

W.S. 1,143 ORIGINAL

BUREAU OF MILITARY HISTORY 1913-21  
BURO STAIRÉ MILEATA 1913-21  
NO. W.S. 1,143

ROINN  COSANTA.

BUREAU OF MILITARY HISTORY, 1913-21.

STATEMENT BY WITNESS.

DOCUMENT NO. W.S. 1,143.....

Witness

Mrs. Bessie Cahill (née Harrington)  
Ballymacelligott,  
Tralee,  
Co. Kerry.

Identity.

Captain, Ballymacelligott Branch  
Cumann na mBan, Co. Kerry, 1915 - .

Subject.

Cumann na mBan, Ballymacelligott,  
Co. Kerry, 1915-1921.

Conditions, if any, Stipulated by Witness.

Nil

File No. S.2448.....

# ORIGINAL

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STATEMENT BY MRS. BESSIE CAHILL

(née Harrington)

Ballymacelligott, Tralee, Co. Kerry.

I joined Cumann na mBan when a Branch was formed in my area late in 1915. The Branch had then about 12 members. I attended a first aid class in Tralee along with Hanna Walsh (née McEllistrim). The instructor was the late Dr. Lawlor. When we had completed our course we gave instructions to the other members of our Branch and organised them in the making and rolling of bandages, and preparation of first aid kits.

The company grew rapidly in numbers and we were visited by Miss O'Rahilly from Dublin. Officers were elected.

We had much work with the Volunteers before Easter 1916, and we stood waiting for orders when the Ballymacelligott Company returned from Tralee bringing Robert Monteith who had landed at Banna Strand with Roger Casement. Monteith was brought to McEllistrim's house at Ahane, Ballymacelligott.

When he arrived at McEllistrim's, Monteith was suffering from exposure and he was so bad that Lena McEllistrim (now Mrs. <sup>Brosnan</sup> ~~Brosnan~~) had to massage his hands until circulation returned. She attended him during his stay there. Monteith was taken from McEllistrim's to John Byrne's house at Ballydwyer Creamery, where Mrs. Byrne and her sister, Hanna McEllistrim, attended him. From Byrne's he was taken to Sean Tadhg Og and there his needs were attended to by other members of Cumann na mBan. This was the start of our work for men 'on the run'.

Early in May 1916, some members of the Volunteers were arrested and a lull came for some time. Our work of preparing kits for the Volunteers went on. The Cumann na mBan were the first to recover after 1916 and we never really stopped our activities.

In April 1918 Gortatlea R.I.C. Barracks was attacked and two of the Volunteers, John Brown and Richard Laide, two gallant soldiers, were killed. The other men, who were on the attack, had to seek shelter and the Cumann na mBan were called upon to assist them in many ways. We were the first Branch in Ireland after 1916, which had active Volunteer officers on the run after a barrack attack to look after.

About June 1918, two R.I.C. men were fired at in Tralee by Thomas McEllistrim and the late John Cronin and intense police activity followed. The two men had to leave the area for some time, but this did not reduce the police activity.

The Cumann na mBan remained active despite police raids by organising, training and organising concerts and dances in aid of the funds.

The preparations to resist conscription gave us an opportunity to organise openly and the people looked to Cumann na mBan for a lead. We had a very active Branch.

In March 1920, Mrs. Kathleen Ahern (nee McEllistrim) went to Dublin accompanied by the late John Byrne and collected some guns and ammunition which she brought safely to Ballymacelligott. Raids were now becoming more frequent and the Cumann na mBan were employed in carrying dispatches from place to place. The Black and Tans had arrived and they concentrated on the Ballymacelligott area.

On the 11th November a party of Black and Tans along with British military arrived at Ballydwyer Creamery. The Tans fired indiscriminately on the people and suppliers attending at the Creamery. One Creamery worker was shot dead and another wounded. One supplier was shot dead, and Jack McEllistrim, a member of the Volunteers, was wounded. Jack McEllistrim was removed to St. Catherine's Hospital, Tralee, that night by members of Cumann na mBan under the supervision of Lena

Brosnan. The other wounded man could not be removed except by ambulance as he was wounded in the stomach.

Mrs. Byrne, Mrs. Walsh, Bridie Carmody, Nurse Dowling and myself, all members of Cumann na mBan, attended the wounded man in turns during the night. At the first crack of dawn I cycled into Tralee for a doctor. I located Doctor Coffey at about 8 a.m. He willingly consented to come out to the wounded man.

On my return I called to the hospital to see McEllistrim where I met the late Jim Bailey and Thomas McEllistrim (T.D.) who ordered me to get Lena McEllistrim and a companion to take the wounded man (Jack McEllistrim) to Cork. I got in touch with Lena McEllistrim at once and the wounded man was removed.

A day or two later the other wounded man was moved to Tralee Hospital.

On the night of 24th December 1920, a party of Auxiliaries visited the house of John Byrne at Ballydwyer Creamery expecting to find him at home. He was a wanted man. John Byrne was not there, but two Volunteers - John Leen and Maurice Reidy - had arrived at Byrne's house a short time before. John Leen was shot instantly. Reidy asked for time to pray. Mrs. Byrne (nee McEllistrim) and her sister Hanna pleaded for Reidy's life, but in vain. Reidy was shot and the two women were locked into a room until the raiding party had removed the bodies from the house to the yard outside. The women were then ordered to get their outdoor clothes and the raiders took them out to a car and told them that they were getting a home for them for the night. By this time the raiders had set fire to the house. Mrs. Byrne did not want to go in the direction they were taking her as she dreaded that they meant to do something to the priest's as it was to that house she was taken.

In the meantime I was at McEllistrim's house and one of the girls saw the flames of Byrne's house burning from the yard. She called me and asked me to go and investigate. I took my bicycle and went to the Creamery at Ballydwyer. As I approached, a neighbour told me what had happened. I went into the yard and found the bodies in an outhouse. I proceeded to the priest's house and, when nearing it, Fr. McDonald, C.C., came on to meet me. Mrs. Byrne, Hanna McEllistrim, Bridie Carmody and I returned to the Creamery where we were joined by John Leen's uncle and aunt and a few others. We got a Christmas candle at the next house and lighted it. I gave out the Rosary.

We remained with the dead the greater part of the night. We attended first Mass and after Mass Nurse Hayes joined us and we returned to the scene of the tragedy where Nurse Hayes and I washed the bodies and laid them out on tables which we had procured the previous night. We had just finished when the Auxiliaries arrived; they looked about, but they did not take the bodies as they were not coffined. That night the Auxiliaries removed the bodies from Clogher Church and only returned them the following day in time for the funeral.

After the shooting of Leen and Reidy the Auxiliaries continued their raids on the Ballymacelligott area and by night and day they drove around shooting. The Auxiliaries were led by Major McKinnon who was continuously leading them to Ballymacelligott, as he appeared to consider it the hub of republican resistance!

In April 1921, Major McKinnon was shot on the golf course in Tralee by Con Healy and that night Ballymacelligott was raided by the Auxiliaries, who burned fifteen houses including that of the Parish Priest.

In May 1921, I was sent to Cork to accompany home

McEllistrim, who had been wounded on 11th November 1920. When we arrived at Gortatlea station, where we alighted, a party of British military and Tans were on the platform. Aided by the stationmaster, Mr. Crowe, I got McEllistrim into the stationmaster's house without being seen. McEllistrim had a fractured arms and he would not have been able to lift his arms had he been ordered to do so. Some of the other passengers were searched.

On the eve of the Truce, Richard Shanahan, John Flynn and Jack Prendiville were shot in Castleisland, and, on the day of their burial I, along with Hanna McEllistrim, took the rifles for the firing party on a side-car to Castleisland.

Signed: Bessie (Harrington) Cahill  
 (Bessie (Harrington) Cahill)  
 Date: April 20th 1955  
 April 20th 1955.

Witness: James J. O'Connor  
 (James J O'Connor)

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