

W.S. 1,346

ORIGINAL

BUREAU OF MILITARY HISTORY 1913-21  
BURO STAIRÉ MILÉATA 1913-21  
No. W.S. 1,346

ROINN  COSANTA.

BUREAU OF MILITARY HISTORY, 1913-21.  
STATEMENT BY WITNESS.

DOCUMENT NO. W.S. 1,346.....

Witness

Robert Kinsella (Bob),  
St. Aidan's,  
Ferns,  
Co. Wexford.

Identity.

Member of Irish Volunteers,  
Co. Wexford, 1914 - ;

Subject.

- (a) National affairs, Co. Wexford,  
(Ferns) 1914 -.
- (b) Ferns Company Irish Volunteers  
(Co. Wexford) Easter 1916.

Conditions, if any, Stipulated by Witness.

Nil

File No. S.2682.....

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STATEMENT BY ROBERT (BOB) KINSELLA,

St. Aidan's, Ferns, Co. Wexford.

In the year 1830 a tyrant landlord lived in "The Palace", Ferns. His name was Butler O'Brien. There was nothing but evictions in the area. As each family was evicted the house was levelled to the ground. The ditches were pulled down, making big fields out of each small farmer's holding. There were eight families evicted in one day. This went on for a number of years until the people became united and decided to resist the evictions.

One day during the year 1839 Butler O'Brien was going on horseback to where his men were doing his bloody work of breaking down the hedges and making larger fields. Mike Murphy went up to Butler O'Brien and handed him a letter. When O'Brien started to open the envelope Murphy shot him dead. The horse, with O'Brien still on its back, galloped back to "The Palace". I am told the blood stains are still on the boards where he was laid when they brought him in.

When making his escape Murphy went into a field where a woman was gathering weeds off her land. She had heard the shot. Murphy asked could he depend on her. She told him to go his way and that she would pray for him night and day and that no harm would come to him, "as", she said, "I was expecting to be the next to be put out".

Murphy continued his way and crossed the Camolin-Clonee road. A violent thunderstorm broke out. It was accompanied by very heavy rain and hailstones. Murphy took shelter under a big hedge. He next saw two R.I.C. men. They also took shelter a short distance from him. Murphy thought they were coming to arrest him and he kept a distance away from them so that he could shoot them if they made any effort to arrest him. Apparently they had not heard about the shooting, as they made no attempt to arrest him. The hailstones were so big that day that they broke some of the shop windows in Ferns.

It happened that the morning of the shooting a tramp had come into Ferns from New Ross. He was arrested by the R.I.C. and charged with the murder of Butler O'Brien. He was tried three times but the jury on each occasion failed to agree on a verdict. Murphy attended the trials and if the tramp was convicted he intended to confess that he shot Butler O'Brien and to give himself up. Murphy later went to America and wrote back saying that he shot Butler O'Brien.

After Butler O'Brien's death Captain Irwin became landlord. He was a good man and very good to his tenants. Of course, he had got a lesson.

On the 2nd February, 1939, one hundred years after all the trouble, twenty-one families were put back on this estate, most of them being descendants of people who had been evicted.

James Fitzharris, better known as "Skin the Goat", was the eldest of a family of seven and lived with his

mother in the parish of Ballybeg. He worked for a man named John Sinnott. One day he was drawing manure out to the farm and, as usual, he had a sheepdog with him. A hunt was on at the time and when the fox came near the sheepdog attacked the fox and killed it. When the huntsmen came up they enquired all about "Skin the Goat" and then went to Mr. Sinnott and told him to sack "Skin the Goat". The crowbar men came and evicted the family and knocked down the house. Everyone in the parish was warned not to give the family shelter or to help them in any way. However, a small farmer defied them and took the family in to his house and sheltered them.

"Skin the Goat" went to Dublin, where he became a hackney car driver. He drove the Invincibles on that May day in 1882 when Cavendish and Burke were killed in the Phoenix Park. For his part in the affair he was sentenced to a long term of imprisonment. When I was a small boy I heard all this related many times by my parents and the old people of the district.

I, myself, remember well the night "Skin the Goat" came home after serving 17½ years' imprisonment. At that time the lads of the parish assembled at the crossroad when the day's work was finished. Some of them used come into our house to play cards. About eleven o'clock one night, it was a lovely moonlight night, in the threshing season, we got word that "Skin" had been released. We were all very excited and overjoyed at the thought of his coming home. We heard the sound of a horse galloping and soon "Skin" arrived on a sidecar, the property of Mr. Lett of Ferns and driven by Paddy

Larkin. We gave him a great welcome.

In those days, after each threshing there was a half barrel of porter and a dance until morning, and "Skin" attended all the dances that season. He got married and went to America, but he was not allowed to land there. He was sent back to Dublin, where he stayed until his death.

About the year 1908 I was at a funeral on horseback. There were about forty others also on horseback as the funeral had to go over four miles. A man rode up to me and started talking about the Rising of '98. I let my mind out to him and told him that, in my opinion, the only way we could get our freedom was by the gun. He told me that there was in existence an organisation whose object was to obtain our freedom by physical force, if necessary.

The following Sunday when I was coming from a meeting of the Confraternity , a man approached me and asked me to come to a meeting. It was a meeting of the Irish Republican Brotherhood - the organisation the man had told me about when going to the funeral a few days previously.

I went to the meeting and was sworn in by Mr. Tom Roche, who was Centre of the Ferns Circle. It was arranged that we would meet at a place called O'Shea's Wood. It was called after a man who at one time owned it and who hanged himself in the hollow where we had arranged to meet. At the time we used meet there it was owned by a Mr. Gilbride. It was up to 30 acres and most of it was covered by bushes. He set it to

small farmers at one pound (£1) per acre. The small bushes were used for bedding horses and cattle and the larger ones for firing. We brought terrier dogs with us to the meetings so as to give the impression that we were going hunting, as it was a great place for rabbits. There were between eight and twelve of us present at the first meetings. After some time Paddy Doyle and I were appointed organisers (unpaid), and from that on our membership greatly increased.

I was captain of the Clonee hurling team and I played football with the Ferns team, of which Paddy Doyle, my fellow I.R.B. organiser, was captain. Both these teams won the championship in 1912, and every member of the two teams was an I.R.B. man.

In Ferns we had no field to play hurling in, only the three cornered field where the school is now built. It was called "the boycott" and belonged to a Mr. Foley who had a pub where Kevin Kinsella is now. Donovan of Ballymore was landlord. Mr. Gilbride owned 20 acres opposite Dan Carton's lane. He was letting it for grass and the hurling and football committee took it for a large sum of money. The following were on the committee: Mr. James Bernie, chairman; Tom Redmond, secretary; Mike Neill, treasurer; Tom Roche, Pat Doyle, Dan Carton, Pat McCullagh, James Conlan, Pat Breslan and myself.

About 1912 the I.R.B. got a small rifle. It was a single shot and fired .303 ammunition. It was operated by pushing a lever which was located underneath.

This ejected the cartridge case. It was then loaded from the top. We paid threepence for each round we fired, but as the ammunition was very scarce we fired only a few rounds each.

In 1913 we started Irish classes. We got the use of an old condemned house which had been used by a workman of Mr. Lett. We paid a shilling a week rent for it.

Also in 1913 Carson started the Ulster Volunteers. They were drilling openly and were not interfered with. They also were engaged in gun-running. Although the Irish Volunteers were not started in Ferns until early in 1914, things were getting hot and we were getting stronger. We held a parade on 23rd November, 1913, to commemorate the Manchester Martyrs. Over 100 took part in the parade. One of our members, Vesty Neill of Newtown, had a bugle to help us keep step. He was approached by Sergeant Thorsney and four R.I.C. men, who attempted to take the bugle. We went to Vesty's assistance and the R.I.C. withdrew without capturing the bugle.

Early in 1914 a company of the Irish Volunteers was started in Ferns. Father Michael Murphy, who was C.C. of Ballyduff, a half parish of Ferns, took a prominent part in the formation of the company. He is now Canon and Parish Priest of Clonroche. The I.R.B. was behind the starting of the company and instructed its members to join, and so we were able to get control of the company by electing I.R.B. men to various offices.

There was no one in the company who had any military experience or knowledge to train us. Fr. Murphy asked W.B. Whitmore, who had been in the British Army and who lived in his parish, to come to drill the Ferns Company. We had about 100 men in the company and each paid a weekly subscription. We were drilled three nights a week in the Gua field by W.J. Whitmore, after which we marched to The Square, Ferns, where, after being addressed by Whitmore, we were dismissed.

A committee was set up to control the company. It consisted of the following: John Bolger, C.P. Brien, D. Murphy, Joe Connors, Dr. Green, (they were all Justices of the Peace - J.P.s), Fr. Murphy, Michael Foley, The Square, and W.J. Whitmore. The latter proposed that the Volunteers should be represented on the committee and that Volunteers from the ranks equal to the number of the existing committee should be appointed, and so Tom Roche, P. Doyle, Pat Ronan, P. Dunbar and I became members of the committee. A collection for the Volunteers was held outside the chapel gate and two hundred pounds (£200) was subscribed.

Shortly after the Great War broke out the Volunteers split and the vast majority of the Volunteers in Co. Wexford went with Redmond, except in Ferns and Enniscorthy where only about half went with him. Needless to say, the men who remained loyal to their republican ideals in those two towns were I.R.B. men.

Soon after the beginning of the Great War the British started a munitions factory in Arklow. A special train ran from Wexford town every morning to bring workers to the factory. Men got in at every station.



Mr. James Bernie of Ferns was a foreman in the factory and on account of him I got a good job in it. I was working with the fitters. I met a very nice fellow there. He was a fitter named Denis McNeillis. We got talking and I discovered that he, too, was an I.R.B. man. He came to Enniscorthy for the Whit week-end and I spent the two days with him and put him in touch with some of our own crowd, including the Misses Moran, Lar Lynch and Pat Keegan.

The Redmondite Volunteers got the use of a rifle range at Kilbora Wood from Captain Irwin, and McNeillis came a few times from Arklow to practice shooting there.

We had a number of Mauser rifles. A rifle and ten rounds of ammunition cost £2 - 10 - 0. Some Volunteers paid cash down. Others paid for theirs by weekly instalments. McNeillis bought a rifle and a revolver.

On 23rd November, 1915, the Volunteers held a Manchester Martyrs Commemoration on Vinegar Hill, where we were addressed by Padraig Pearse. We marched all the way there from Ferns and back. There were only 83 Volunteers present that day from the whole county of Wexford. Three came from New Ross; they were Phil Lennon, McGrath and Joe McCarthy. Four came from Wexford town - Seán Sinnott, Myles Redmond and two named Byrne. From Oilgate were Joe Cummins and Parke Bolger. There were five from Gorey district: Seán Etchingham, Joe Funge, Seán O'Byrne, Jas Gleeson and Doyle. A couple came from Ballindaggin and the remainder were from Ferns and Enniscorthy. That gives some idea of the strength of the Irish Volunteers in County Wexford

before the Rising.

Poor Pearse came back again in 1916 and gave a lecture in the Athenaeum, Enniscorthy. He said: "Some of you or me will have to make the supreme sacrifice and we will make it willingly".

During Holy Week, 1916, we received orders to parade at 3 p.m. on Easter Sunday. We were to bring our arms, ammunition, equipment and two days' rations. We paraded as instructed and a messenger arrived from Battalion Headquarters in Enniscorthy instructing us to dismiss but to be prepared for another mobilisation at short notice. We returned to our homes. Late on Easter Monday we heard that a Rising had started in Dublin.

On Tuesday morning we were mobilised and marched towards Enniscorthy. Near Scarawalsh Bridge we got a message from Enniscorthy not to proceed any further. There were between 15 and 20 of us, and Pat Ronan, who was 1st Lt. in the company, was in charge as W.J. Whitmore, who was Company Captain, had gone to Dublin during Holy Week and had not returned. The main body then went to Ballinahallen Wood. With John Kelly (later Commandant) I went on to Enniscorthy, where we saw Jack Gallagher and Jim Cullen. We got bread and cheese, which we brought back to the lads in the wood. We returned to Ferns that night with instructions to await further orders.

On Wednesday everything was in confusion. Orders came from Battalion H.Q. to mobilise and they were cancelled soon afterwards. This happened several times during the day.

On Thursday we got definite orders to mobilise and to proceed to Enniscorthy. That evening about 20 of the Ferns Company mobilised and, under Lt. Pat Ronan, marched to Enniscorthy. On arrival there we went to the Athenaeum, which had been taken over as Headquarters.

The Volunteers were in complete control of the town. Guards had been placed on the banks and outposts on all roads leading to the town. The R.I.C. did not attempt to leave their barrack.

Late on Saturday a large party, including all the men of the Ferns Company, under the command of Paul Galligan and John Murphy of Enniscorthy, went to Ferns, where we took over the R.I.C. barracks which had been evacuated. Outposts were placed on all roads leading to the town. A man named John Byrne arrived in Ferns with the information that the R.I.C. and military were mobilised in Arklow to march on Ferns and Enniscorthy. John Murphy came to me and told me to get a few good men and to go out the main Ferns-Arklow road to as near Camolin as possible and to block the road. I got Syl. Murphy, Thomas Whelan and Michael Walsh. A man named Ennis drove us out almost to Camolin. Murphy and Walsh cut a tree and blocked the road while Whelan and I were on guard. Having carried out our task, we returned to Ferns and were told to go home to our beds as there were too many in the barrack and school, which had also been taken over.

When we returned to Ferns next day we found that the Volunteers had been withdrawn and were told that the surrender had taken place. We set out for the country and went to Mr. Carton, Kiltomas, and stayed there for a

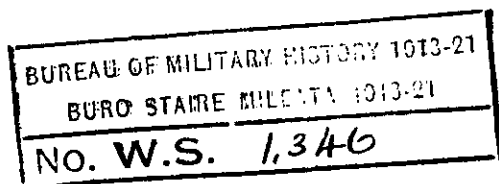
day or so. Mr. Carton went into Ferns to find out what was happening. He returned and told us that the Volunteers had been arrested and that all the R.I.C. and military had gone off with them. Thinking they had gone on to Dublin we allowed that we would be safe until near morning, but they only went to Arklow and returned and caught us in bed.

We were arrested and brought to Arklow, where we were put on a gun-boat and conveyed to North Wall, Dublin. From there we were taken to Richmond Barracks, where we were under Bob Barton, who treated us very well. We were given bread, bully beef and water. After some days we were sent to Wandsworth Prison. I was released about October, 1916.

When we came home we started collecting all the arms which had been dumped at the surrender. After the general release of the prisoners we reorganised the company and started drilling again. Some of the men who left us at the Redmondite split came back. We worked for the Sinn Féin candidate in the 1918 general election and we swept the country.

In 1919 I took part in a number of raids for arms, and after the North Wexford Flying Column was formed I took part in the blocking of roads and cutting telephone wires. On a few occasions I lay in ambush with others but the enemy did not come.

I joined the National Army in 1922 and left it in 1924.



Signed:

Robert Kinsella

(Robert Kinsella)

Date:

St Aidan's Terms

Witness:

Sean Brennan Lieut.-Col.

(Investigator)(Sean Brennan) Lieut.-Col.

28<sup>th</sup> Jan. 1956