

ORIGINAL

BUREAU OF MILITARY HISTORY 1913-21

BURO STAIRÉ MILITAIRÉ 1913-21

No. W.S. 1235

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BUREAU OF MILITARY HISTORY, 1913-21.

STATEMENT BY WITNESS.

DOCUMENT NO. W.S. 1,235

Witness

William O'Flynn,
Burke Street,
Fethard,
Co. Tipperary.

Identity.

Captain Fethard Sluagh Fianna Eireann;
Comd't. 1st Batt'n. South Tipp. Brigade.

Subject.

(Fethard)

Fianna Eireann, / Co. Tipperary,
1920-1921.

Conditions, if any, Stipulated by Witness.

Nil

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STATEMENT BY Mr. WILLIAM FLYNN,
Burke Street, Fethard,
County Tipperary.

In the years of 1920 and 1921 when the War of Independence, as it has come to be known, was at its peak period, I was a schoolboy of 14 or 15 years of age attending the Patrician Brothers' school in Fethard. My father was at the time actively associated with the Sinn Féin and Irish Volunteer Movements. He was President of the East Tipperary Sinn Féin Executive, and he represented the Fethard Electoral area on the Tipperary (South Riding) County Council in the interests of the Sinn Féin party.

My brother James was a Brigade Officer of the 3rd Tipperary Brigade, Irish Republican Army, and my grandfather, who resided with us, had been a member of the Fenian organisation. Our home was frequently visited by men 'on the run', such as the late Pierce McCann, T.D., Seamus Robinson then O/C., 3rd Tipperary Brigade, I.R.A., James Keating of Brookhill etc. It was also used as the "centre" through which dispatches passed to and from various I.R.A. units. I mention these facts so that the reader may more easily appreciate the background to my upbringing, and that it would be impossible for a boy reared in such environments to have other than a strong national outlook.

Early in 1920 I became attached to "B" (Fethard) Company, 1st Battalion, 3rd Tipperary Brigade, as a boy scout. This came about through my association and that of eight or ten other boys with an officer of the Volunteer Company named Jeremiah Whelan. Although he was then a fully grown man Whelan took a special interest in boys and he often took us for long walks through fields and woods and from him

we learned the rudiments of scouting. In this way too we got a good knowledge of the countryside for miles around Fethard.

Soon Whelan commenced to take us a little further into his confidence, and he began to entrust us with dispatches to take to various places and people. Other minor little jobs, but which we looked upon at the time as being very important, were allotted to us and other Volunteer Officers came to use our services. Possibly on account of my family's association with the Movement, I was the boy generally picked on to go with the dispatches, and to do scouting work.

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Two /my school companions of those days were a boy named Clancy, son of Sergeant Clancy of the R.I.C., and a boy named Storey whose father was the Warrant Sergeant in the British military barracks in Fethard. By chumming with these two boys I was able to gain easy access into both the R.I.C. and military barracks, and whenever I was in either barracks I always kept my ears and eyes open. I took particular notice of any unusual police or military activity, memorised the registration numbers of motor cars or lorries which I saw in the barracks, got the names of prisoners or hostages brought in in lorries, and made a mental note of the times at which patrols or parties of police or military left or entered the barracks. All this information I passed on generally to Jeremiah Whelan whom I have previously mentioned, or to James Keating who was then either the Company Captain or the Vice-Commandant of the Battalion.

The question of forming a Sluagh or Company of Fianna Eiteann in Fethard may have been contemplated by Jerry Whelan or some of the other Volunteer Officers. Of that I am not certain.

However, during 1920, the late Countess Markievicz visited Fethard. I cannot say what the object of her visit was but she remained for a few days as the guest of my father and mother. On hearing of my activities and of the other boys who were associated with me she suggested that to put the Boy Scout Movement on a proper footing in Fethard we should organise a Fianna Eireann Sluagh, and affiliate with the National Organisation. Acting on her suggestion a meeting of twelve or fifteen boys was arranged and the Sluagh was formed. I was elected as Captain of the Sluagh and I subsequently received a letter from the Countess confirming my appointment and acknowledging our affiliation. This letter was taken from my home during a raid by Free State troops in the Civil War and was never returned to me.

In connection with the organisation and training of the Sluagh, I found the "B.P." literature of the Baden Powell Scout organisation to be both useful and helpful.

The members of the Sluagh were sworn in by Jerry Whelan whom I have previously referred to. We carried on much on the same lines as a Volunteer Company of the time. We had parades and drills in the fields around Fethard. From a small weekly subscription amongst the members we collected sufficient funds to purchase belts and whistles. We had no other equipment. One of our principal duties was to act as scouts when the local Volunteer Company held parades. These parades were usually held at Kilnockin Hill or Market Hill. Occasionally when the Volunteer Company parade was over the Volunteer drill instructor took us in hand and gave us some foot drill.

There were many instances in which the members of the Sluagh assisted the Volunteer Company and the Volunteer Officers.

Although the Sluagh had a strength of about fifteen members, the duties to be done fell to the lot of about five. This was not due to any lack of enthusiasm on the part of the other boys for the work, but simply to the fact that they were not asked to do it by the officers of the Volunteer Company. I remember an occasion on which James Keating the Battalion Vice-Commandant, and two or three other Volunteers wished to raid an R.I.C. man's residence during his and his family's absence. While they could raise the window on the ground floor they could not get in, for the window was barred. I was sent for and I managed to squeeze in through the bars and made my way to the hall door which I opened for them.

At that time the enemy forces did not pay much attention to boys of my age so I was often entrusted with the care or conveyance of small arms. I recall assisting in the removal of arms from a dump on Whelan's farm at Clamps Castle to a dug-out at Carrigbawn, a distance of about two miles. Again, at the request of Jerry Whelan, I brought two revolvers, which were required on loan by the 7th Battalion, from Fethard to the house of William Hassey at Rathkenny, Drangan, and handed them over to Hassey who was a Company Captain. I cannot say for what purpose the revolvers were required.

On two or three occasions I met by appointment the Battalion Vice-Commandant some distance outside the town of Fethard, and I took charge of his revolver for him while he went into the town to transact whatever business he had to do.

One day early in 1921 Jerry Whelan sent for me and told me that himself, James Keating and another Volunteer named Thomas Healy had gone to the Railway Station in Fethard the previous night to seize the outgoing mails, but that they could not find the mail bag as the postman had hid it somewhere on the station.

They proposed to try again that night, and Whelan told me to go to the railway station early and when the postman arrived with the mail bag to watch him and see where he hid it. I did as instructed and when the postman arrived he went to the ladies' toilet and hid the mail bag there. I passed on the information to Whelan and his two pals who were waiting in an outhouse close to the station. They then donned masks, held up what few people were about the station platform, myself included, and went to the ladies' toilet where they got the mails. I can still see the postman's face as he exclaimed, "How in hell did they find out where I had put it!"

I felt very elated over the success of this venture, but my ardour received a damper when, next morning, my father was arrested in connection with the affair. He did not even know that his young son had anything to do with it. He was taken to the military barracks for questioning but he chanced to have a perfect alibi, for at the time the mails were taken some military personnel from the barracks were in the shop doing business with him.

Another incident in which I was able to be of assistance occurred when a crate containing rifles and ammunition for the Brigade arrived in Fethard from G.H.Q. Following the usual procedure in such cases the crate which was labelled "Stationery" was delivered by the carter to O'Shea's stationery shop to which it was addressed. O'Shea's stationery shop is next door to my father's premises in Burke Street. I was standing at the street corner watching my father and another man loading the crate onto an ass and cart when I noticed a patrol of Black & Tans leave the R.I.C. barracks about 100 yards away and coming in our direction. If I did not know exactly what the crate contained, at least I had a good idea.

I told my father and his helper of the approaching patrol, the loading of the crate which was very heavy was rushed and with two other boys, both members of the Sluagh, I hopped up and drove the ass and cart helter skelter to Jerry Whelan's house at Clamps Castle. Here the crate was transferred to a horse and cart which was standing in the yard, covered with farmyard manure, and driven away by one of the Whelans. Most of the way we were under the surveillance of the Black & Tan patrol and naturally we were sure that the patrol was following us. But in this respect our fears were groundless, for the patrol was on its way to take up duty at a boycotted farm about half a mile from Whelans.

On Sunday evening 18th June, 1921, a rumour went the rounds that three British Military Officers, Lieutenants Batteridge, Twagood and Glossop all stationed in Fethard Military barracks were missing. I went to the military barracks to see what I could find out about it. This time I was not permitted to remain long in the barracks as a soldier told me to get to hell out of the place. I was in it long enough, however, to notice that there was feverish activity going on. Troops were being paraded and put into lorries and I got the idea that arrangements were in hand for a large scale round-up. Somehow I also got either the idea or the information that troops were coming out from Cahir to take part in the round-up. If it was only an idea it subsequently proved to be correct. I went home at once and told my father. He decided that I should go immediately to the Brigade Headquarters at Rosegreen with the information. I might mention that a note of personal or family anxiety was also present, for my brother James, who was 'on the run', was a Brigade Officer and he was then in the Rosegreen district.

On a bicycle I set off for Rosegreen. I have an idea that on my way I either passed some troops or they passed me. At either Looby's or Davin's of Rathsallagh I met a Volunteer named Frank Perdue who was well known to me. I gave the information to him ~~to~~

him to pass it on, and as a result both the Brigade Staff and the staff of the 1st Battalion were enabled to get out of the area before the British cordons closed in.

I stayed that night at my aunt's house at Tullamaine near Rosegreen. Next morning an old friend of my father's named Tom Sayers came out from Fethard and told me that I was not to go back into the town. He said that the soldiers were searching everywhere for me and that they were describing me as the foxy-headed little so-and-so who was in the habit of frequenting the barracks. Thus at the age of 15 years I found myself 'on the run'.

The three British officers referred to had been captured while spying in civilian clothes. They were executed at Woodroffe by the I.R.A. As a reprisal the British closed down my father's premises in Fethard and he himself was ordered to leave the district.

Amongst those to whom I brought dispatches for my father were three who died during the struggle for Independence. These were the late Pierce McCann, T.D. who died while a prisoner in Gloucester Prison, and James Looby and William Delaney who were shot while in custody by British forces. All three lived in the Dualla district. Another notable character to whom I brought a dispatch from my father was the late Captain Johnny Leahy of Boherlan. From Fethard to Boherlan and back is a distance of at least 24 miles, quite a hefty push on a bicycle for a youth not yet 14 years of age, but, where the Movement was concerned, my father was a stern task master.

After the Truce I attended training camps at Clerihan and Ballinard. I also organised and trained Fianna Éireann Sluagh in five different Company areas and was appointed Commandant, 1st Battalion, Fianna Éireann, South Tipperary Brigade.

My object in putting these incidents on record with the Bureau of Military History is not a personal one. In the stories and histories of the period 1913 to 1921 which have been published to date, scant mention has been made of the part played by the boys of Fianna Eireann, and my interest in making this statement is solely to show how that organisation, in at least one small country district, could and did assist the Irish Volunteers and the Irish Republican Army.

Signed: William O'Flinn
(William O'Flinn)

Date: 29 Aug 1955
29 Aug. 1955.

Witness: J. Grace
(J. Grace)

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