

ORIGINAL

BUREAU OF MILITARY HISTORY 1913-21
BURO. STAIRE MILEATA 1913-21
No. W.S. 1262

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BUREAU OF MILITARY HISTORY, 1913-21

STATEMENT BY WITNESS.

DOCUMENT NO. W.S. 1,262

Witness

Phil Fitzgerald,
5 Susanville Road,
Drumcondra,
Dublin.

Identity.

Adjutant, 3rd Battalion, 3rd (South)
Tipperary Brigade, 1918 - ;
I. R. B. Centre (Rossmore).

Subject.

Third Battalion, 3rd (South)
Tipperary Brigade, 1916-1922.

Conditions, if any, Stipulated by Witness.

Nil

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ORIGINAL

BUREAU OF MILITARY HISTORY, 1922
BURO STAIRÉ MILEATA 1913-21
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STATEMENT BY MR. PHIL FITZGERALD,
5 Susanville Road, Drumcondra, Dublin.

Adjutant, 3rd Battalion (1918-1922), 3rd Tipperary Brigade.

My great-grandfather was evicted from the rich lands of the Golden Vale about the year 1800. Later, he settled on a small farm in the parish of Rossmore, up in the hills of Glenough. This is reputed to be the glen immortalised by the gallant "Seán Ó Duibhir a gleanna".

After years of grinding poverty under the heel of landlordism, my grandfather inherited the farm. He and his large family fought the hunger and poverty and degradation that followed the artificial famine of 1847. Exorbitant rents, and all the economic ills that accompany occupation by enemy forces, drove two of my aunts and four uncles to Australia. That was my background as I grew to manhood, and, in a dim sort of way, my heart rebelled against the system that drove my kith and kin beyond the seas.

I grew up passionately fond of reading and loved music and dancing and the songs of the countryside. The shadow of the emigrant ship haunted me as I gradually got a grip on my country's history. The so-called "national" schools tried to hide that history from us. About 1900 the Land Acts gave our people peasant proprietorship and comparative prosperity, and soon the Gaelic League gave us the incentive to stay in Ireland and work for Ireland. It was an uphill fight for years.

The failures of '48 and '67 were forever cast up at us, our fathers and mothers were ardent supporters of the party who had given them land reform, the Hibernian movement was strong and popular, and we were "rash youngsters" and "rainbow chasers".

Right up to 1916, we had no Republican organisation of any kind. Many of us joined Redmond's Volunteers, but we soon broke away. Father O'Growney's little books were being studied, but until the "blood bath" of the Rising, nobody seemed to be certain that we were marching in the right direction. The Great Day arrived. Eagerly we sought news of the fighting. A few fellows in a neighbouring parish were arrested and deported. Our blood was up, but we didn't get going properly until after the amnesty at Christmas 1916. In February, 1917, I was sworn in as I.R.B. Centre, and my duty from then on was crystal clear. I succeeded in recruiting some real good lads, and we all worked very hard promoting feiseanna, holding dances in friendly farmhouses to raise money for arms fund, and raiding houses of enemy supporters to collect shotguns and other arms.

On the night of the 15th August, 1917, I took part in armed raid for explosives at Molloy's stores, Thurles (2nd Tipperary Brigade). Large quantities of gelignite and detonators were seized. Experiments with explosives were now carried out and I became fairly proficient in their use. Many raids and experiments had a lighter side - it was not all dull slogging. We enjoyed our own and our comrades' mistakes; we poked fun at the other fellow, and were forever learning by trial and error - that was our only training. Coming home early one lovely summer morning from what was commonly

known as a Sinn Féin dance (these were really recruiting meetings), a few of us decided to raid a house at Drumwood for arms. The owner, Mr. Abercrombie, was reputed to be an ex British officer, tall, athletic and straight as a pine. He was caretaker of a large wood which lay beside his house. To try to avoid bloodshed, a council of war was held, and it was decided to try a little strategy. The others kept in hiding and I approached the house by the main gate. He had just got out of bed and was yawning lazily outside the door when I bade him good-morning. He eyed me questioningly and returned the greeting. I immediately apologised for disturbing him so early, and asked if he would sell me a few trees that I wanted for cutting into suitable lengths for roofing a shed. He looked me up and down again, picked up a small axe, said, "Come on", and headed out into the wood. The sight of such a wicked weapon made me feel very uncomfortable, and now began a battle of wits. The house was on the eastern side of the wood and, in order to get him away as far as possible, I insisted that more suitable timber grew on the western side. He reluctantly tramped off to where I wanted him, and I "purchased" three great trees of white deal. To mark them, he slashed a piece of bark of each with the dreaded axe. I gave him a fictitious name, said I'd call back about mid-day, pay him and collect the stuff. As we parted, I think he still doubted the propriety of my early morning visit. The man never saw me before, or after, that incident, until six years later I passed him by as he was fishing at a local river. He smilingly nodded and asked me if I was still in the timber business. Just shows what training those British officers get! How did we survive against them?

The threat of conscription early in 1918 gave us recruits galore. Brigades, Battalions and Companies were formed. I was elected Adjutant, 3rd Battalion, 3rd Tipperary Brigade. Our Battalion area comprised the parishes of Knockavilla, Anacarty, Hollyford, Rossmore and Clonoulty, with a Company in each parish, and, for security reasons, the Companies were named A., B., C., D. and E., respectively. I supervised the election of officers in D. and E. Companies, and organised Cumann na mBan in each Company area. About this time, we made a midnight raid for arms on the stately home of Major Armstrong (2nd Tipperary Brigade). A ruse to gain admission failed. He opened fire with a shotgun and gave us a rare fright. Returning home late one night from a Gaelic League meeting in Drombane, five of us were held up at the point of the gun by a large body of R.I.C., put under arrest for refusing to answer any questions, put on trial next day in Thurles and sentenced to one month in Limerick jail. From now on, we watched R.I.C. patrols and lay in ambush a few times to attempt disarming them.

January, 1919, "set the heather on fire". Two R.I.C. men, guarding explosives for quarrying purposes, were shot dead at Soloheadbeg. A large quantity of gelignite, two rifles and equipment were captured. We procured some of this stuff and had further experiments. Doon R.I.C. barracks (East Limerick Brigade) was marked down for capture by local Battalion officers. They had no explosives and they invited us to bring along some to blow in a gable that had no visible portholes. Here was a golden opportunity to test our efficiency! We arrived there with, what we considered, enough gelignite to blow

up the Great Pyramid. Our experiments had led us to believe that we could easily blow in that wall. In spite of a snow storm, trip wires which gave immediate alarm, the breaking through of already prepared portholes and dropping of hand grenades, and heavy rifle and machine gun fire, we managed to place three heavy charges in position. We had three terrific explosions but the wall stayed put.

It was now early 1920 and the Murder Gang from Thurles had shot I.R.A. men dead in their beds in 2nd Tipperary Brigade area. We lived well within the ambit of their midnight drunken forays, so a few of us decided to go on the run. Up to this, we had been working at home during the day, and trying to do national work at night. Now, we had time to look around and we picked out a suitable ambush position at Rathcannon on the main road between Clonoulty R.I.C. Barracks and Thurles, which was five miles distant. About midnight we dug a trench, sixteen feet long, four feet deep and somewhat more than halfway across the road, and camouflaged it with canvas sheeting and dust. Six of our men took up positions at Clonoulty Barracks and, during heavy sniping, succeeded in wounding a sergeant. Our plan was to compel the R.I.C. garrison to send up Verey lights which would attract lorries of Tans from Thurles as reinforcements. We were ready at ambush position to fall on the ruffians when their lorries dropped into the trench. Once again, it was "the best laid plans of men", etc. The sniping went on, the Verey went up for hours, but the Tans in Thurles slept their drunken sleep throughout the whole performance and, as day dawned, we removed covering from trench and dispersed.

Next, we turned our attention to Hollyford R.I.C. Barracks. This was a strong, two-storey stone structure with usual steel shutters on doors and windows, and portholes on all sides. Blowing a hole in any of the walls was out of the question. It was decided to lash long ladders together, climb up, bash a hole in the roof, pour in paraffin and set the building on fire. Halfway up the ladders, men were posted to keep portholes under fire and thereby prevent those inside from using them. This was a crude method of attack, but brave hearts and willing hands can accomplish almost anything. This was my "finest hour". I was selected to man the main gate with the gentle, gallant Seán Treacy. Our job was to prevent the police from escaping with their arms when the building became untenable. The attack was successful and, despite all dangers and difficulties, we had not a single casualty.

Soon we had a call for a few men to assist at attack on Clerihan R.I.C. Barracks. Six of us started off with no knowledge whatever of how to get there. We received very short notice and had to travel by night across country, with the Suir and two smaller rivers between us and our objective, which was fifteen miles away. As we by-passed Cashel, we could hear the hum of enemy lorries on the roads around the town. It was great fun consulting our half-inch map with the light of a bit of candle; usually, when we held council as to where we were and where "that bridge" was to be found, our candle was blown out by the night wind and we had to re-light it and start on the map all over again.

About this time, we had ambushes or attempted ambushes of R.I.C. patrols at Ballinahinch, Camas,

Killenure, Shroughavarla and Dundrum, and an ambush of a military patrol at Coolacussane. We also attempted an attack on Kilcommon R.I.C. Barracks (1st Tipperary Brigade). We were actually in battle position here when it was found that part of plan of attack had miscarried and we had to retire without firing a shot. Soon after this, we assisted at an ambush of military lorries at Ross (2nd Tipperary Brigade). From this attack we had to retire under heavy fire from an unexpected armoured car.

In order to attend to my duties as Battalion Adjutant, I had to return each week to Doorish, Rossmore, where we had our Battalion headquarters. B. Company officers arrested a spy, James Kirby, about this time. The Battalion Commandant, Tadhg Dwyer, myself and another took charge of his trial and execution. The local priest was called to administer the Last Rites to the unfortunate man. From April, 1921, until the Truce of 11th July, 1921, we had no R.I.C. or military patrols within our area. We had destroyed bridges, trenched roads and cut telegraphic communications. Later, telephones were removed from all post offices. Raids on trains for enemy mails were now frequent.

Enemy round-ups on a large scale were now the bogey. During the long, bright days and very short nights of May and June, we were subjected to two of those ordeals. Lorries, heavily laden with enemy troops, started out from Tipperary and Templemore military barracks about midnight and dropped men in full war kit along the military road that ran right through the centre of our area. About four thousand men were engaged in the operation. When day dawned, they moved off in a

westerly direction and thoroughly searched all fields, fences, houses and all likely hiding places. All young men were ordered out of bed and marched off before the advancing hordes. All were assembled in Hollyford village for inspection and interrogation. Some were assaulted, others threatened, but all were released. The same procedure was adopted later in the eastern end of the area, but those of us on the run eluded them each time. Towards late June and early July, we had several near misses in making captures and of being captured ourselves.

July 11th dawned and with it the fateful Truce. There was quiet jubilation throughout the country, but we soon settled down to serious training to be ready for all eventualities. Training camps were set up in Divisional, Brigade and Battalion areas. I attended Brigade camp at Ballinard Castle, Fethard, and later assisted in running a training camp at Ardmayle in our own Battalion area. Everything moved smoothly and splendidly until the disastrous Treaty was signed on 6th December, 1921. Loyal brothers in arms began to take sides and soon Civil War cast its dark shadow over the land. About ninety per cent. of the men in our Battalion area (and indeed in the whole Brigade) remained true to the oath of allegiance to the Republic. At this time, our Battalion headquarters was housed at vacated R.I.C. barracks at Dundrum. When the war shifted southwards, we received orders to blow up the barracks and proceed to Divisional headquarters at Clonmel. We remained here a few days awaiting instructions, and one little incident stands out in my memory. As I crossed the barrack square very early one glorious July morning

(this was 1922), I noticed a tall man, dressed in cap, trench coat and leggings, with a rifle slung loosely on his shoulder, talking to the sentry at the main gate. The sentry pointed in my direction. The "stranger" advanced towards me and asked if I could get him Seamus Robinson, Officer Commanding, Second Southern Division. I was happy to be able to comply immediately with his request - it was none other than Eamonn de Valera. After the heat and strife and bitter disappointment of negotiations and debates, he had joined up as a private. Next day, Divisional Headquarters (to which I was now attached as Staff Officer) was shifted southwards to Carrick-on-Suir to be in closer touch with the fighting which had broken out in Waterford. Here, I had the honour of having tea with the gallant Erskine Childers, but unfortunately I was not aware of his identity at the time.

A few days later, I was commissioned to reorganise East Limerick Brigade. There had been many defections amongst the officers here, and, after my arrival, I immediately called a meeting of all loyal officers in the Brigade area. The meeting place was fixed for Knocklong (famed in song and story). There was confusion and misunderstanding regarding scouting party. There was no report of Free State troops in the area but, as two local officers and myself entered Knocklong, we walked into about one hundred and fifty armed men in civilian attire - they turned out to be enemy forces. We were put under arrest and conveyed to Limerick jail. Conditions here were appalling; the warm August weather, the filth and stench of overcrowding drove us to many petty squabbles with our captors, and to two brief hunger-strikes. Just one month of that, and six hundred of us were put aboard

a small boat. Again, it was overcrowding and even filthier conditions than we endured at Limerick. After journeying down the Shannon and right round the south coast, we dropped anchor in Dublin Bay and were kept on board for ten days under the same shocking conditions. Then we were put ashore under heavy guard and entrained for Gormanston internment camp, Co. Meath.

This camp held one thousand prisoners and was reputed to be the best of its kind in Ireland. We were fortunate in having many members of the teaching profession with us, and soon we had established an education board. Classes, to suit all standards, were arranged in mathematics, engineering, Irish, English, French, Italian and Spanish. I eagerly availed of this golden opportunity to step up my meagre education. I worked hard and was rewarded by passing the Féinne examination, and got Certificates of Merit in Maths., Engineering and English. These latter were signed by members of the Education Board, and includes the signature of Seán T. O'Kelly who is now President of Ireland.

The war was now over for many months and hunger-strikes for release started in other camps and prisons throughout the country. We decided to go on hunger-strike in sympathy with our comrades and remained on strike for fifteen days. Soon after this, about two-thirds of our crowd were gradually released, and those of us who remained were shifted to other camps. I was with a small crowd posted to camp at Newbridge Military Barracks, and later some few of us were shifted to Tintown, The Curragh. After a few months here, I was

stricken with some kind of paralysis, and I was removed on a stretcher to the Curragh Military Hospital. After two months' treatment here, I was released on 4th June, 1924.

SIGNED: Phil Fitzgerald
(Phil Fitzgerald)

DATE: 30th September, 1955
30th September, 1955.

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No. W.S. 1267

WITNESS Seumas Robinson
(Seumas Robinson)