

W.S. 922

ORIGINAL

BUREAU OF MILITARY HISTORY 1913-21
BURO STAIRE MILEATA 1913-21
No. W.S. 922

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BUREAU OF MILITARY HISTORY, 1913-21.

STATEMENT BY WITNESS.

DOCUMENT NO. W.S. 922

Witness

James W. Cunningham,
Carrick,
Co. Donegal.

Identity.

Member of I.R.B. Glasgow, 1918 - ;

Officer in charge of purchase of munitions
in Birmingham for I.R.A., 1920 - .

Subject.

Collection of munitions, Birmingham,
and their shipment to Ireland, 1920 -

Conditions, if any, Stipulated by Witness.

Nil

File No. S. 1643

ORIGINAL

BUREAU OF MILITARY HISTORY 1913-21

BURO STAIRE MILEATA 1913-21

I.C. W.S. 922

STATEMENT BY Mr. JAMES CUNNINGHAM,

Contractor, Carrick, County Donegal.

A FEW NOTES REGARDING ACTIVITIES IN BIRMINGHAM IN 1920-22, AS JOTTED DOWN, WHICH MIGHT BE OF HELP TO ENLARGE ON OR AUGMENT THE AMOUNT OF DATA AVAILABLE ABOUT THE ACTIVITIES OF THE I.R.B. and I.R.A. IN ENGLAND, DURING THE YEARS PRECEDING THE TRUCE, DURING THE TRUCE AND AFTER THE SETTING UP OF OUR NATIONAL GOVERNMENT.

I, James Cunningham, a joiner, found myself working on a housing scheme in West Bromich, early in 1920, in company with a number of other joiners of Irish extraction. We, most of us, had been connected with the Volunteer movement at home. I myself, had joined the I.R.B. movement in Glasgow in 1918 but through economic circumstances found myself in Britain. Naturally conditions at home were the topic of conversation night and day, so eventually we formed a company of the Volunteers in Birmingham and elected the following officers: P.O'Neill, Armagh, J. O'Brien, Limerick, and myself.

Our main object was to get arms and send them home. To do so we had to contribute money ourselves, make money collections among our friends and run dances, lotteries, etc. to raise funds. We were fortunate here in having a branch of the Irish Self Determination League active in Birmingham. We also had an Irish Institute, a meeting room where the scattered Irish of Birmingham could meet on Sunday evenings. Birmingham was not then by any means the Irish city it is today. The Irish colony was scattered all over the sprawling city, so that a meeting place where they could gather was a God-send to them, like "The Highland Man's Umbrella" in Glasgow.

Our activities met with a fair amount of success. When the Dublin 3rd Battalion got to hear about it they sent over their Quartermaster (the late ^{Captain Leo} ~~Colonel~~ Duffy of Monaghan) to investigate. He made contact with O'Brien, O'Neill and myself and we fixed up a suitable tunnel for the "stuff" to go through. Possibly it is hard to believe but the parcel post was our main channel and some of the big drapery houses in Dublin were at the receiving end. Houses like Ferrier & Pollocks, Todd Burns and Arnotts acted unknowingly as our receiving depots. This method of sending "stuff" was, I think, a novel one but great care had to be exercised at our end as several parcels were going over weekly and we had to be very careful in choosing our despatch post office in case some of our men were recognised. We sent parcels from as far out of Birmingham as Lichfield, Stafford, Sutton, Colfield, etc. The amount we were sending home (small as it naturally was, due to various reasons, principally lack of finance and, of course, the limited method of dispatch) must have had its effect as we had an urgent message to send a representative to Dublin to discuss the possibility of developing Birmingham on a bigger scale.

I must divert here to tell of a parcel which I sent to a Road Contractor friend of mine in Donegal. He was engaged on a fairly big job (several miles of road to be coated with broken stone) but he could get no explosives. He approached me on the matter and I foolishly agreed to send him some high explosives with detonators, etc. I got together a parcel and went to the Post Office myself, but when it was weighed, it was a pound over the limit allowed. The clerk kindly suggested that I make two parcels of it and cleared a desk for me to do so. But needless to say I did not avail of his offer. Neither did I go back to the same Post Office with the parcel when I got it suitably lightened. I remember the relief I felt when I got a letter from my friend to say that the stuff had arrived safely. I had pictured some careless postman dropping the

parcel in the little office in Donegal, to which it was consigned, and blowing up the whole place, or perhaps some prying R.I.C. man getting suspicious and catching my friend out and also our dispatch organisation which I had more or less jeopardised.

As I stated previously I was chosen to go to Dublin and was given an address from where I was taken to another address in, I think, Mount Pleasant Street (H. Brady, Killybegs, was staying in the same digs) where I was told to be prepared and hold myself in readiness as I might be called for at any time. I stayed in a whole day and night but it wasn't until the following morning that a man came for me and took me to meet the Quartermaster General, Seán McMahon. (I afterwards found that my guide was Joe O'Reilly). I think our meeting took place in an old shop off Capel Street, but I can't place the exact locality. I talked for an hour with Seán and discussed all the possibilities of Birmingham as a supply centre. O'Reilly left me back at my digs and I was told to await further instructions and to keep to the house, as I might be wanted at any time.

Next day passed and I got no word but on the following morning I was again called for by J. O'Reilly, who this time took me to a public house in Corporation Street - P. Shanahan's. I again met Seán McMahon who told me that Collins, being so impressed with what I had told him (McMahon), wanted to hear it first-hand from myself and that we were to await him there. O'Reilly disappeared again as soon as she had left me with Sean.

The two of us were talking in the 'snug' when in came two old ladies of the type which then frequented Shanahan's (by the way, this is the public house depicted in Seán O'Casey's play "The Plough and the Stars"), and bought (I think) two gins. Seán and I were sitting without any refreshments in front of us and the old ladies began to look suspiciously at us - at least I thought so, so I got

up and asked the bar man if he was going to serve our drinks. (We had not ordered anything). He looked knowingly at me and served two bottles of stout, when I discovered that Sean was a T.T. However, the matter was rearranged and a mineral substituted for the stout.

We had barely started to enjoy our drink when I saw a tall, athletic-looking man cycle right into the bar, leave his bicycle at the side of the shop, seize our two drinks, shove them across to the bar-man and impetuously order us to follow him. We were taken into an inner sanctum and I was placed between the new arrival and Sean. It was then I realised I was in the presence of the great Michael Collins.

I was then put "through the mill" properly - questions came like machine gunfire. All the possibilities of Birmingham as an arms supply centre were discussed and finally Collins seemed satisfied. He appointed me in charge of the Birmingham area, as a full time agent and he gave me a letter of introduction to P. Daly of Liverpool. I was instructed to get back again that night and get things going full steam. All the supplies were to be sent through Liverpool so we had to give our old friends of the Dublin 3rd Battalion the go-by. My guide J. O'Reilly again mysteriously appeared and guided me back to my digs. It was only then, when I had time to think over the whole matter that I realised the magnitude of the job I had undertaken.

I travelled to England by the B. & I. Boat. I remember there were several coffins of the remains of "Auxies" who were killed in an ambush in the South of Ireland (I forget which), laid out on the main hatch, draped with Union Jacks, with a guard of swaggering, drunken "Auxies" in charge. Fortunately, I was unmolested as I kept quietly to myself.

I arrived safely in Liverpool early in the morning and called on Daly. This was the first meeting I had with him. We made temporary arrangements and I started off to Birmingham to take over my new job.

I had a Herculean task ahead of me, when one realises that the only organisation we had was the haphazard one which a few working men had built up in the comparatively short time which had elapsed from our initial meeting in the parochial hall attached to St. Michael's Church at Meeting House Lane.

However, the die was cast so I started to get a nucleus of a new organisation going with all speed. I was careful not to interfere with the Volunteer organisation as such, as they were affiliated with the parent body in Liverpool, so I considered it better to keep both separate (O'Neill was to remain in charge of the Volunteers) and I set up my own organisation. I kept my own counsel and even O'Neill was kept in the dark as to most of the work in hand. I, of course, maintained my position in the Company to avoid any misunderstanding with the sincere fellows of the Company. I, of course, kept in touch with all the Irish activities as best I could, although I never belonged to either the I.S.D.L., the Irish Institute or any of the Irish Dance Committees, so that I could fix on the best elements among them to work for me. I considered that the people with whom I was to work should, as far as possible, be inconspicuous in Irish affairs.

Going along these lines, I soon picked up two real finds, one an ex-British soldier of Irish extraction, Dan O'Malley (3rd generation Irish), and Tom Gilmore, a master gunsmith, who had a small factory off Steel House Lane, the centre of the arms district. O'Malley became my right-hand man and was despatch clerk of all the consignments to Liverpool. Gilmore's premises was our warehouse and packing centre, for which it was ideal. At this time I had been lodging at a place in King's Heath but I considered it was too far away from the centre of things, so I came to lodge in Warwick Street (off Steel House Lane) and made my headquarters with a family named Staunton (who were from Mayo), in Trent Street, a slum area near the Bull Ring. I later lived with them. The Staunton

family proved to be invaluable. Paddy, although the poor fellow hadn't the full use of his hands (his right hand was paralysed, was one of the finest characters I met and his wife Mary (a third generation Irishwoman) had also a heart of gold.

Staunton's, I am sure, was known to a big number of the underground there. To digress for a moment, when I was afterwards consigned in Winston Green Jail, a convict got talking to me one day and I discovered that he lived in a court off Trent Street the odd times he was free. (He was a petty thief). He did me several kindnesses during the time I was in prison and apparently the word went around among his friends there, as I was treated with great respect by them.

The knowledge which I gained of the underworld stood me in good stead, as it was a great source of "stuff". Of course I never ventured into any of the dens without Dan as I would be lost, both literally and metaphorically. The language of the "Brumigumites" is not just Oxford English and although Dan's English was hard enough to understand, I got quite used to him and Gilmore but I never could understand the argot of the slum dwellers there. I was taken by Dan to several of the slums within a mile or two radius of the Bull Ring and even in daylight, I am sure if I had been left without a guide, I would not manage to get back to known surroundings.

There is an area around St. Chad's Cathedral also which is difficult to negotiate. The system of housing, or layout, was a series of lanes opening off streets and then entries off these lanes leading into courts or squares. Then possibly there might be three four entries and exits, so during my time there (now 32 years ago) I learned quite a lot about the centre of Birmingham.

Another dump which we had there was in the cellar of an all-night restaurant (I would say about a 5th grade one) run by a sister of Dan's. All the night policemen in that area frequented it for

coffee and often Dan and I arrived there after a foot-slogging of several miles to find the coffee room packed with "Bobbies." Of course there was a back entry and access to the cellar through a coal chute known to us. We often disgorged our load and packed it away while "The Limbs of the Law" drank their coffee and talked immediately above us.

I remember an occasion when Dan and I were coming back to this base around 2 o'clock a.m., each of us loaded to capacity (I think I had 4 Lee-Enfields slung over my shoulder by means of a rope and the guns hanging down on each side and covered with a heavy coat), hands in pockets and trying to look as unconcerned and as uncomfortable as possible although I felt far from it. The load was heavy but as the night was hot, the heavy coat made things well-nigh intolerable. A Bobby who was standing under a street lamp and could see us for a couple of hundred yards coming towards him halted us. I suggested to Dan that we make a run for it, knowing quite well that I would be unable to run fifty yards, but at least it held some hope. Dan, however, counselled calmness. "I know this fellow", he said, "keep calm, say nothing and I will do the talking". We both crossed the street to where the policeman stood on the opposite side. Then a long conversation took place about that day's racing at Uttoxeter or some such place and it went on until the weight of the load I was carrying became almost unbearable. Eventually it finished up with each of them giving the other several tips for the next day's racing, which were duly and politely noted and we continued on our way. Both of us had to rest for a long time in the cellar that night to recover from the fright and the fatigue.

This restaurant was quite near Gilmore's place, so it was convenient for collecting for the despatch depot. Then again, Gilmore's place was convenient to "Snow Hill Station", where all our stuff was despatched from. Of course "stuff" was also carried by passenger and there was hardly a time I travelled to Liverpool I didn't carry a suitcase or two there.

To digress again, I remember on one occasion when some of the rifles and ammunition which were taken from a Seminary at Birmingham were stored at Burslem in the Pottery district, and had to be removed owing to our dump keeper getting the wind up. I took the whole lot to Liverpool alone and I remember it distinctly as if it were yesterday. My helper (a local teacher named McCarthy) got me a truck and helped me to wheel the stuff to the station where I was left to fend for myself. I had four packages, a sailor's bag in which there were six rifles, a tin trunk packed with .303 and 2 suitcases packed with .303. Burslem is on a branch line and I had to change at Crewe. This meant that I had to cross the whole network of lines from one side of the station to another. I got an accommodating porter and got the baggage landed on the London platform, for the London-Liverpool Express. I managed to get my baggage aboard the train. I left the trunk and sailor's bag in the corridor and took the suitcases into the compartment in which were two very prosperous looking business men. I casually (or tried to appear casual) lifted one of the suitcases on to the rack, but it was so heavy that it came right through and I had to move it under the seat. I felt very embarrassed; but apparently my fellow travellers did not remark anything unusual as they helped me to stow the bags under the seat. The guard then came along and ordered me to remove the packages from the corridor. My travelling companions again helped me to stow the two extra bags but the tin trunk had to remain at my feet, as it was too big to be stowed away. Well when I arrived at Liverpool and got my packages on to the platform I had to engage a taxi. The stuff was too heavy and bulky to be stored in the baggage compartment and I had an argument with the taxi driver who wanted me to employ a second taxi. However, I eventually got him to agree to allow two of the smaller bags into the rere with myself and we set off. The address I had arranged with Daly was in a side street, off Scotland Road and as I was under the impression I had aroused the

taxi man's suspicions I naturally did not like to take him direct to my place of assignment, so I paid him off in Liverpool Road, dumped my bags etc. and waited until he cleared off and then proceeded to carry the stuff to the house assigned. However, it took me three trips to remove it.

To crown all, there was, apparently, a slip-up in the time, as the two ladies who occupied the house were out when I called so I had to sit on my bags and wait for an hour. The policeman on the beat passed me several times and I thought he became suspicious. Eventually the ladies arrived and I got my parcels inside. I was uneasy, however, and would not be satisfied until the stuff was again removed and although I was to have stopped there that night, I got ^a Miss English to provide me with alternative accommodation. My suspicions were proven right as the place was raided by C.I.D. at 2.30 the following morning. Fortunately the raid was unsuccessful. All the material was got safely away and eventually reached Dublin and I got safely back to Birmingham.

On another occasion I was travelling across the square from Lime Street Station at Liverpool with another chap (I forget his name) when his bag burst and started spraying clips of .303 all over the place. I drew his attention to it and in the meantime kept picking up the clips and putting them in my pocket.

But to get back - our method of shipment from Birmingham was to consign crates (some of them weighing up to two cwt.) by rail to an address in Liverpool. The "stuff" was mainly consigned as delph, purporting to come from the Pottery district. Daly was notified of the consignments and sent a list of its contents for checking, and as soon as delivery was made there, the consignment was contacted and when convenient removed to the Dock area. In connection with this method of sending lists, a rather embarrassing thing happened at my trial in Birmingham (referred to previously) although it amused the

Judge and Counsel. One of my letters was discovered in a raid in Liverpool and the list contained mention of a consignment of "Mausers" which I had spelled "Mauzers".

O'Malley was invaluable in the matter of these consignments. It was quite a usual thing to see Dan going along Steel House Lane on his way to the railway station, possibly sitting on his barrow and chatting ^{to} a policeman. That was Dan to a T. He undoubtedly was the coolest customer I ever met. Time and again we were within an ace of being caught but Dan's coolness and sang-froid would get us clear.

Gilmore also was a real character. He carried on a good business in sporting guns, the whole job being done by himself and his family. The old man did all the fitting, making of springs etc. One son did the engraving (and some beautiful work he did), another son did the stock, and so on. It was quite a common occurrence to see some of the real "big-shots" (titled people) in Gilmore's place about these guns. It appears (I was not aware of it until I actually saw it done) that to have a sporting gun properly made, one's arm span or reach must be measured and these people whom I saw there were in for a fit-on, as it were. It was quite a usual thing to see a gun-set priced at £120.

Poor old Tom insisted on making one for me (a real beauty, with my name and address engraved on it), which I sent home via the usual channel, for the North. Unfortunately it went missing, and I am sorry to say on the Irish side. Someone fancied it and took possession. It was something I should like to have had but as it turned out, it was not to be.

About this time I got in touch with a young fellow (a native of Tipperary) named Sweeney (he was not, as far as I am aware, a member of the Volunteers), who was a janitor at a seminary in the city, which was attached to an O.T.C. Sweeney reported to me that they

had an armoury there with a few stands of rifles and a supply of ammunition. I had the job surveyed and in consultation with the other officers of the Volunteers, we drew up a plan to get possession of the arms etc.

This was no easy task as, along with the teaching staff and students, they had an ex-British Sergeant Major in charge of the armoury and he kept the keys attached to a leather belt which he wore continually except when asleep and on other occasions which occurred periodically. On these occasions he left his belt and coat hanging in the vestibule immediately outside the door of the lavatory. I arranged that our man Sweeney was provided with a small box of wax and he shadowed the Sergeant Major until he finally got an impression of the key. It was then a simple matter getting a key made (we were in the right city for it), so that we had only to await a suitable time to get into the place.

An opportunity came quite soon. For some reason a holiday was proclaimed at the college and we were warned of this beforehand by Sweeney, so we arranged with him to leave the back gate unlocked. We made entry (in pairs at intervals so as not to attract attention), the key fitted perfectly and that night we got away with 20 rifles and about 4,000 rounds ammunition. It took a squad of about 20 men to carry it all out, as it had all to be carried on our persons. It was distributed in various places. Some of it was sent to Liverpool on the holiday morning (it was on this occasion that the bag burst crossing the square at Lime Street station) and the whole operation was carried out without a hitch. Of course we sent Sweeney to Ireland.

The Authorities never got to know the true facts of how this job was done. Afterwards when I was being released from Winston Green, the Superintendent in charge (McKenzie I think his name was, he was Scotch at any rate) asked me as a special favour to tell him.

He wanted the information for his private records. He was on the point of retiring and I was coming back to Dublin, but although I believed him and could understand his reasons for wanting the information, I felt that I could not divulge anything to him.

The "stuff" was safely landed in Dublin. P. Daly told me that Collins was highly pleased with the operation and asked him to convey his appreciation to all who took part in it.

About this time I was enlarging my field of operations. I had contacts in Coventry, Stoke, Burslem, Nottingham and Wolverhampton. I made some very useful contacts at Coventry. One of them (Jack Healy), had a small engineering business and as they were very badly off for small arms parts in Dublin, I was instructed to see what could be done. I had again to go to Dublin and again met McMahon. I was given several samples of parabellum, Peter the Painter and Colt Automatic parts, to take back with me and see if they could be reproduced.

I met Collins again on this visit but only for a short time. He was rushing off to some appointment. He had, however, time to inquire as to the capabilities of Healy and emphasise the importance of getting the parts made if possible. Healy was successful in turning out a number of the parts they required and they were sent through the usual channels. By the way, Healy designed and perfected an automatic pistol but I don't know if it was ever put on the market.

I made a very successful raid on a small drill-hall in the Pottery area which resulted in 20 good Martini-~~Henry~~ being added to the store at home. It was the most simple of all the operations carried out, as there was only myself and a good, patriotic priest connected with it. It was reported to me by Father O'Connor that rifles were being used in this hall for drill purposes - the

striking pin in the bolt was filed away to make the gun harmless. I thought of my friend Gilmore and took one of the bolts along to see if it could be put right. It was quite a simple job according to him so I moved them all to Gilmore's workshop in one operation. I used two suitcases and of course unscrewed the stock from the barrel and the gun fitted readily into the case.

During my stay at Marsden's in Warwick Street, I had the late Sean Russell staying with me for a few days. He was buying some lathes. I also had Billy Pilkington who is now a Redemptorist Father. Marsden's boarding house was on the first floor and the whole of the ground floor premises was a gun shop show-room. Russell got quite a turn when he saw where I was staying. Mrs. Marsden was a decent soul. When I was arrested she was brought to Court as a witness, but beyond identifying me, all they could get her to say was that she considered me a decent, respectable man and thought that I could do no one any harm.

About this time Liam Mellows took over as director of purchases, so I came directly under him and from then, until we parted in the Four Courts at 11 o'clock on the night before the Civil War started, he was my friend and I hope I was his. I will never forget him - many a time he shared his bed with me when I was in Dublin seeing him on business. I was out on the hillside on the night of 8th December, 1922, when I heard he was executed. (Go ndeanaimh Dia trocaire ar a anam). He was a kindly generous Irishman and I met very few like him.

The Truce at home was now on, but it must be remembered by those who came down from the hills and got back to their homes, that for us in England there was no Truce; in fact if anything our activities were intensified. The records (if they could be got) would show, I am sure, that the flow of "stuff" from all over England to the ports of Glasgow, Liverpool and London was, if anything, increased.

I had a very interesting experience during this time. There was a big water tunnel being made in Somerset, on which was employed a squad of navvys from Achill, among them a man named Sweeney, who had got in touch with Dublin about high explosive procurable on the job by the cwt. I got instructions from Daly in Liverpool to go to Somerset to look into the matter and if things were as stated to arrange for transport of the material to Birmingham. I arrived at a small way-side station (I can't remember the name of it), but I found I had to walk about two miles across fields and open grazing land until I arrived at a small hamlet. Sweeney lodged in one of the houses there. He was not in from work when I arrived so I told his landlady that I was looking for work as a navvy. She, apparently, had a friend a ganger on the job and volunteered to speak for me in the morning. Sweeney arrived back from work and arranged for me to get lodgings there. Sleeping accommodation was very limited and for the two nights I stayed there (until I had the arrangements completed), I occupied a bed with two navvys. After a meal, Sweeney and I went out to survey the lay of the land and everything was as reported. There were several cwt. of high explosive hidden all over the moor. We worked out a method of transport that night and the following night and eventually I left with a supply of the stuff for Birmingham. While in Somerset, Sweeney introduced me to the famous Lynchahall whom we met in a pub. He was working there as a navvy and must have been over seventy years at the time.

Our Birmingham supplies were still keeping up to standard and were further augmented by a find which our friend Dan had made. This eventually became our undoing as will be seen later.

A factory had been set up on the outskirts of Birmingham for the purpose of breaking down surplus (war) .303, to get the brass and nickel content. O'Malley got in touch with one of the workers, and

then started a steady stream of supplies of much needed ammunition (should the war start again at home). I was getting from 800 to 1,000 rounds per week at very little risk, but as there were, of course, hundreds of millions of rounds in the factory and it had been discussed at length in Dublin, and as there was a possibility of trouble at home over Belfast, at any moment, it was decided to raid the place.

I will digress here again for a moment. When in Dublin in January I had the pleasure of being sent by P. Daly (who could not go himself) to meet Paddy Donoghue at Manchester, after his (O'Donoghue's) release from prison, representing the Liverpool section of the I.R.B. (to which I was attached), to convey their pleasure at his release. I take this opportunity of expressing my appreciation (though belated) to the Manchester members for their kindness to me.

Another incident worth recording was an attempt to prevent the hangmen (Ellis and Turnbull) from going to Derry to execute O'Shea and Johnston there for the accidental killing of a warder. I was in Liverpool at the time and was asked to go along.

Sean Ó Murthuile came over from Dublin with instructions. Daly was in charge and we were to take a car from Liverpool and go to Rochdale where Ellis lived and keep his house under surveillance, pending further instructions which were to come from London. Negotiations were going on there at the time and the executions at Derry were to be discussed. If the men were reprieved we were to take off in our car for Liverpool. If not we were to make sure that Mr. Ellis would not reach Derry. Turnbull (who lived at Burslem) was also kept under similar surveillance. As it happened the men were reprieved and the incident passed over.

A rather amusing sequence occurred last year in Donegal. I was at a dinner at which some of our "Loyalist" neighbours were present and during the dinner (between the courses) I heard one of them telling the story to his friend who was sitting beside him from his angle. It appears that he and some of his friends were taken

prisoner by the I.R.A. in Donegal and held during the time of the Derry prisoners' negotiations. They would possibly have met the same fate as Mr. Ellis had the reprieves not been granted. I wondered what my loyalist friends across the table would have thought had they known my side of the story!

To get back to the raid on the factory; all the plans were made, we were to have a lorry, car and a cycle combination on the job, together with about 20 Volunteers. The arrangement was that I was to meet our contact in the factory at a given place at 7 o'clock. We were to open the gate and I was to remain at the gate and admit the men - I was the only one there who knew them all - as they came forward, at intervals of a few minutes each. I was also to admit the transport, then the gate was to be locked until the loading was done. In addition each man was to carry away as much as he could manage. A man could carry about 450 or 500 rounds at a pinch. The transport was to deliver the stuff at Healy's workshop.

The arrangements proceeded without a hitch as far as the opening of the gate, but no farther. Then I knew we had run into a trap. Our contact refused to go on and open the store (as previously arranged) and insisted on standing at the gate with me. Finally I got him to move towards the store and I immediately started to walk back in the direction in which our men were coming. But I had only got about 50 yards when two armed plain-clothes men jumped over the wall and held me up.

I was knocked about a bit as they had expected I would be armed but we had already arranged that arms would not be taken on the job. I was bundled inside, hand-cuffed and put into a room which seemed to be an office. I was there for at least half an hour alone in the dark, and I was congratulating myself that all the others had got away when the Detectives came in with two men, O'Neill and Ryan. (These men insisted on coming back to see what had happened to me and got caught). P. Daly, who was also on the raid, came to the gate

sometime after I was taken in and on finding it shut, came to the right conclusion that something had gone wrong, and set off as I did to try and stop the others getting caught. He spoke to O'Neill on his way up, but as O'Neill did not know Daly very well, he unfortunately did not turn back.

They brought in J. Heaney and Grogan next. Grogan was to have driven the lorry but at the last minute (fortunately as it turned out) the arrangements broke down and he came along with Healy in their cycle combination. Two other Birmingham men were brought in and that was the catch for the night. We were not allowed to talk so we could only guess what had happened to the others. At this time I realised to my horror that I had the keys of the gate in my pocket. I asked to be taken to the lavatory and although hand-cuffed managed (from that day to this I don't know how) to get the keys out of my pocket and drop them down the lavatory. I flushed the lavatory and the keys must have disappeared, because although an extensive search was made for them, they were never produced in Court.

We were kept at the factory for two hours in total darkness. I don't know whether they expected massed attack or not, but there were plenty of police around when we were eventually taken out, bundled on a lorry and taken to Steel House Lane Police barracks. During the subsequent trial we learned that the raid was more widespread than Birmingham. Men were roped in from Hanley, Liverpool, Manchester, Newcastle and Dewsbury, so it would appear that a general round-up was to be made. (Louis Cunningham, D. Fitzgerald, T. O'Sullivan, Shackleton, Scanlon and Kirwan). That night men were taken in who had no connection with Birmingham or with anyone in it. (An inquiry was held later at the Four Courts to try and reach a solution, but all the findings and evidence was destroyed in the subsequent bombardment.

The taking of depositions dragged on for months (from April until the second week in June, 1922), when we were released on bail, very much to our surprise. The bail was procured in Birmingham. (My old friend Gilmore had to be forcibly retrained from going bail for me). We were instructed to report to Dublin and funds for travelling were placed at our disposal and as we, of course, did not go back, the bails were forfeit, and I understand were promptly repaid by the Irish Government.

An incident which occurred at the trial throws light on the unscrupulous methods of the police. When Healy arrived at the factory on the night of the raid, he was guided directly into the factory yard by one of the C.I.D. Mr. Maurice Healy (K.C.) who practised in England was employed to defend Healy and his defence was that Healy thought he was still on the main road until he found himself in the factory yard. The K.C. put a very good skin on this defence as it was proven that along the factory front, one half of the road was up for repair, and at the time J. Healy came along the usual red safety lamps were lighted along the excavated portion of the road, which was on the opposite side to the factory, and that as he did not know the road well (it was a bye-road anyway) he mistook the yard entrance for a bend in the road. The Chief Superintendent (McKenzie) swore that he could not possibly have made this mistake as one half of the gate was shut and barred when he entered.

I was listening to this evidence and had noted the City Surveyor's evidence when he was proving the plan of the factory and premises, and he had stated that the width of the gate, as far as I remember, was 9'. All the accused were provided with paper so I sent a note over to Healy to have the width of the cycle combination (which was in the yard) measured, and compare with the width of half the gate. He did so and then asked the Superintendent to be put back in the witness box and questioned. The Superintendent again

swore that Healy drove through with half of the gate shut. The K.C. then sprang the surprise that the combination was 4" wider than half of the gate. Mr. Healy made great play about it and left the Superintendent feeling a very small boy indeed.

Well, we left Birmingham and were taken to the Four Courts. I stayed in Fleming's Hotel but visited the Four Courts daily. After the inquiry I expected to get a short holiday in Donegal and if possible be home for the 29th June, but fate decreed otherwise.

I left the Four Courts on the night of the 22nd June about 11 o'clock, said good-bye to Liam and said I hoped to see him when I came back from the North. (I was to leave in the morning). I never saw him again. P. Fleming of Liverpool and I were held up by Free State troops on our way back to the hotel, but were allowed to proceed. At 3 o'clock we heard the rattle of machine-gun fire. The tragic Civil War had started. Fleming and I reported at Barry's hotel in the morning.

Signed:

J. W. Cunningham
(J. W. Cunningham)

Date:

20th Feb. 1954

20th Feb. 1954.

Witness:

Lucy Cunningham
(Lucy)

(Lucy Cunningham) Sec.

