

ORIGINAL

BUREAU OF MILITARY HISTORY 1913-21

BURO STAIRÉ MILÉATA 1913-21

No. W.S. 987

ROINN  COSANTA.

BUREAU OF MILITARY HISTORY, 1913-21.

STATEMENT BY WITNESS.

DOCUMENT NO. W.S. 987

Witness

Captain Sean Breen,
16 McCurtain St.,
Gorey,
Co. Wexford.

Identity.

Second Lieut. 'G' (Gorey) Company,
3rd Battalion, North Wexford Brigade,
1920.

Subject.

National activities, Gorey, Co. Wexford,
1918-1921.

Conditions, if any, Stipulated by Witness.

Nil

File No. S. 2312

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STATEMENT BY CAPTAIN SEÁN BREEN,

16, McCurtain Street, Gorey, Co. Wexford.

During the conscription period in 1918 a Company of the Volunteers was formed in Gorey. At a meeting held in the Market House W.J. Brennan-Whitmore and Michael McGrath were elected officers. At that time the Company was about 200 strong. We had practically no arms. During the summer training was held two nights weekly and consisted mainly of drilling, route marches and tactical training. When the conscription scare passed the members dwindled away until about only a dozen remained. Those who remained were also members of the local Sinn Féin Club. We took an active part in the 1918 General Election on behalf of the Sinn Féin candidate.

In November 1919 the Company decided to raid the residence of Miss Nessie Gibbons, Kiltannel, Gorey, for arms. We had inside information that she had a shot gun and a .38 revolver as well as some older pistols etc. The raid was carried out on the night of the 16th November, 1919. Those taking part were Patrick Fitzpatrick (in charge), Michael McGrath, Joseph Stafford, Aidan McCloud, Patrick Redmond and myself. Admittance was gained by a ruse. We knew that Miss Gibbons always kept the door on a chain at night which allowed the door only to open slightly. Stafford, attired as a messenger boy, knocked on the door and when Miss Gibbons opened it he handed her a

closed envelope, saying it was a letter from Lady Stopford and asked her if there was any answer. Miss Gibbons then took the chain off the door and admitted him. Then the remainder of the party, who had been hiding round the corner, walked quietly into the house, Miss Gibbons was told she need not be afraid as we were collecting arms and no harm would come to her. She was requested to remain in the dining-room which she did. McGrath remained at the dining-room door; the rest of the party searched the house and collected anything in the nature of arms. All the raiding party were disguised. Before leaving we told her that if we took anything which was found to be of no use to us it would be returned to her if she said nothing about the raid.

The following day (Monday) there was great police activity in Gorey. I was arrested at 2 o'clock. Later that evening Fitzpatrick, Stafford, McGrath and Redmond were also arrested. Five of the six who carried out the raid were under arrest, but I was the only one charged with the raid. I was closely questioned as to my movements the previous night. Fitzpatrick was released after an hour. Myself and McGrath were put in one cell and Stafford and Redmond in another. The police tried every means to get us to split on each other. They told McGrath and I that Stafford and Redmond had made statements and told everything and incriminated us. They told the same story to Redmond and Stafford about us. I was brought

to the dayroom and put sitting at the fire. The other prisoners, each in turn, were brought through the dayroom so that they could see me at the fire. They were again told that I had given information and again requested and advised to make statements. Not one of us fell for these tactics. The others were later released. I was detained for six days in Gorey R.I.C. Barracks. On Saturday I was brought up at a special court held in the barracks before Mr. William Sullivan, Resident Magistrate. I was charged with entering with others, while disguised, the residence of Miss Nessie Gibbons, Kiltannel, near Gorey, on the night of the 16th of November, 1919, and taking therefrom a shot gun, a revolver, two blunderbusses of an old pattern and some bayonets. The representatives of the press were refused admission to the hearing of the case. Miss Gibbons said she recognised me as being one of the men who raided her house. I refused to recognise the court or to make a statement. I was returned for trial to the Winter Assizes.

When the military lorry from Arklow pulled up at the barracks to convey me to prison there was a considerable amount of booing by the younger members of the crowd who had assembled outside the barrack to give me a "send off". The police drew their batons and charged the crowd, several people being injured.

One day while in Mountjoy Prison, Dublin, awaiting trial a warder entered my cell and told me I had a visitor - a solicitor. I told him I knew

nothing about a solicitor coming to see me. He said: "You had better come along and see him". I was brought to a room and after a few minutes the next person shown into the room was, to my amazement, Michael McGrath (my comrade on the raid). He told me that when charged at the court to say "not guilty", and before he had time to say any more a warder entered and called him out. McGrath had represented himself as being from a firm of solicitors in Dublin and apparently in the meantime the prison authorities had made enquiries and had discovered that he was not.

I was brought to trial at the Leinster Winter Assizes, Green Street, Dublin. Mr. Gibson, K.C., and Mr. Sealy, instructed by Mr. M.J. O'Connor, Crown Solicitor, Wexford, prosecuted. My comrades outside had engaged Mr. Kinahan, B.L., instructed by Mr. J.T. Dunbar, solicitor, Enniscorthy, to defend me. As instructed by Michael McGrath I pleaded "not guilty". Apart from the police the other witnesses for the prosecution were Miss Gibbons and Michael Collier, Ballycanew. (The latter had been convicted at Oulart Petty Sessions on the 18th November, 1919, for stealing £47 10 0 from Mrs. Breen, Corduff). Giving evidence, Collier said that after his conviction at Oulart Court on 18th November he was brought to Gorey Police Barracks and put in the cell with me. He said: "Breen told me that he was blamed for making a raid and the reason that had him there was that his sister had been working in the place and was sacked, and there were fellows who were in the raid who had

been arrested and let out". When cross-examined by Mr. Kinahan Collier admitted that when being conveyed from Gorey Barracks to Waterford Jail to serve his sentence of six months, that the police told him he would be released before Christmas if he gave evidence against me and that he still hoped to be out before Christmas. The Judge (Mr. Justice Kenny) told him to 'stand down'. Giving evidence on my behalf Joe Stafford said he was with me at the Market House from half-past five until 6 o'clock when Patrick Redmond joined us. He (Stafford) then went home to his tea. Patrick Redmond said he met me at 6 o'clock and remained with me until about twenty-five minutes to seven. My father said I arrived home at about a quarter to seven and remained at home until half-past seven. Aidan McCloud said he met me and went to the pictures with me at 8 o'clock and stayed in the cinema until the pictures were over. about half-past ten. The evidence for me covered the period during which the raid took place. After an absence of over an hour the jury failed to agree and were discharged. I was put back to the next assizes.

I was kept in custody until March 1920 when I was brought before the Wexford Assizes for trial again. This time Mr. J.D. Rosenthal, K.C., and Mr. Kenny, B.L., instructed by Mr. M.J. O'Connor, Crown Solicitor, appeared for the prosecution. On this occasion I was defended by Mr. Cecil Forde, K.C., and Mr. Kinahan, B.L., instructed by Mr. T.B. Dunbar, solicitor. The following jury were sworn to try the

case: Martin Gahan, Patrick Gahan, Andrew Dillon, Edward Kavanagh, James McEvoy, John Asple, Joseph O'Sullivan, John Nolan, Michael Hickey, David Power, John Quinn, John Nagle. The witnesses for the prosecution were the same as at the previous trial. Collier, who had been released after my first trial, had joined the British Army and travelled down from Belfast where he was stationed to give evidence against me. It is interesting to record that Collier has not, as far as I know, set foot in County Wexford since. The witnesses and evidence for me were the same as at the trial in Green St. Having reviewed the evidence the jury retired, and after about a quarter of an hour's absence returned into court with a verdict of not guilty. I was then discharged having spent four months in custody.

About May 1920 Courtown R.I.C. Barracks was evacuated and the garrison transferred to Gorey. The barracks was burned shortly afterwards by Volunteers from Gorey and Courtown. I was not on the job but I know the following were: Michael McGrath, Joseph Stafford, Patrick Fitzpatrick and Dudley Butler. Fitzpatrick was accidentally burned about the face and hands. However, he managed to return to Gorey on a bicycle and went to Mrs. Veney and remained there until he was fully recovered. It is interesting to state that this lady's house (with four others in North Wexford) was destroyed by fire in May 1921 by the British Military authorities as an official

reprisal following an attack on police at Inch on 7th May, 1921.

Shortly afterwards we were visited by Brigadier Andy McDonnell from Dublin. We told him of our activities etc. He said he would make a report to G.H.Q. on his return to Dublin. Up to this the Gorey Company was not officially recognised. Following McDonnell's visit we received a letter from G.H.Q. instructing us to cease our activities until the Company was officially organised. Shortly afterwards officers from the Battalion re-organised the Company. The Battalion O/C, Myles Breen, appointed Peter Connolly to be Captain, Michael McGrath 1st Lieutenant, Fitzpatrick as Adjutant and myself 2nd Lieutenant. The Company, which was now about 300 strong, became 'C' Company, 3rd Battalion, North Wexford Brigade.

Training in the use of arms was intensified. Numerous raids for arms were carried out. We collected about 30 shot guns, a few revolvers and a .22 rifle. We also raided the mails, cut the telegraph wires, blocked roads and harassed the enemy in every way we could.

On the 11th November, 1920, my house was raided by Auxiliaries and R.I.C. and I was arrested. In December I was tried by general courtmartial held in the Cavalry Barrack, Waterford. I was charged with having contravened the Defence of the Realm Regulations by having three rounds of .303 ammunition in my possession not under effective

military control. I was further charged with having in my possession a document containing information which might be useful to persons hostile or opposed to the Restoration of Order in Ireland in that I had in my possession a plan of His Majesty's prison at Waterford. When the charges had been read out the President of the court asked me if I were guilty. I replied: "I refuse to plead". A police witness giving evidence swore that he found one round of .303 ammunition behind a picture in the kitchen of my house and also a plan of Waterford Prison in a locked box under the bed in an adjoining room. Another police witness swore that when he searched me at the Gorey R.I.C. Barracks he found two rounds of .303 ammunition in the lining of my coat. I wish to record that I had not any ammunition in my possession or in my house but I had the plan of Waterford Prison; in fact I had prepared it myself. When asked if I had anything to say in my defence, I said "I do not wish to make any statement to the court in my defence but I would like to make a statement for the press". I then made the following statement: "As regards this ammunition alleged to be found on me, I say it was planked there. As a matter of fact, I knew my house was going to be raided. The police visited another house before mine and they said they were going to John Breen's house. I went home to tell my mother they were coming and that she need not worry about them. As a matter of fact, if I had the ammunition in my house or in my coat I could easily

have removed it. I had plenty of time to do so supposing for a moment that I had it. When the policeman came in he said he found one round of ammunition behind a picture. I told him he planted it there and that it was never there until he planted it there. He states again that he found two more rounds in the lining of my coat, but there is no lining in my great coat and at the time I showed the coat to another witness. As to his statement that I said he would be done in when he got to Dublin for arresting me, I deny making any such statement. Is it likely that in the midst of these men when I was being boxed and buffeted about, that I would tell him "I would get him done in". I was found guilty on both charges and sentenced to nine months hard labour and was sent to Worcester Jail to serve the sentence. Having completed my term I was released on 21st July, 1921. On my arrival home in Gorey I was met by a large crowd at the railway station and given a hearty reception.

Signed:

Sean Breen
(Sean Breen)

Date:

12/8/24

Witness:

Sean Brennan Lieut. Col.