honour to meet The O'Rahilly at the Great Northern Railway Station in Derry. We, in the Fianna, formed part of an escort to the hall where he gave a lecture.

The National Volunteers, up to 1914 in Derry, were in a strong position. I always went to the drill hall for training until the split in the Volunteers occurred in 1914. The split in the Volunteers occurred as a result of the attitude John Redmond, who was then leader of the Irish Parliamentary Party, took with reference to the Great War which had only then broken out. The Redmond element in the Volunteers wanted to be associated with Britain's attempt to smash up their German enemies, which policy Mr. Redmond favoured. I then took the anti-Redmondite side. I still trained under old Cormac Cavanagh, R.I.P., and was taught how to handle the rifle, revolver and bomb.

During the Rising in 1916 some of the Derry City men were mobilised to stand by, but I happened not to be there because I got no notification of the mobilisation. After the Rising and up to the General Election of 1918, drilling and training by the Volunteers was carried out in Derry City. In those exercises I took an active part as I had done before 1916.

In the year 1918, when the anti-conscription campaign started, things were going well with the Volunteers and I was

getting all the knowledge I could on military affairs. Early in the year 1920, I took part in raids on Income Tax offices and raids for arms on some houses occupied by ex-British officers, and lots of other minor things were beginning to warm up about the middle of 1920.

Shooting in Derry - June 1920.

In June 1920, there was let loose a "hell" of a pogrom by the Orange element in Derry directed against their Catholic neighbours. This pogrom was supported by the British military forces who shot down on a Saturday night a large number of people of which fourteen died.

On the following Monday the I.R.A. took the field and they took possession of St. Columba's College as a military position.

This position in St. Columba's overlooked some of the enemies' strongholds and enabled us to beat them out of their strongholds with casualties, both dead and wounded, on the enemy side. It was a full week of heavy fighting with the honours going to the Derry City Battalion of the Irish Volunteers.

Coming to the end of 1920, I was with a party of Volunteers who raided a goods train at the Midland Railway for machine guns. We held up the whole station staff at the point of the gun and raided the wagons and stores. In our search we got no machine guns but we got machine gun parts which were of no use to us. The River Foyle being just alongside the railway track, we dumped all we could of the military stores in the wagons into the river.

I was on a raid at Howason's coal yard after that where British military were loading coal. It was thought that this raid would be a "safe cop" for obtaining 15 or 16 rifles belonging to the military working party, but something

happened in connection with that raid and it was called off. On another job we were to burn down a large house belonging to a Captain Allen. Twice this job was attempted and on the second occasion the house was partly damaged.

Rescue of Frank Carty from Derry Gaol.

In January 1921, I, with three other Volunteers, made an attempt to rescue Frank Carty from Derry Gaol. My comrades were Captain C. McGuinness, R.I.P., Bernard Doherty, R.I.P., and Joseph Sheehy. We took possession of a house in Harding St. where a middleaged woman lived with a girl. This woman's name was Mrs. Heaney. We left our headquarters on the night of the attempt and took possession of the house just before curfew time. Feelings in Derry from the time of the June riots were boiling. When we arrived at the Heaney house we informed the people of the house that we were coming to look after any person who was in danger of the curfew patrols or who were isolated in the Unionist quarter of the city. In this way we allayed their suspicions and began to talk to them in a friendly way. When it came to midnight we went to the back of the house to begin our part of the plans for the escape.

Curfew being on at this time Captain McGuinness's intentions were that, if all had gone well, I was to climb up the gaol wall at the rere of the house as Carty was in the gaol hospital suffering from a severe wound he received before his capture. McGuinness was equipped with an 'S' hook attached to a long rope. It was our job to get this 'S' hook attached to the top of the gaol wall to enable us to climb up the rope attached to the hook.

All the houses in the street were the property of loyalists except the house we were in and the house next door to it where a Mr. McCluskey lived. There might have been a few others in that street not actually hostile. In addition, to all the loyalists in the street, two or three members

of the R.I.C. resided there. We attempted to get the hook to catch on the coping of the highwall, but every attempt that was made was a failure as the hook failed to catch. We worked on this job until McGuinness called it off about three o'clock in the morning as our efforts proved abortive. We had to wait in the house until curfew was lifted about 5.30 a.m.

On the night of February 1921, we four, mentioned above, were called to a wellknown house in Derry - No. 4 Chamberlain St. - where we met some high ranking officers in the I.R.A. including our own O/C., Paddy Shiels. At this meeting we got instructions to get Carty out of prison at all costs. We were told that when Carty was captured he was carrying arms and that he was awaiting the sentence of death. Previous to this meeting those officers had made arrangements that hacksaw blades be sent into the prison to enable Carty from inside to saw through the bars of his cell window. There was also wax sent in to him to camouflage the cuts of the hacksaw. A ball of strong cord was also smuggled in through a man (warder) who was working in the prison. Carty got full explanations, on all the equipment I mentioned above, about our plans and his part in them.

On the night appointed for the escape the same four men I have mentioned above were mobilised to carry out the outside part of the plans. Before going on the operation our officers told us that we were making this second attempt at the rescue at the peril of our lives, and that if we were unwilling to carry it out we were to say so. Every man said he was willing to go through with it.

We had to leave before curfew again and this time we landed at the other end of the street at a house, the property of a man named McLaughlin. Before we arrived at McLaughlin's house some of our equipment had been delivered there.

We arrived at McLaughlin's before curfew and started work. McGuinness, being a seaman, was very handy with ropes; so, assisted by us, he got a lot of broom handles and sawed them into sections so as to make rungs for the ladder, and McGuinness laced the rungs to side ropes and made a perfect job of a very strong rope ladder.

Our next job was to get to Heaney's house which we had used before for the first attempt and must use again for this attempt as their back yard was just up against the gaol wall. We got all the ropes and the ladder carried from one end of the street to the other in our stocking soles, and when we got the length of Heaney's house it was closed against us and the people were gone. I expect they got scared from their experiences a few nights before when we spent the night with them.

In our dilemma of meeting a locked door our only alternative was to smash a window and shoot a bolt on the door, which we did, and went to the back with our "gear" and started on our part of the plans of the rescue. It was previously arranged that at a certain specified time Carty was to throw a ball of twine over from the hospital window where he was confined to us outside the prison walls.

The prison hospital was situated 10 or 15 feet from the top of the wall where McGuinness had posted himself. Each of us was in different yards from McGuinness covering the hospital. As I mentioned before, one of those backyards belonged to McCloskey's who were friendly, but did not know what was going on. The next two yards belonged to loyalists. As we were all in our stockings we made little noise. We were separated in this way in order to be sure that no matter what yard the cord was thrown into we would find it.

When the cord was actually thrown over, we had been standing on damp earth for a long time. We heard a faint whistle from within and we heard the cord coming over the wall. It was, however, pitch dark, so we had to search along the wall each man from where he was posted, and eventually the cord was found. A rope and then a rope ladder were tied on to the cord in a secure way and a slight tug on our part gave Carty the signal that all was well with us. Carty hauled up the rope and the ladder, as he had the bars of the window cut a few days before, and the cuts filled in with wax; all he had to do was to push out the bars and fasten the rope to some part of his cell equipment inside. We had been told, and we also knew, that when Carty got on the rope it would need all four of us to get on to the rope ladder which reached the top of the prison wall and put our weight on the ladder to prevent the rope and Carty dropping into the prison yard on the inside, the idea being that by keeping a pull on the rope to keep it taut, Carty could negotiate the ten or fifteen feet separating where he was, at the window inside, to the coping of the wall by going hand over hand along the rope.

If we made any slip on the outside by allowing the rope to get slack, Carty would have fallen about 25 feet into the prison yard, so we held on firmly to the ladder until Carty appeared on top of the prison wall. However, before Carty left his position inside the prison he made a bundle of some of his clothes and threw them across the prison wall. This bundle landed on our side of the wall on top of one of the corrugated roofs of an ash pit and what a noise it made in the silence of the night!

Carty came down the rope ladder on our side safely and, in his delight, he embraced every one of us. The time was about 4.45 a.m. on the morning of February 2nd 1921. After Carty

arrived in our midst we all went into the house with him and remained there quietly until curfew was lifted.

Just when we were on the point of leaving the house, we heard the tramp of marching men in the street. This sound naturally alarmed us as we imagined that the military authorities or the prison staff had noticed evidence of Carty's escape from the prison. However, we soon verified that the soldiers we heard marching were the troops coming off their curfew patrols.

Our instruction was that after the escape we were to hand Carty over to two Volunteers who were to take him to a safe house. When we got to the end of Harding Street, we found that the soldiers had gone down Abercorn Road, and we went up the same street. It was explained to us that in case of an alarm in the prison of the rescue or of the prisoner missing, we were to advance up Abercorn Road to Bishop Street and see that the road was clear. After we got through Bishop St. into Barry St. we went down into Long Tower St. and handed Frank Carty over into the custody of James Gallagher and Joseph McMahon, R.I.P., to be taken to a safe house in the city. Carty was got safely to the arranged house.

After that we got him on board a coal boat named The Carricklee. On this boat he was got across to Scotland.

I was in a few minor operations after that. On the 1st April 1921, there was a night of major operations by the Volunteers carried out in Derry City. James Taylor and I bombed a strong military post on the Strand Road, Derry, with heavy casualties on the British side. In preparation for this bombing we were called to headquarters on the night of April 1st, 1921. All the active men in the city were

present and we were separated into parties and each party went on a different job on that night. Taylor and I were issued with two Mills bombs each. We left headquarters all under the orders of the late James Keenan, who was then the quartermaster and issued the arms and bombs.

We made our way up to the Northland Road and we were wondering how we would get to our point in the Mental Hospital grounds on the Strand Road. We decided to enter the Mental Hospital grounds from the Lawrence Hill side of Northland Road.

We had to drop over a wall about 25 feet with a bomb in each pocket and then make our way down through the Mental Hospital grounds to where we could get a view of the military post on the Strand Road. When we arrived at the nearest point to the post, one of us had a peep over the wall towards the post and all the soldiers were standing in the road in a group, some a little scattered.

We got into a position on top of the hill. We pulled the pins from the grenades and dropped them amongst the soldiers on the road. There was a terrible explosion which shook that part of the city.

We made our way back from this point through an underground passage which led us clear on to the Northland Road again. We knew that there was a passage from the Mental Hospital to the doctor's house, but we were not sure whether the gate leading to this passage was closed or not. We got through without much difficulty.

Shortly after this a second flying column was founded in Derry City for service in Co. Donegal. I joined the column and went with them into Donegal where we had active service against British military, Black and Tans and R.I.C.

On 8th May 1921, I was arrested in Donegal. I was taken to the military barracks in Derry and interned in a detention hut along with a lot of Republican prisoners. Charlie McGuinness, who was our column leader in Donegal, was also picked up after I was captured and was lodged in the same detention hut with me. We were accompanied by Volunteer Reilly and both of them were captured at the same time in the possession of arms. McGuinness was wounded in a thigh at the time of his capture.

In that period McGuinness and Reilly were down for courtmartial as they were captured in possession of firearms and the result of the courtmartial would mean that they would be executed. It was arranged that by some means or another McGuinness and Reilly should be got out of prison, and I and another prisoner wanted to go out with them. The leader who was in charge of our place of detention told us that we would not be allowed out with them as our presence might spoil the whole attempt. This was a disappointment to us, but we were later able to do good work for the boys who did escape. Our part in this plan was to saw away a portion of the hut from inside. I and some of the boys got to work and the rest of the men in the hut kept up a chorus of singing to drown the sound of sawing an exit for the escape. Previous to this McGuinness had some visitors in and, with them, we arranged his line of escape and the assistance he would get from the leaders outside to help him in his getting away.

When our work on the inside was finished and McGuinness and his comrade ready to go, we pushed out the tin and wood we had sawn through in the hut. The exit we made was on the rere of the hut and McGuinness and his pal got out of the hut quietly. McGuinness was the first out and got over the wall surrounding the hut. When O'Reilly

attempted to climb the wall he fell back again into the prison yard. John Kennedy and I, who saw his inability to cross the wall, got hold of him by the legs and pulled him into the hut again before the sentry came round the hut, or he would have ^{been} riddled with bullets by the sentry.

McGuinness got clear away and O'Reilly was later sent to Petershead Prison in Scotland. The rest of us in that hut were interned in Ballykinlar Barracks.

We had a rough passage from when we left Eglinton Barracks in Derry on our journey to Ballykinlar Camp. When we arrived in Belfast we were beaten badly by a mob of loyalists; as we were all handcuffed under a strong military guard, we were not able to defend ourselves. We were taken to a military barracks in Belfast and a few days afterwards we arrived in Ballykinlar Camp in County Down. I was not long in this camp until a strike developed over parcels. This strike was fought under the careful leadership of Frank O'Duffy of Co. Monaghan, who was O/C. of the camp.

During this strike, when the military saw they could not defeat us or break us down, they threw all our beds and bedding into the compound. They had, however, to replace them in position again.

After the strike I witnessed the shooting of Tadhg Barry of Cork. This prisoner was shot down in the compound at a point where he was bidding some of his friends farewell who were leaving the camp on parole.

I saw a Volunteer named Con O'Hanavan, now a Superintendent in the Civic Guards, lifting Barry when he was shot, and I saw Father Burbage attending to him

administering the last rights of the Church. I later stood guard over his body in the wee chapel within the wires on the day he was being removed to his native district for burial; the whole camp was lined up and called to attention as his body was borne on the shoulders of his former comrades in arms, a bodyguard of prisoners left his remains to the station in County Down.

I was interned until the general armistice and was released, as far as I remember, on the 21st or 22nd December 1921.

Signed: *D Doherty*

(D. Doherty)

Date: *14/5/53*

14/5/53.

Witness: *John McCoy*

14/5/53

(John McCoy)

14/5/53.

