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BUREAU OF MILITARY HISTORY, 1913-21.

STATEMENT BY WITNESS

DOCUMENT NO. W.S. 847

Witness

Patrick O'Donoghue,
36 Herbert Park,
Dublin.

Identity.

Member of Sinn Fein, Manchester, 1908 - ;
O/C. Volunteer Companies, Manchester area.

Subject.

- (a) Irish national activities, Manchester, 1908-1922;
- (b) Escape of Irish Prisoners from
Lincoln Prison, 3/2/1919, and
Strangeways Prison, 25/10/1919.
- (c) Procurement of arms, Manchester area, and
their transfer to Ireland, 1919-1921.

Conditions, if any, Stipulated by Witness.

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ORIGINAL

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Statement of Patrick O'Donoghue,

36, Herbert Park, Dublin.

About the year 1908 I became acquainted with Andreas O'Brien who was Secretary of Sinn Fein, and as a result we formed a branch of Sinn Féin in Manchester at the time in Richardson Street. James Barrett became President of the branch and I was Secretary. I think our membership was approximately 40 strong. We had no active branch of the Volunteers attached to our Cumann. We ran a series of concerts and we collected funds for the Independence Movement at home. None of our members came to Dublin for the 1916 Rising. We did not even know it was coming off.

The first activity of importance with which I was connected was the escape from Lincoln gaol on the 3rd February 1919, of Eamon de Valera, Sean Milroy and Sean McGarry. Sometime prior to the escape a postcard was given to me by William McMahon who had received it from Fr. Kavanagh of Leeds. The blank space on the postcard contained the drawing of a key amongst other things. When I saw this postcard it struck me that it had something to do with an escape of prisoners from the gaol, as Father Kavanagh had told me that this postcard had been sent out from the gaol. I crossed to Dublin that evening and contacted Martin Conlan, who, in turn, made an appointment with Michael Collins. I saw Collins that night in Mrs. McGarry's house and I showed him the postcard. Both Collins and myself decided that the postcard was a code relating to

the proposed escape of prisoners from Lincoln. However, we had not enough information to formulate any definite plans although the full significance of the drawing of the key was now understood by all of us. So we were not able to make any definite plans for an escape without further information coming from inside the prison. A key was then made from the dimensions given on the postcard by Gerry Boland. This key was baked in a cake by Mrs. McGarry. I took this key with me to England enclosed in the cake and had it sent in to the prison as a gift to the prisoners.

The prisoners did not find ^{the key} satisfactory and I got a further message informing me of this fact. I got another key made by an ordinary local locksmith as if I wanted it for my own house. This key together with a file, was also baked in a cake in Manchester by a Mrs. O'Sullivan. The cake was taken to Lincoln by a Miss Talty, an Irish girl residing in Manchester, and was sent in to the prisoners. A few days later I got word from the prison that this key was satisfactory. Michael Collins sent over to Lincoln a man by the name of Frank Kelly who worked in Sinn Féin offices in Harcourt Street. This man had an English accent. In a letter smuggled out to me the prisoners had indicated that the most opportune time for an escape would be in the evening after tea. So Kelly was instructed to hang round the prison and was told to observe the movements of persons entering or leaving the prison by the particular gate which we had in mind for the escape of the prisoners. Sometime after Kelly arriving Collins himself came over

and I accompanied him to the vicinity of the prison. We walked round the precincts and had a good look at the escape gate selected, and Collins was quite satisfied with everything he saw. Before Collins going back to Dublin I was working out plans for the escape, such as the hiring of taxis and the positions they would take up, and where the prisoners would be taken to following the escape.

I gave details to Collins and he was quite satisfied. Collins now returned to Dublin. All that now remained was to fix a definite date. The fixing of the date was left to the prisoners themselves and we had not long to wait before a letter reached me giving the time and date that suited the prisoners. I sent a further message in signifying that we would be ready.

A few days before the date fixed for the escape Harry Boland and Michael Collins and Fintan Murphy came over from Dublin. I was not married then and I had a house to myself. As the Manager of Beecham's Opera Company was a friend of mine we went to an opera on the night before the proposed escape. After the opera we were invited to supper by Sir Thomas Beecham in the Midland Hotel. We were all naturally in very good form. I introduced Collins and Boland to Sir Thomas Beecham under their proper names and he expressed his delight at meeting prominent people interested in the Irish Independence Movement. I think this was on Friday night.

On Saturday afternoon the four of us - Collins, Boland, Murphy and myself - went to Lincoln. We left Fintan Murphy at Worksop with instructions to have a

car at his disposal about the time we would arrive there. Petrol restrictions were very severe at the time and we could not extend beyond Worksop on the first stage. Leaving Murphy behind, the three of us went to Lincoln and I engaged a car there. I had used the driver of this car on several occasions before and had become very friendly with him. I instructed the driver to remain with his car at a certain hotel on the verge of the town. I stayed with the driver and Collins and Boland left me and went to the gates of the gaol which was about a quarter of a mile distant. It was arranged beforehand that a flash lamp signal was to be given at a given time from the field in front of the gate at which the prisoners were to escape. If everything was in readiness an answering signal would be given from one of the top cells. Evidently everything went according to plan because in less than a half hour the three prisoners and Collins and Boland arrived at the hotel where the car was. The three prisoners and myself got into the car and went along to Worksop. Here we met Fintan Murphy with his car. I dismissed my driver and we walked a couple of hundred yards to the point where Fintan Murphy had his car. We got into the car and drove to Sheffield. When passing near the railway station at Worksop the driver started jibbing about going further because he would be disobeying petrol regulations and suggested that we should take the Sheffield train which was in at the station at the time. I tactfully explained to him that the train would not suit us as we had a call to make en route. So the driver accepted the position and continued his journey with us. We dismissed him at Sheffield and

Liam McMahon, who was also concerned with the escape, had a friend's car in an hotel nearby.

We then travelled on to O'Mahony's house in Manchester. I took Mr. de Valera to the house of a Father McMahon. The latter was a native of Tralee. Some ladies, among whom were Kathleen Talty and Mary Healy, took the other prisoners to friends' houses. De Valera stayed in Manchester for almost a week. I took him to Neil Kerr's house in Liverpool. Kerr made arrangements to take him to America with seamen friends who were members of the organisation. Sometime afterwards de Valera was anxious to see his wife. So she came along to Manchester as an ordinary passenger. We got her a passport and she went to America. I should mention here that it was not difficult to get a passport at the time. One only required the necessary forms to be signed by police officers, Justices of the Peace or Clergymen and these signatures were not difficult to obtain.

The other two prisoners came to Liverpool and were transferred to Ireland by Neil Kerr and Steve Lanigan. The latter had charge, as far as I know, of the Liverpool area.

Following the Lincoln escape, three Companies of the Volunteers were started immediately in Manchester and district. I was appointed to command all local activities there. I was assisted by Captain Jock McGolligy. Matthew Lawless was in charge of No. 1 Company and Captain Harding was O/C No. 2 Company.

The approximate strength of the three Companies was about 100. At that stage we did not hold any definite

weekly parades. Our sole purpose of organising into units was to collect arms and munitions.

There was an ordinary merchant ship calling at the ship canal in Manchester. She traded between Manchester and Dublin. Donoghue was the name of the skipper. He was a Dublin man. And the man in charge of the police in the Ship Canal was Detective Inspector Carroll who was a friend of mine. This made things very easy for us when getting arms on board the boat. The chief source of supply of arms was the purchase of them from soldiers except for some quantities that came from Glasgow where the I.R.A. there found difficulty in transferring them direct to Dublin. As the quantities of arms increased we secured a garage at the back of a Nursing Home. This we used for storing any arms that we had. A lorry could get into the garage and unload the stuff.

The type of arms we succeeded in procuring was mainly revolvers and revolver ammunition, rifles and rifle ammunition.

An old man by the name of Seamus Barrett, who was a member of a local I.R.A. Company, played a big part in securing this material from officers and ex-officers of the British Army. Barrett told them that if they had any guns to dispose of he would oblige them by buying them. In this way he was very successful and succeeded in getting a big number of revolvers. I had many a row with him as I thought the charges were sometimes too high. There could not have been much of a check by the British Army authorities on these guns judging by the rather easy way they could be disposed of.

At this time there were a number of prisoners in Strangeways gaol, Manchester, and I visited them regularly. The majority of my visits, however, were to Austin Stack who was then in charge. The prisoners' committee, composed mostly of Cumann na mBan girls, visited all the prisoners in turn. Suggestions for the escape of a number of prisoners were being considered for some time but nothing definite was done until Fionán Lynch came out of prison. He handed me a sketch that he had made of the prison compound, buildings, cells, etc. of all the inside positions of the prison. Anyway he told me that arrangements should be made for the escape of a number of prisoners from the gaol and that the prisoners themselves were quite satisfied that they could reach the outer wall in certain circumstances. These circumstances would involve the tying up of a warder who was in charge of them at a certain time in the evening. I examined the position outside the prison with Fionan Lynch and had a map smuggled in showing the outside of the prison. He went back to Dublin and saw Collins who came across to Manchester some time later. Collins and my wife visited Austin Stack in the gaol under an assumed name.

He was satisfied from the guarded conversation he had with Stack in the prison in the presence of the warder that there was a definite possibility of success. He then instructed me to go ahead with arrangements and that he would provide us with a rope ladder from Dublin and send over an expert at using one.

Rory O'Connor came to Manchester to take charge of arrangements. The prisoners were communicated with from

time to time under a devised code system which was used in letters in and out and safely got through the hands of the prison censor. Under this code Collins was referred to as "Angela" and I was referred to as "Maud".

The escape was first fixed for Saturday, 11th October, at 5 p.m. But due to the two men that came from Dublin with the rope ladder not reaching the appointed rendezvous in time it had to be postponed to a later date in the month, namely the 25th October. The men concerned were Christy O'Malley and Owen Cullen. The prisoners were notified by me of the change in date by a message that I smuggled in in a pot of jam.

On the evening of the 25th October, 1919, plans were completed and positions were taken up accordingly. A street running up at the back of the gaol had no houses. The gaol wall was on one side and a brick-stack on the other. As this street was more or less a public high-way we decided, while "operation escape" was taking place, that both ends of the street should be blocked and guarded by Volunteers. This meant that people wanting to enter it from either end were allowed to enter but not to go out and people who were in the street at the time the blockade was put into effect would have to remain there.

Matthew Lawless and another Volunteer were dressed as window-cleaners "innocently" moving around the area and ready to play their part when required. When everything was in readiness Rory O'Connor blew a whistle which was the pre-arranged signal and this signal was answered from inside by one of the prisoners. Almost

immediately a rope with a weight on it was thrown over the wall. The weight fell on the inside but it only brought the rope a few feet over the wall and dangled about 20 feet over the heads of the prisoners inside. The rope was pulled back and thrown again but with no better result. A third time it was thrown and this time we succeeded in getting it a couple of feet further but not sufficiently far down for the prisoners to grasp it. One of the party, Peadar Clancy - later murdered in Dublin Castle - ran an extension ladder that we had procured locally up against the wall and succeeded in putting the rope ladder within the grasp of the prisoners.

In this he was assisted by Mat Lawless and another Volunteer. When this was done Austin Stack was the first man to come over the wall in safety. Beaslai was next and he got stuck against the wall half way up because his other escaping comrades were trying to use the rope at the same time as he was endeavouring to make the ascent. It was then realised that only one man could climb the rope at a time, and the six men got safely over. Their names were J. Dolan, C. Connolly, P. McCarthy, P. Beaslai, Austin Stack and D.P. Walsh.

I arranged with the prisoners that in the event of any of them getting lost they should all meet at the Queen's statue in Piccadilly, Manchester. Four of the prisoners were put into a taxi which I had in readiness and two of them, Dolan and McCarthy, used bicycles. I accompanied these two but as the traffic was rather heavy we got separated and they got lost temporarily. So they found themselves in a strange city with nowhere to go. As they did not like asking questions they

found their way to St. Patrick's Catholic Church and considered that the best thing was to go to confession. They saw a priest but instead of making their confessions they told him of the difficult position they were in. The priest made contact with an Irish lady from Clare in the city. When they were introduced to this lady she took them to the house of a friend of hers living about six miles out in the suburbs at a place called Prestwich. When she knocked at the door she explained her position to the owner, a Mr. George Lodge, a young Irishman who was a chemist in the Imperial Chemical Company. Stack and Beaslai had already been taken to Mr. Lodge's house. And it was a very strange coincidence that this Clare lady should have unknowingly selected the same house for a safe refuge for the escaped prisoners - Dolan and McCarthy.

After a week's stay in Lodge's house, the prisoners were visited by Michael Collins from Dublin. Three days later Liam McMahon and myself and Lodge travelled by train to Liverpool with Beaslai and Stack. We all played cards on the way to avert suspicion and seemed a care-free, holiday party. At Liverpool we handed them over to Neil Kerr and Lannigan. I cannot say how the other four prisoners got away from Manchester.

Following the deliberate burnings by the Auxiliaries the Army Executive decided that the Volunteers in the English cities should adopt retaliatory measures in their areas. I was summoned to a meeting in Dublin at which Michael Collins was present. A general discussion took

place on the question of activities to be carried out in Manchester and other cities in England where Volunteer units existed. It was felt that the people in England should be made conscious of what the people in Ireland were suffering as regards deprivations carried out by the Crown Forces. And it was to be definitely understood that any burnings the I.R.A. might carry out in Manchester would not be solely for the purpose of reprisals but merely to bring home to the British people the sufferings and conditions to which the Irish people were being subjected by their police and soldiers here.

Two places were mentioned at the meeting where an attempt should be made to prevent their functioning in the ordinary way, namely the Electrical Power House and the Waterworks. I returned to Manchester accompanied by Mr. Cripps, a chemist who understood electrical construction and the Power House system. We succeeded in getting him to go through the Electrical Power House as a visitor. He reported that it was possible to put this plant out of action by the use of a certain amount of explosive material. At some later stage an attempt was made on the lines he planned. The attempt failed but the authorities realised what had happened. A number of Volunteers entered the Power Station one night and put a quantity of explosives beside the main transformer. It was ineffective but some of the purpose was served because all the Manchester newspapers the next day had the headings "Power Station attacked by I.R.A.".

Another attempt on the main Water Supply was made at Heaton Park. While a large hole was blown in the main

by the explosion, sufficient damage was not done to stop the complete flow of water and the city was not inconvenienced in any way as alternate supplies were available. It had a similar result on public opinion as in the case of the Power House. The press gave it wide publicity. And even though we had failed to put both places entirely out of action we were serving our purpose, namely to excite the sympathy of the English people.

At this time the Manchester Guardian was giving a lot of publicity to the Irish situation. C.P. Scott was the editor of the Guardian at the time, a very able literary journalist. He was sympathetic to the Irish Cause and made several attacks on the British Government for giving the British military and Auxiliaries such a free hand in Ireland for their blackguardly methods.

We had planned to burn warehouses in Manchester on the same night as they were burned in Liverpool, the 27th November, 1920. But the burnings in Manchester did not materialise on that night. It was felt that our units were not sufficiently organised to carry out the destruction of warehouses on a large scale. When our units were properly organised warehouses and haystacks in outlying districts were burned from time to time. The damage done from a financial point of view was considerable. I think it must have been in the neighbourhood of £600,000 for which the British Government had to pay the Insurance Companies concerned.

For a long time previous to these I.R.A. activities and afterwards the collection of arms was the main work of the Volunteers. These they purchased where they could and raided places for them etc. We had collected so much that it became impossible to store them in private houses. So I took a garage in a very quiet suburban district. This I used as a dump for storing the stuff and getting it ready for transporting whenever the opportunity arose on the boat "Eblana" trading between Manchester Ship Canal and Dublin. The Glasgow unit found difficulty in transferring their collection of arms to Dublin. So from time to time they brought down a lorry-load which we stored in this garage. The club in Erskine Street belonging to No. 2 Company was raided by police. Shots were exchanged between Volunteers and the Police and a boy named Morgan was killed. Following this there was a general round-up of all known people who were active or whom they thought were active in I.R.A. activities.

This No. 2 Company allowed a boy named Murphy to be a member without having sufficient recommendation for his admission as a member. He was only a member for a few weeks and happened to be in the club at the time of the raid. All these boys in the club were arrested including Murphy. Murphy, it appears, mentioned that I was in charge of the area and on that account I was visited at night and arrested. They searched the house but found nothing except a photograph of me which they published in the paper. The lady who owned the garage recognised me as the person she had let it to. She

reported the matter to the police. The garage was raided and a considerable quantity of rifles and thousands of rounds of ammunition were seized. About 20 of us were tried by ordinary Court. A man named McDonnell of London was defending me. We were two or three months awaiting trial. During the trial the Truce came. So we refused to plead after the Truce came into being. It was to come into effect at 12 o'clock in the day. We were in the Dock at the time and during the Court proceedings the Judge got a terrible shock when I called him to attention to salute the Truce. The Court continued to sit and we got sentenced to various terms of penal servitude ranging from three to fourteen years. I was sent to Dartmoor prison with some others. On going there we were segregated from the other Irish and prisoners who were sentenced in Ireland/sent to Dartmoor. After about a month we resisted and refused to obey regulations except we were treated as political prisoners. We were immediately put into solitary confinement and punishment cells for a week or two. Then we were separated into various other prisons. I went to Bristol first and was then transferred to Birmingham. Here I only knew one man named Charlie Somers. We were in gaol until January 1922. A general amnesty was granted to Irish prisoners after the Treaty was signed. But the British Government refused to extend the Amnesty to the Irishmen who were tried and sentenced in England. Collins refused to accept that and made representations to the head of the British Government that it was not in keeping with the terms and spirit of the Treaty to

have us detained any longer. So we were released early in January. But we were served with a document by the Home Office stating that we had lost our British citizenship on account of being sentenced for treason felony. We were then deported back home to Ireland.

Signed:

P. O'Donoghue
(P. O'Donoghue)

Date:

May 19th 1953

May 19th, 1953.

Witness:

W. Ivory Comdt.
(W. Ivory) Comd't.