

**ORIGINAL**

BUREAU OF MILITARY HISTORY 1913-21

BURO STAIRÉ MILÉATA 1913-21

No. **W.S.** 989

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BUREAU OF MILITARY HISTORY, 1913-21.

STATEMENT BY WITNESS.

DOCUMENT NO. **W.S.** 989

**Witness**

Michael Sheehy,  
Castletownconyers,  
Kilmallock,  
Co. Limerick.

**Identity.**

Adjutant Charleville Battalion. I.R.A.

**Subject.**

Irish Volunteers, Charleville, Co. Cork,  
1914-1921.

**Conditions, if any, Stipulated by Witness.**

Nil

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STATEMENT BY MICHAEL SHEEHY,  
Castletownconyers, Kilmallock.

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I was born at Croagh, Rathkeale, County Limerick, in June 1893. My parents were farmers.

In my youth I did not take much interest in politics but I know that my parents were supporters of John Redmond's party.

I came to work in Binchys, General Merchants, Charleville, where I am still employed, in the middle of 1913. When the Irish Volunteers started in Charleville early in 1914 I did not join immediately but sometime in the late spring of that year I joined the Volunteer Company formed by the Redmondite section. There was also a Company of Volunteers controlled by the O'Brienite party in the town. The strength of each Company would be about 100.

A few weeks after joining the Volunteers two Companies were amalgamated. We were drilled by British Army reservists at the time. I think the names of some of them were - William Deasy, Michael Tynan and \_\_\_ Gore. The combined unit was controlled by a committee on which O'Brienites and Redmondites were represented. As far as I can recollect the representation was as follows :-

O'Brienites

Michael Cahill  
Dave Sullivan  
John Barry  
Paddy O'Connell  
Patrick Daly  
Michael Motherway

Redmondites

John J. O'Donnell  
Dr. Hayes  
Patrick Lyons  
Patrick Haugh  
Ned Wallace

There were also three representatives of the Protestant community on the committee. They were Rev. Mr. Harvey, Captain Harrison and Mr. Sanders.

The Volunteers continued to train during the summer of 1914 under their instructors. Foot drill and arms drill with wooden rifles were the only form of training undertaken. We also had route marches every Sunday to meet Companies in neighbouring districts. I don't remember that we had any arms of any kind at this time.

When war broke out in August, 1914 our instructors were called up for service in the British Army. This upset our organisation somewhat but we managed to carry on for some time. However, when John Redmond made an appeal for recruits for the British Army there was a split in the Volunteer Executive in Dublin and this led to divisions in the Volunteers throughout the country. As a result the organisation in Charleville slowly faded away and before Christmas, 1914 it was practically non-existent.

Big numbers of young men from the district were joining up the British Army - especially the Irish Regiments - in response to Redmond's appeal for recruits but I never had any leanings that way.

Early in 1915 a big recruiting meeting for the British Army was to be held in Charleville. The meeting was to be addressed by all the local politicians from a window of the hotel in the Main Street. In addition Sergeant Michael O'Leary - the first Irishman to win a Victoria Cross in the war - was to speak. The local representatives on the platform were :- John Barry, Mick Cahill (O'Brienites), John O'Donnell, Ned Wallace, Dr. Hayes and Morrissey family (Redmondites). The Protestant element were represented by Captain Harrison, Mr. Sanders and Revd. Mr. Harvey.

When the people of Charleville began to move about on the morning of the day fixed for the recruiting meeting they were shocked to see that the walls of the hotel had been tarred with anti-recruiting slogans.

The meeting was, however, held and denunciation of the "outrage" (as the tarring was called) was general.

Arising out of this incident three Secondary Teachers employed at the Christian Brothers' Schools were arrested next day by the R.I.C. They were questioned about the "outrage" but were not charged with any offence. They were released from custody after 24 hours. I think that they were released early in the week because I know that on the Friday night in the same week I attended a meeting at which the Irish Volunteers were re-formed. This meeting was held in the ball-alley in Smith's Lane. The pioneers in the organisation of the meeting were the three teachers who had been arrested in connection with the tarring of the hotel. They were Seán O'Dea, Lawrence Hedigan and Tom Barry. Others who took a hand at the initial meeting were Eugene McCarthy, Dinny O'Driscoll, Mick Mahoney, Mick Motherway and witness (Mick Sheehy). Within a couple of week the membership of the unit was about 50. The first officers elected were :-

Captain Sean O'Dea,  
 1st.Lieutenant Lawrence Hedigan,  
 2nd " Tom Barry.

The Company was, at the time, a unit of the Galtee Battalion which embraced a good portion of East Limerick as well as, I think, Charleville and Mitchelstown areas. The Battalion O.C. was Liam P. Manahan, Ardpatrick. He was a Creamery Manager.

The Volunteers were not popular among the general public in the district at this time. They were subject to much jeering and abuse from the many "Separation Women" (British soldiers' wives whose husbands were serving in France) when on parades or route marches.

The usual foot drill and arms drill with wooden guns was carried on. We usually met in fields and bye-roads in the vicinity of the town.

This continued during the year 1915 and early 1916. Our Company took part in a parade of the Galtee Battalion which was held at Ardpatrick on Patrick's Day 1916. Several other Companies from East Limerick also took part in the parade. The Battalion O/C., Liam Manahan, was in charge.

There was a parade of the Company at Smith's Lane early in Holy Week, 1916. The Battalion O/C. was present. Before the parade was dismissed we were told by Seán O'Dea (Company O/C.) that there would be a parade on Easter Sunday at the Convent gate at 2 p.m. I think that all members attended on Sunday morning. After remaining at the Convent for some time the parade was dismissed. No further activities took place during the week.

Seán O'Dea, Lawrence Hedigan and Tom Barry - the officers of the Company - were arrested about the first week in May, 1916. They were interned in Frongoch. Later on in the same month about twenty other members of the Company were arrested including Jim Brislane, Robert Joyce, Dick Nagle, Joe Nagle, Denis and Tim Begley, Eugene McCarthy and Mick Motherway. I cannot remember the names of the others. All those arrested were held in Limerick gaol for about four or five weeks when they were released.

The members of the Company still continued to meet quietly in small sections for the remainder of 1916. I don't remember any real activity in public at this time until the release of the local prisoners from Frongoch early in 1917 (I think). At this time Jim Brislane was O/C. When the news of the release reached Charleville the Volunteers arranged to welcome them on their arrival. We marched to the railway station accompanied by a good crowd of the general public as well as by members of the G.A.A. and Gaelic League. The arrival of the train with the prisoners was greeted with cheers. A procession was formed at the station and, headed by the prisoners,

marched into town. On the way the "Separation Women" did not forget to express their views and needless to say their remarks were not complimentary. However, the outlook of the general public towards the Volunteers and Easter Week appeared to be undergoing a change. Many of the people were beginning to realise that there was much to be said for the outlook of the Volunteers from a <sup>national</sup> natural viewpoint. We availed of this change of heart to increase our strength.

When Seán O'Dea and the two others (Hedigan and Barry) applied for reinstatement in their jobs as teachers at Christian Brothers' School only Tom Barry was re-engaged. His re-engagement was attributed to the fact that he was married (to a local girl) while the others were single. Seán O'Dea and Lawrence Hedigan then left the district while Jim Brislane, who had been appointed O/C. while the others were interned, continued in charge.

The general release of the prisoners interned or imprisoned after Easter Week was the signal for a fresh outburst of enthusiasm for things national. Jim Brislane availed of this to organise Volunteer units in the neighbouring parishes. For this purpose he utilised the Volunteers of the Charleville area to create an interest amongst the younger elements by arranging route marches and parades to the surrounding villages on Sunday evenings. As a result, units were formed in Newtownshandrum, Dromina, Liscarrol, Milford, Churchtown and Ballyhea. These Companies or units together with Charleville were formed into the Charleville Battalion of Cork Brigade.

The first officers of this Battalion were :-

O/C. James Brislane, Charleville  
 Vice O.C. Denis O'Driscoll, Newtownshandrum,  
 Adjutant.. Robert Joyce, Charleville,  
 Q.M. James Winters, Churchtown.

I think this Battalion was formed late in 1917 or early 1918. The strength of the units varied from 20 or 25 to 65 or so.

During the years 1917 and 1918, the Volunteers, as well as carrying out their drills and parades, did a large volume of work in organising the political side - Sinn Féin. Certainly in this area all Volunteers were pioneer members of Sinn Féin and worked continuously for its success.

The threat of Conscription in 1918 led to a substantial increase in the membership of the Volunteers in Charleville. The strength of the Company at one stage reached 300. Nearly every man of military age except, of course, the dyed-in-the-wool Imperialists - and there were many here - joined up. However, when the threat of Conscription had passed the new recruits faded away gradually and the Company returned to its normal strength of about 60 or so. Several raids for arms had been carried out during the early and middle portions of 1918. Several shotguns were obtained in this way as well as about 250 rounds of ammunition for same. These raids were carried out by Mick Motherway, Tim Begley, Denis Begley, Jack Cronin, Mick Scully and witness. About twenty shot guns were got in this way. At this time the Company also had two rifles which had been bought from soldiers home on leave from France. The officers of the Company at this time (May 1918) were :-

O/C. Denis Begley,  
1st.Lt. Jack Cronin,  
2nd.Lt. Mick Scully.

Towards the end of 1918 before the General Election in December of that year the Volunteers were very busy working for the success of the Sinn Féin candidate for the area - Paudeen O'Keeffe. They were engaged in canvassing, guarding polling stations side by side with the R.I.C. and using every effort to ensure the success of the Sinn Féin candidate.

The work of drilling and organising went on during 1919. We were carrying out more advanced types of drill - doing scouting, being trained in the use of cover while at odd week-ends we would have some target practice with .22 rifle.

About this time the R.I.C. were beginning to take more notice of Volunteer activities and arrests for "illegal" drilling were becoming a regular feature. Denis Begley was the Company O/C. and the police raided his house sometime in the summer of this year to arrest him on a charge of this nature. Denis Begley, however, evaded arrest and went "on the run". He left the district shortly afterwards and he was replaced as O/C. by Seán Cronin.

Sometime nearing the end of 1919 Denis O'Driscoll (Battalion Vice O.C.) and Robert Joyce (Battalion Adjutant) left the area. They were replaced by Paddy O'Brien (Liscarrol) and Jeremiah Moran (Charleville) respectively.

Early in 1920 I was appointed Battalion Adjutant to replace Jeremiah Moran and I continued to serve in this capacity until May 1921 when I was replaced by Tom Clancy (Liscarrol). While acting in this capacity my duties were as follows :-

- (a) To attend to all despatches as directed by Battalion O/C.,
- (b) To keep a record of the business transacted at Battalion Council meetings and of the attendances thereat,
- (c) To maintain contact at all times with Brigade Headquarters and to ensure that all messages received were dealt with or transmitted without delay to the appropriate destination.

Up to 1st March, 1921, when the Chairman of the Charleville Rural District Council (Seán O'Brien) was murdered by Black & Tans I managed to attend to my duties as Adjutant and at the same time remain at work in Charleville. I did not, however, sleep at home at night. However,



following the murder of Seán O'Brien I left the town and joined the Battalion O/C. in the Field.

While acting as Adjutant and residing in Charleville in the period early 1920 to March 1921, I took part in all activities in the Company area including the blocking of roads and cutting of communications in connection with the attacks on Ballylanders (27th April, 1920) and Kilmallock (28th May, 1920) R.I.C. Barracks.

During June, 1920 I was a member of the party who raided the mail train at Charleville Station when the train was boarded by about twenty Volunteers - the engine being taken over by Paddy O'Brien (at this time Brigade Quartermaster, I think) and Thomas Coughlan (Charleville) who compelled the engine crew to drive the train to a spot about two miles from Charleville in the Buttevant direction and to stop it there. With others I was in the mail van where we collected all the letters and removed them to a motor car which was waiting at the place where the train was halted (Mooneys gates). The mails were then conveyed to Brigade Headquarters where they were censored by the Brigade Staff. They were later returned through other Post Offices. Some of the others engaged in this raid were :- Mick Motherway, Dick Smith, John Higgins, Stephen Motherway, John Costello; Mick Ryan. Liam Lynch was in charge of this operation, I think.

Raids for mails, blocking of roads and cutting of enemy communications was practically a nightly occupation for members of the local Companies in this area from August, 1920 to the Truce as the Brigade and Battalion Columns were very active and every difficulty had to be placed in the path of the enemy.

When I took up duty in the "Field" with the Battalion O.C. following the murder of Seán O'Brien on 1st March, 1921, I was

~~delighted~~<sup>delighted</sup> to visit the various Companies in the Battalion and check up on their scouting and communications system. After spending a couple of weeks on a survey it was decided at a Battalion Council meeting early in May, 1921 that six scouts would be on duty in each Company area, day and night. These were to be selected men and were to be so placed that they could cover all movements of enemy troops in the area from the time they left their bases. Runners were also available to relay information to Battalion and Column Headquarters.

About the end of May, 1921 I was appointed Battalion Vice-Commandant and within a few days I was sent for by Liam Lynch who at this time was O/C., 1st Southern Division. He instructed me to proceed to Dublin and to get in touch with Headquarters. He informed me that on arrival in Dublin I was to get in touch with Kathleen Boland at a shop in Henry Street (I think). I travelled to Kingsbridge by train from Buttevant one morning at the end of May, 1921. I called on Kathleen Boland who advised me to call back next day. When I called again she gave me Dick Mulcahy's address - somewhere near St. Stephen's Green. I called on Dick Mulcahy that evening and he questioned me about the military position in the area with particular reference to our control over lines of communication (roads, railways) in the Charleville-Buttevant area. When I had explained the position to him he asked me to return next day.

When I met him the following day he was accompanied by Mick Collins and I was then told the object of my trip, viz. to make arrangements for a journey to the south by Eamon de Valera.

The arrangements proposed by Headquarters were :-

- (1) To halt the train on which De Valera was to travel at a point between Buttevant and Charleville.

- (2) Transport to take De Valera to Brigade Headquarters which at the time was in the vicinity of Nadd, near Kanturk, to be made available by the Charleville Battalion,
- (3) De Valera to travel as guard on the train.

I pointed out the danger of stopping the train in such close proximity to the strong military posts at Buttevant, Charleville and Ballyvonare, and it was finally agreed that De Valera should leave the train at Buttevant Railway Station.

While these arrangements were being made by Mick Collins I was in his company on a number of occasions at Kirwan's, Parnell Street, Dublin, where he had discussions with several railway employees (guards, firemen, engine drivers).

Before I left Dublin the date and time of De Valera's trip was fixed after consultation with him when he was visited by Mick Collins and myself somewhere near Mount Merrion ( I think). On our way to visit De Valera we travelled by taxi and we ran into a "round up" which was being carried out by the British somewhere near Amiens Street. We succeeded, however, in getting outside the "ring" before it was closed. Incidentally, I should have mentioned that we were travelling from Clonliffe Road, where I was staying, to Mount Merrion at the time.

When all arrangements were complete I returned home early in June. I had been in Dublin for nearly a fortnight. I went to Buttevant Railway Station on the date fixed for De Valera's arrival but he was not on the train. I was informed by the guard on the train (he was one of the men I met in Kirwan's with Mick Collins) that De Valera was not travelling so I returned to Brigade Headquarters and reported accordingly.

Rank at Truce - Vice O.C., Charleville Battalion.

Strength of the Battalion at 11th July, 1921 .. 550.

Signed: Michael Sheehy  
(Michael Sheehy)

Date: 13<sup>th</sup> August 1954

Witness: Phil O'Donnell  
(Phil O'Donnell)

