

886 ORIGINAL

BUREAU OF MILITARY HISTORY 1913-21
BUIRO STAIRÉ MILEATA 1913-21
No. W.S. 886

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BUREAU OF MILITARY HISTORY, 1913-21

STATEMENT BY WITNESS.

DOCUMENT NO. W.S. 886

Witness

Michael William O'Reilly, F.C.I.I., P.C.,
59 Ailesbury Road,
Dublin.

Identity.

Member of I.R.B., Dublin, 1911 - ;
Member of 'F' Coy. 2nd Batt'n. Dublin Brigade,
1913 - ;
Captain and later Deputy Adjutant Irish Vol's.

Subject.

G.P.O. area, Dublin, Easter Week 1916,
and his imprisonment later.

Conditions, if any, Stipulated by Witness.

Nil

File No. S.94 ..

Form B S M 2

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STATEMENT BY MICHAEL WILLIAM O'REILLY, F.C.I.I., P.C.,
Managing Director, New Ireland Assurance Company,
12 Dawson Street, Dublin.

Residing at 59 Ailesbury Road, Dublin.

I, Michael William O'Reilly, born on the 11th December, 1889, at Stillorgan, Co. Dublin, started school at Mount Anville National Schools, and subsequently transferred to the Stillorgan National Schools where I continued until I passed out of sixth standard and then went to the Christian Brothers, St. Eblana's School, Dunlaoghaire, for a comparatively short session, leaving as a result of an eye accident which necessitated my removal to Hospital where I was treated by the famous Eye Specialists, Doctors Maxwell and Mooney.

Apprenticed to the Grocery and Provision Trade with the firm of Messrs. Bewley, Sons & Company, Ltd., in their Branch premises at Blackrock, and after serving there for sometime was transferred to their Henry Street premises, and I subsequently returned home to assist my parents in a small shop that they were running at Stillorgan. While there during this period I contacted a Mr. J.F. O'Kelly, who was then the Superintendent for the Prudential Assurance Company Ltd., in the Dúnlaoghaire-Blackrock Districts, and he suggested to me the advisability of taking up Insurance as a career. Meanwhile, my late Manager at Bewley's in Blackrock offered me a position in the business which he had opened for himself at Brighton Square, Teremure, which offer I accepted and remained with him for approximately twelve months when my old friend, Mr. O'Kelly, again came on the scene and

informed me that there was an Agency vacant in the Dalkey District and that, if I should apply for it, he thought there would be little difficulty in my securing the appointment. I accordingly applied and in June of 1910 I had my first introduction into the Life Insurance business.

My principal hobby during those years that I referred to was reading and, under the influence of my Mother, my readings included a considerable amount of Irish History and in particular the events relating to the period from 1847 up to 1900, as a consequence of which I tended towards developing a nationalistic outlook and in 1910 I was easily persuaded to join the Thomas Davis Amateur Theatrical Society which was established in Blackrock and was used largely as a cover for a Recruiting School by the local Circle of the I.R.B., into which organisation I was sworn in or around the Spring of 1911, shortly after I had been married, which event took place on 25th January, 1911, at Blackrock Church.

My progress as an Agent was steady and I impressed my Superiors sufficiently to obtain their good offices in securing promotion to the position of Assistant Superintendent in the Company's services in the Clontarf District, which event took place about a fortnight after the Bloody Sunday of 1913, and as my District covered portion of the North Wall, Talbot Street, Marlboro' Street, Summer Hill, etc., I had ample opportunities of going around with my Agents and seeing the damage which had been done by the Police Force during the general strike of that year.

My transfer to Dublin also necessitated my transfer from the Dúnlaoghaire Circle of the I.R.B., and I was duly notified that I was posted to a Circle which met in

Parnell Square under the late Tom Hunter.

In November of 1913 we were all duly mobilised to attend the Public Meeting at the Rotunda organised by Mr. Owen MacNeill and all those others then associated with him for the purpose of bringing into existence the Irish Volunteers. Naturally at the conclusion of the meeting I handed in my name and was duly notified that I had been posted to B. Company, Second Battalion, and our first public meeting was held in the Richmond Hall, Richmond Road, Fairview, where the Company was duly formed and Tom Hunter in due course was elected Captain. Subsequently, Mr. Connaughten and myself were elected Lieutenants and, as the Company grew, it was decided to divide it and to form F. Company of the Second Battalion, which Company was transferred to the Fr. Mathew Park, and I as First Lieutenant was transferred with it and Mr. Connaughten also. In due course I was elected Captain and remained so until early 1916 when I was transferred to Headquarters as Deputy Adjutant of the Dublin Brigade.

After the outbreak of the 1914-1918 war when Mr. John Redmond advocated the recruitment for the British Army, the split inevitably came between those of us who disagreed with that policy and the balance of our colleagues. My Company, F. Company, Second Battalion, was badly depleted by the defection of those of our colleagues who decided to join the Irish National Volunteers, the body which had been formed under the aegis of Mr. John Redmond and his friends. Nevertheless, in the course of time between then and 1916 we recruited steadily so much so that we were able to form out of F. Company another Company known as E. Company, Second Battalion, of which incidentally Tom Weafer was Captain and Oscar Traynor an Officer.

Training was continued intensively and a substantial Company turned out to march to Howth for the Gun Running and, as the events of that day are well known, it is sufficient to record that, acting on orders, we dismissed the Company at Malahide Road and cut across the fields through Croydon Park and, again acting on orders, left our rifles in Croydon House. Subsequently, however, that evening I was contacted by other Officers, including Tom Hunter, who advised that I should go back and secure my rifle and bring it home, which order I accordingly carried out concealing the rifle under my armpit and trousers.

The events of Bachelors Walk brought recruits pouring into the Volunteers and we were kept extremely busy getting our new men into check.

As Deputy Adjutant of the Dublin Brigade I was brought into much closer touch with the Head Office at No.2 Dawson Street where I met innumerable people, particularly a number of the Irish boys who had returned from England consequent upon the introduction of conscription there, among whom was Patrick Shortis. I was able to accommodate him between then and his going out on Easter Monday, 1916. During the week prior to 1916 I was mainly engaged in lining up transport for F. Company and all was arranged for them to turn up on Easter Sunday in accordance with the mobilisation orders which had been issued for that day. On Easter Sunday morning a knock came to my door and, on opening it, I found a very young, active and intelligent looking person outside to enquire if I was Captain O'Reilly, and on being so informed he delivered to me a message from Sean MacDermott that the mobilisation for that afternoon had been called off, but I was to stand to as other directions might be issued during the day. I consequently remained at home

all Easter Sunday and devoted myself very largely to some office work which had been neglected during the previous few days. In the evening of Easter Sunday, I had a visit from, among others, Captain Tom Hunter, who advised me that the Supreme Council was still in session and he expected that a statement would be issued within a few hours. Nothing occurred, however, and I went to bed and the following morning I was knocked up and ordered to report to Commandant Joseph Mary Plunkett in a Nursing Home in Mountjoy Square with full kit and iron rations, and so, having bade my wife and children (four) goodbye, I cycled up to Mountjoy Square and located the Nursing Home in which Commandant Plunkett was then staying, not actually by reason of illness but as a hide-out. Having reported to the Commandant, he informed me that I was attached to his personal staff as Aide-de-Camp and I would accompany him to carry out such instructions or orders as he would deliver, and in due course we proceeded to Liberty Hall where he went along to a meeting which was being held between Connolly, Pearse, MacDermott and others, and I waited outside where I noticed particularly the intense air of activity with which boxes, parcels, etc., were being moved from one place to another and ultimately being transferred to waiting transport outside. It was now about twenty minutes to twelve and, as I looked out on the busy Quay in Beresford Place, I noticed a touring car pulling up, out of which stepped the O'Rahilly, who went into Liberty Hall and joined the other Leaders who were in Conference. About a quarter to twelve they all emerged and the various Companies of both Volunteers and Citizen Army were duly formed up and the column was headed by a Company of the Citizen Army, followed by Volunteers brought from various Companies, at the head of which Commandant

Plunkett and myself were placed, and at about five minutes to twelve, the order to march was given. We faced south, turned into Eden Quay and got the order to turn right in O'Connell Street, and as we came right opposite the Post Office at precisely twelve o'clock, the order to halt was given, accompanied by the order to charge which was immediately taken up by the leading column who rushed into the Post Office and took up positions which had in some measure been previously allotted to them.

The Post Office was occupied with comparative ease, there was very little shooting and, beyond a nasty gash which I got in my right wrist when smashing through the glass of the door leading to the back of the counter, I escaped unhurt. Having occupied the Post Office, we proceeded to sand bag the windows, doors, and mount the necessary Guards. During the process of this work, the British mounted troops charged O'Connell Street and they were met by a fusillade of bullets from the Post Office. Immediately they retired a small party was rushed out to blockade Abbey Street and, as a consequence, the Newspapers Stores, "The Irish Times", which was then situated in Abbey Street, somewhere around Wynn's Hotel, was raided and the paper reels were found extremely useful for the work in hand. Captain McGarry had, meanwhile, taken over the Radio Transmitting Station which was then over the D.B.C. premises in Lower O'Connell Street, now occupied, I think, by the Hibernian Bank. My next sortie from the Post Office was to the Headquarters of the National Volunteers in Parnell Street where we were advised that there were both small arms and ammunition and, while we did not discover very many small arms, we did succeed in locating quite a number of cases of Point 22 ammunition which was duly loaded on our

vehicles and transported back to the Post Office, and so Monday, Tuesday and Wednesday passed over, everybody being engaged in some manner or means, either in making home made bombs or filling more sand bags, securing water or many other things that such a situation demands, and then the first big blow fell upon us, the wounding of Commandant James Connolly.

Others also had been wounded and, as a consequence, instructions were given to break through the adjoining walls down to the Theatre which was then known as the La Scala occupying a site which is now held by Woolworths. This breaking through took considerable time but ultimately we succeeded in getting through to the Dress Circle of the Theatre where a First-Aid Station was duly set up with the aid of our medical help and the Cumann na mBan, and in this connection Dr. Jim Ryan, the present Minister for Health, was of considerable assistance. On the Thursday I was informed that a visitor wanted to see me and, when I came down at the side gates opening into Princes Street, I found that my visitor was none other than my Mother who had walked in from Stillorgan to ascertain what the position was and to find out if there was anything she could do, and she told me that she hoped to be able to go down and see her niece who was then residing in Fairview. On hearing this, I remembered that Pat McCrea had told me that he unfortunately had left some ammunition at his residence in Clontarf and, when I mentioned this matter to my Mother, she said she would make her way to Clontarf and try and pick it up, and much to my surprise in about three or four hours later I was again called to the side door and my Mother duly presented whatever ammunition she had been able to secure and carry with her, having incidentally passed through a British Military Guard on Annesley Bridge. Having left the ammunition with me,

she bade me goodbye and walked back home to Stillorgan. She would then have been in or about her sixtieth year.

Things then began to warm up and the next thing we found that Clery's was ablaze and, as the heat grew, there was considerable excitement at the Post Office, and water and still more water had to be brought to cool the sand bags in the windows. In addition to this, we had been already advised that the Fairview Companies, which had been holding the Ballybough-North Strand line, had fallen back into Marlboro' Street and that some of them had occupied the Imperial Hotel which was situated over Clery's, and a number of sorties were made with a view to try and secure relief for them and, in fact, some of them did, I believe, get back to the Post Office. However, our own turn was not far behind and on Friday morning an incendiary shell struck the roof of the Post Office and penetrated into the telephonic rooms, gradually burning itself down through the shafts into the main building and, despite all our efforts with the hose which was played on the burning building and helped by the last group who were then at the back of the Post Office, our efforts were unavailing and we were mobilised and, with Frank Henderson, myself and others, were sent down to the First Aid Station to bring back as many of the wounded as possible, and when we arrived back with the wounded, dusk had fallen and we were informed that the Post Office had been vacated and new positions had been taken up in Henry Place and Moore Street. We got across to Moore Street as quickly as we could, bringing our wounded men with us, and just got to the corner of Moore Lane where a barrage of machine gun fire was playing on the brick wall on the south side of Henry Place, past which we had to get in order to make our way into Moore Street. Unfortunately, during a slight lull, a loose

brick falling struck me on the knee, but we succeeded in getting into a cottage just on the corner of Moore Street where Dr. Ryan had already set up his quarters and, having bandaged my knee, he ordered me to rest and I found the soft feather bed into which I threw myself and had my first sleep for several days.

The following morning, Saturday, having washed, shaved and breakfasted, I had my full kit including shaving outfit, and I made my way through the houses of Moore Street down to the Headquarters Staff. By this time we were completely cut off from other units, and the British Military held Britain Street, as it was then known, and right down to Capel Street and back up to Summerhill and were keeping up constant bursts of machine gun fire. It soon became evident that our position was somewhat hopeless, and Cumann na mBan was called upon to supply the messenger to go to British Military Headquarters, which I understand was situated in the Rotunda. Shortly afterwards the question was asked if anybody had a razor and I immediately produced my safety razor outfit which was used in turn by the two Pearse's, Connolly, MacDermott and Plunkett. After some going backwards and forward Commandant Plunkett informed me that I was to proceed out to Moore Street carrying a White Flag, and, as I popped out of the door, I was immediately met by a burst of rifle and machine gun fire but fortunately I was able to jump back and take cover, meanwhile holding out my White Flag which had the effect of drawing a British Sergeant up to enquire what the idea was and, on being informed, he expressed his ignorance for any truce. He was then shortly afterwards joined by an Officer who instructed him that the matter was in order, and, on being told that we were filing our men out, he told me that I should also go

across the street through Riddle Row and pick up some snipers who were there and giving them quite a lot of trouble. This I duly did accompanied by him and, as we picked up a number of men, including one, Mr. Breen, who had been a Volunteer in my Company, he was violently abused by the Sergeant for alleged continuous sniping at him during the night.

I overcame that difficulty and, when I got back from Riddle Row, most of our troops were formed up in Moore Street facing south, and Commandant Plunkett and myself took the head of the column and were ordered to march into Henry Street turning left, and at the top of Henry Street, thinking that the surrender would take place at O'Connell Bridge, I turned right and, after a good deal of excitement, the turn right was rectified and we were marched up to the Parnell Monument, halted and ordered to lay down our arms, etc., and in my kit bag was my safety razor, the loss of which has been one of my greatest regrets. I was standing only a short time at the head of a long line of prisoners when the British Commander-in-Chief came over to me to interrogate or perhaps question me. He informed me of the arrest of Casement and the attempted landing at Kerry, of which I did not at that time know, and generally suggested that we had been out to help the Germans which I stoutly denied. He acted a perfect gentleman and, when all our arms and ammunition had been taken from us, we were marched across Parnell Street into the grass plot in front of the Rotunda Hospital upon which we were permitted to recline and where I remember partaking of a raw Oxo cube and giving one to Willie Pearse at the same time. The night passed and in the morning we were called early, duly formed up and marched up to Thomas Street to the Richmond Barracks. I remember Thomas Street particularly by reason of the barrage of

abuse which we got from the female residents of that quarter, most of whom we assumed were the wives of soldiers serving in the British Army. In Richmond Barracks our names and addresses were duly taken and, while we were in the gymnasium, I confided to my friend, Breen, that I had a steel jacket which had been given to me by Seán MacDermott and he advised that I should get that off as quickly as possible, and after gathering a small group around me, I succeeded in getting out of the steel jacket which I duly deposited in the middle of the floor, but there was much consternation when a British soldier espied it on the floor, and enquiry was immediately set on foot as to who had left it there but nobody knew.

I was passed through the Detective Screening Squad and transferred to another portion of the Barracks where we were kept until almost nightfall. We were then served out with hard biscuits and a tin of beef, and just as it got dusk, we were ordered out into the Square and formed up. All sorts of wild rumours circulated through the ranks as to what our destination was, but they were soon set at rest when we were marched out from the Barracks and back down through the deserted streets in the City on our way to the North Wall. I remembered distinctly the eerie graveyard feeling which that walk, or rather the march through the City, created. Apparently curfew had been enforced as there was a deathlike silence in every street that you passed through, even the seagulls on the Liffey appeared to have sensed it and held their peace. We arrived at the North Wall and were quickly aboard the steamer, and I found myself located in one of the holds very close to a hot water or steam pipe which at times made the journey unpleasantly hot, but which, nevertheless, I was thankful for when I was awakened shortly before our arrival at Holyhead.

Aboard the train at Holyhead it fell to my lot to be transferred to Knutsford Jail which is situated some distance outside Manchester, pleasantly situated if one could so describe a Jail. It is just immediately outside the Railway Station and we had no sooner crossed the Railway Bridge when we saw the gates of the jail opening wide to receive us. Here again our names and addresses were taken and we were posted to our separate cells where we were kept in solitary confinement for a matter of about two weeks, except for parade each morning for an exercise around the Prison Yard, silence also being imposed there, but I was suddenly called out of the ranks and accused of talking and got a serious warning. After some days at Knutsford, the Sergeant in charge of the wing appeared to be attracted by some of the Irish prisoners and he made frequent visits to my cell. His most cheery opening when he entered the cell during the earlier days was to tell me that "another of your blokes was shot this morning". This news I received quite calmly because frankly I did not believe him, but unfortunately, I was to learn how true it was at a later stage.

During this period of solitary confinement, time passed monotonously slow and I remember one morning after breakfast was served, which breakfast incidentally consisted of a small plate of thin oatenmeal porridge, a mug of tea, a small piece of bread and a patty of margarine. It was a beautiful May morning and the sun was shining brilliantly outside when, in order to while away the time, I brought my small stool to the window so as to enjoy in some measure the beauty of the sun outside, but within a few seconds there was loud rattling at the door and, in less than a minute, the door was opened and I was taken out and brought down to the basement cells on the ridiculous charge of signalling

to the wing opposite. This was about 7.45, and at eleven o'clock, after meanwhile being strongly pressed by one of the British soldier prisoners, some of whom were also interned there, to give him my Rosary Beads or even a button off my officer's uniform, all of which I resolutely refused, I was brought before the Governor of the prison and duly charged, a charge which I denied, but the Governor found me guilty and sentenced me to three hours which I had already served, and consequently I was returned to my own cell. Shortly afterwards I was again brought before the Governor, this time to be informed that a parcel of food had arrived for me, but that prison regulations did not permit either letters or food parcels to be passed on to prisoners, but as the parcel was possibly sent in ignorance on this occasion, I would be permitted to take it, as otherwise it would probably go bad.

In due course the conditions under which we were confined were raised in the British House of Commons, as a consequence of which we had a visit one Sunday from Mr. Alfred Byrne, M.P., and on his arrival, all the prisoners were allowed free movement in the large yard of the prison, and shortly afterwards we were informed that letters and parcels would be permitted as well as visitors. To my surprise, I was again called down to the Governor's office and informed that, since they had no means of dealing with letters and parcels, we would have to set up a post office or sorting office of our own, and he was placing me in charge. I could pick whatever assistance or assistants I needed, and my choice immediately fell upon Volunteer Conroy who had on a previous Saturday morning manfully come to my assistance and aid when I was being ordered to wash out the floor of my cell, which I regarded as an indignity offered to an Officer of the Irish Army, and as he persisted and was going

to call in more of the guards, I capitulated on the plea that I would do it under protest, to which he replied that, in so far as he was concerned, I could do it on my so-and-so knees. Our cell doors were open and the noise of our altercation was heard in the next door cell which was occupied by Volunteer Conroy, who came to know what it was all about and immediately took over the job, saying, "Captain, I shall wash out your cell!".

The admission of letters and parcels and the granting of facilities to visitors meant considerable freedom of action in so far as the prisoners were concerned, and our cell doors were left open from breakfast time until after supper, and considerable freedom of movement was availed of. On Sundays we would be inundated with visitors, mostly from Manchester, bringing parcels, messages, tinned fruits and tinned meat, all of which was shared around, and in due course I had a visit from my wife and my mother, and they stayed for a few days at Knutsford in a little café in the town which was run apparently by a kindly soul, because one day my wife came in with a parcel and said to me that she wanted me to take this parcel, change into the suit that was in it, and let her take home my uniform, a suggestion which, of course, I did not entertain for a moment, and she was much crestfallen when she had to take the suit which her kindly landlord had loaned her. Their visit coincided with the sinking of the ship which was carrying Lord Kitchener to Russia and there were few, if any, mourners to be found among the prisoners when the news was announced. My mother, I think, took particular delight in this news, but my wife, being somewhat more reserved, considered this slightly unseemly. My mother, however, had a long memory and she recalled the 'exploits' of Kitchener when he dealt with the Dervishes in the Sudan.

Staying in the restaurant in Knutsford was the Sergeant of my wing, Sergeant Allen, who claimed to be related to Allen of Allen, Larkin and O'Brien, and he appeared to take particular pride in telling my wife and my mother of how calmly I took the news which he gave of the shootings in Arbour Hill and Kilmainham, and I think it was at his instigation that the suit of clothes was sent in, as apparently he had heard rumours that those who were in uniform would have to change out of it. Time went on and my duties as postmaster of Knutsford brought me into contact with almost all the prisoners and I became consequently quite well known to them; hence on our arrival at the North Camp, Frongoch, to which we were being transferred, it was perhaps not surprising that the first contingent that arrived selected me as Camp Commandant, there being an arrangement with the British military that the internal affairs of the Camp would be managed by the prisoners themselves, that is to say, they would be responsible for the kitchen, cooking and serving of meals and the general cleanliness and upkeep of the Camp, including the fifty or sixty huts which we ultimately occupied. When we arrived at Frongoch, we found a series of wooden huts almost smothered in overgrown grass, but after a very short time the grass was trampled down and, as it appeared to be a somewhat rainy area, the trampled grass soon became replaced with soft mud.

The routine of the day was breakfast at 8 o'clock followed by approximately an hour's recreation when the entire camp then formed up in a field situated between the South Camp and the North Camp, the latter of which we were in, and were put through certain military movements. In fact, full advantage was availed of the opportunity for keeping our Companies and Battalions well drilled and disciplined, and

each morning the Camp Commandant, accompanied by his Adjutant, would inspect the men while on parade. As the rain persisted and the mud became more difficult, volunteers were called for to form what was known as an R.E. Party which would immediately proceed to make suitable pathways around the camp, and pay would be at the rate of 1½d. per hour. The required number of volunteers were found and they continued their work until the pathway was more than half-way finished when one evening after meal, I was called on to attend a meeting which was being held in the hut occupied by Mr. William O'Brien. When I arrived I found that the meeting of the R.E. Party had been gathered together and I was informed that they were dissatisfied with the conditions under which they were operating, and they proposed not to report for duty the following morning. While I was disappointed that the work was going to be stopped, I nevertheless realised I could not order them to carry on.

SIGNED:

M. W. O'Reilly
(M. W. O'Reilly)

DATE:

17. 8. 53
17.8.53.

WITNESS:

S. Whelan
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