

W.S. 1404

BUREAU OF MILITARY HISTORY 1913-21  
BURO STAIRS MILITARY 1913-21  
No. W.S. 1404

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ORIGINAL

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BUREAU OF MILITARY HISTORY, 1913-21.

STATEMENT BY WITNESS.

DOCUMENT NO. W.S. 1404

Witness

Thomas Dargan,  
5, Connolly Avenue,  
Janesboro',  
Limerick.  
Identity.

Company Captain, C. Company, Limerick Battalion.

Subject.

Fianna and Irish Volunteer Activities,  
Co. Limerick, 1917-1921.

Conditions, if any, Stipulated by Witness.

Nil.

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ORIGINAL

BUREAU OF MILITARY HISTORY 1913-21  
BUREAU STAIRÉ MILEATA 1913-21  
No. W.S. 1,404

STATEMENT BY THOMAS DARGAN

5 Connolly Avenue, Janesboro', Limerick.

I was born in Limerick in May 1905, and went to school to the Christian Brothers and Leamy's School and later the Technical Institute.

I became an apprentice to the printing industry in the "Limerick Chronicle" in 1918. I broke my apprentice period in 1921 and again in 1922, but completed it in 1923.

I joined Na Fianna Eireann in 1917 on its reorganisation after the Rising. At this period Paddy McSweeney was in charge and meetings were held in the rooms of the Railwaymen's Society at Lower Hartstronge Street. The strength at the time was about 25 and did not improve very much numerically for a long time. Regular meetings were held each week at which signalling and scouting classes were held.

During 1918 the organisation showed signs of a big improvement and the members took part in the General Election of that year. In the summer of 1918, the Fianna held a camp at Tinaranna, Co. Clare, for two periods of two weeks each. I attended the second two-week period.

My first introduction to firearms was at this camp. A miniature rifle (.22) was brought to the camp for instruction and firing practice. As a result of the firing the camp was visited by the R.I.C. who had a barracks about two miles away. They inquired if any guns were in the camp and who was doing the firing. As a result of this visit the rifle was removed to the house of the local Parish Priest who had supported Sinn Fein in the election.

On the Saturday we broke camp, the rifle was wrapped in canvas to be brought to Limerick and, as we waited in the railway station at Killaloe for a train home, all our stuff was piled on the platform including the rifle. As we were transferring our equipment to the train, two R.I.C. men entered the station, apparently expecting some parcels. Seeing our pile on the platform, one of them started to examine it, but, noticing it was camp material, he walked away. So our one and only gun escaped capture.

Prior to 1916, the Fianna had a hall in the back of a house occupied by the Daly family in Hartstronge Street. The ground was given by John Daly, himself a Fenian who had spent several years in jail, and ~~brother~~<sup>Uncle</sup> of Ned Daly who was executed in 1916. ~~and the hall was used as a meeting place for the Fianna.~~

After the camp in 1918, it was decided again to use the Fianna Hall and, until it was burned by the Black and Tans in 1920, it was used as the local meeting place of the Fianna. The organisation at this period was beginning to gain strength and parades and public marches were held.

At this period the organisation was divided up in sloughs to correspond with the various parishes in the city - St. Michael's, St. Joseph's, St. John's, St. Mary's, St. Munchin's and St. Patrick's.

In 1919 P. McSweeney left Limerick for Dublin and was replaced by Gerard Christy as O/C. Late in 1919, some of us who had been members since 1917 decided it was time some effort was made to collect guns, but this did not meet with the wholehearted approval of the senior officers. It must be stated at this point that all officers were elected by the

rank and file, so it was decided that a change in officer ranks was long overdue, but nothing was definitely done about it at the time, and the sluaghs were practically working on their own without any central control. After a time, the sluagh system appeared to have broken down and all the members were meeting as one unit.

The senior members drew up a plan to collect arms and so started the Fianna arms raids. Most of the raids were carried out by two groups and our success at the beginning was anything but good, due principally to lack of good information. It must be remembered that at the time the average age of the Fianna raiding parties was about 15 years and they were starting out without any experience. Nevertheless, a certain amount of success came our way and as time went on we were gaining valuable experience which proved very useful in 1920 and 1921, when activities on the war front were every day gaining momentum.

In 1920, on instructions from H.Q., the Fianna was reorganised on company and battalion lines and we became the Limerick Battalion. The city was divided up into company areas to correspond with the I.R.A. company areas, which numbered seven. We were now controlled by a Battalion Council which consisted of Battalion O/C., Gus Gabbett; Battalion V/Commandant Joe Crowe; Battalion Adjutant Liam McInerney; Battalion Q.M. Paddy Dugan, and seven captains from the seven companies.

Elections were now stopped and all officers and N.C.Os. were appointed by the Battalion Council. On the formation of the battalion I became the first captain of C/Company, which rank I held until captured by Black and Tans on 22nd May 1921.

As a result of the raids for arms we had now collected several shotguns and revolvers and were prepared to extend our activities. One Sunday morning, two of our members - Gus Gabbett and Liam Barry - held up a British officer in O'Connell St. and captured a .45 Webley which he was wearing. One of our first big raids was on the offices of Messrs. Bannatyne's of Roche's St. About twelve members took part in the raid of whom I was one.

It was decided to start the raid at 9 o'clock in the morning in order to get the clerical staff, which was about 15 strong, under supervision before they went to their various places in the office. At 8.45 we entered the office and rounded up the man who opened the building for the staff. Two members were placed just inside the door in order to intercept the office personnel as they came in. As soon as they were inside the door, they were held up and handed over to other members to be detained in one corner of the office. About 9.10 a.m. all the staff were safely rounded up and it was discovered that the cashier, who had the keys of a big safe, had not yet reported for duty. There was nothing to do but wait, but this was very risky as the building was only two blocks from William St. Barracks, H.Q. of the Black and Tans, and was a very busy office which was used extensively by the public. If we should delay any length of time we might have several of the firm's customers on our hands as well as the staff. About 9.15 the cashier arrived and was immediately captured and the keys demanded of him. At first he refused, but on seeing the display of revolvers, he handed over the keys. He was taken to the safe and told to open it and we got the shock of our lives. Instead of office books which were usually kept there, we discovered it held several thousand pounds in notes and silver. I think the cashier got

a shock when he discovered we were more interested in fire-arms than money. During the interval of waiting for the cashier, one of the clerks made a move towards the telephone but changed his mind when one of the party pointed a gun at him.

At this time I was an apprentice compositor employed by the "Limerick Chronicle". On three days every week I went to Bannatyne's office for the list of prices for flour, bran and other feeding stuffs and always to the same man. The morning of the raid was one of the days I was due for a visit. At 3 o'clock that evening I entered Bannatyne's office as usual and went up to the clerk. He looked at me in surprise as I had held him up that morning. He started to give me the prices when in came a party of R.I.C. and Tans. I was beginning to feel a bit nervous at this time, but when I looked at the clerk behind the counter, I thought he was going to faint.

The same morning the party also raided a pub and a private house. At this time we were becoming experts at raiding. We got information that a shotgun was in a house about three miles from Limerick. Although this was outside the Limerick Battalion area, we considered it in the Fianna area as we had a section of the Fianna at Clonlara, Co. Clare, about four miles from the city, and a company organised in Castleconnell, Co. Limerick, a village about seven miles from Limerick.

In order to carry out this raid, six of us went to the house by bicycle. After a lot of searching we discovered the gun hidden in the thatch. It may be worth recording that in this house we found a considerable sum of money in a dressing-table drawer. I noticed at the time that in most

of the fairly big houses we raided a big amount of ready money appeared to have been kept.

Some time in 1920 we decided to capture bicycles from the British military. The carrying of dispatches was getting a big job which required a bicycle.

It was decided that the G.P.O. would be watched for military messengers. Two members usually took part in the operation. One went to see where the soldier was doing business and on giving the all-clear signal the other just jumped on the bicycle and went away. After a time the British military got wise that the raids were organised and sent two cyclists to the G.P.O. We changed our method and concentrated on the shops in O'Connell St. and in this way we must have taken 50 or 60 bicycles. Sometimes our members were armed, but in most cases we depended on speed of operation to get us through. We lost two members on this operation. One held up a soldier outside the Soldiers' Home and took his bicycle and got away. He was arrested a few days after and was tried in Cork and identified. He was sentenced to two years. The other member got captured while taking a bicycle from outside a publichouse. Paddy O'Mahoney was the captured member. He was accompanied by Tommy Lowe in the attempted capture of the bicycle. They were taking the machine away when suddenly two armed Tans came out of the pub, accompanied by the soldier. O'Mahony took out his gun and fired six times at the Tans, but he was out of luck, as the cartridges failed to explode. The Tans captured O'Mahony and Lowe and were bringing them to Frederick St. Barracks. On the way, Lowe pushed the bicycle against the soldier and in the confusion escaped. O'Mahony was tried by courtmartial and sentenced to two years. The Court said that only for his young age they would have dealt more severely with him.

The bicycles, on being captured, were brought to the Fianna Hall where they were immediately stripped of all military equipment and repainted. The night the Fianna Hall was burned, about 14 bicycles in the course of being changed-over were destroyed.

The dispatch service was going full swing in 1920 and was under the complete control of the Fianna Battalion Council who supplied all messengers. The operational centre for dispatches was the Irish Transport and General Workers' Union Hall, O'Connell St., Limerick, which was used as I.R.A. Brigade H.Q. The top landing of the building was used exclusively by the Brigade Adjutant and Brigade I.O. G.H.Q. dispatches for mid-Limerick, East Limerick, West Limerick and Clare came through Limerick City, and getting them through to their respective destinations was the job of the Fianna.

In order to start them on their way, messengers had to travel by bicycle to the following places:- Annacotty, Co. Limerick - 3 miles; Castleconnell, Co. Limerick - 7 miles; Cratloe, Co. Clare - 6 miles; Caherconlish, Co. Limerick - 8 miles; Patrickswell, Co. Limerick - 5 miles. In the end of 1920 and in 1921 these roads became very dangerous for cyclists as British military, Black and Tans and Auxiliaries were practically continuously on them, but during the whole period only one dispatch was captured. One of our members, John Keane, was going through O'Connell St. on his way to Cratloe with a message in code from G.H.Q. for Austin Brennan, Clare, when he ran into a search party of Black and Tans and was arrested.

The Fianna were also responsible for the collection of all dispatches from G.H.Q. which arrived in Limerick at the railway station. The messages, which usually were carried by



the train staff, were handed over to a contact in the Railway office and then collected by our members and brought to I.R.A. Brigade H.Q. Messages for H.Q. were delivered at the station and then forwarded to Dublin by the same procedure.

As I.R.A. Brigade H.Q. was situated in the Transport Union Hall, it was fairly well covered, but also had its disadvantages, as any building used by a big number of men was liable to be raided at any time.

The Brigade decided that a protection system should be put into operation and the following scheme was put into use:- As the offices were on the top floor of the building, a ladder was procured for escape through the attic onto the roof and the party could come down through the attic of one of the houses in the street, having pulled up the ladder when leaving. A push bell on the outside of the house was connected to the offices. When the offices were being used, one of our members stood at the side of the hall door with his back to the bell. Should a raiding party pull up in front of the building, he pressed the bell three times. When the bell rang in the offices, all papers and anything else dangerous in the office were collected and brought on to the roof for safety. If a meeting was taking place there at the time of the raid, usually only two went on to the roof and the remainder went downstairs and mingled with the ordinary members of the Hall in the billiard room or card room. The system worked very well, the only disadvantage being to the member on duty who usually had to answer a lot of questions put by the police and, likely as not, got a few punches for his trouble.

This protection system worked very successfully and, right up to the Truce, no I.R.A. officer or document was captured at Brigade H.Q.

On the formation of the I.R.A. City Active Service Unit, scouting for its operations was carried out by the Fianna. I acted as scout on several occasions and, accompanied by other members, carried revolvers from one part of the city to another, dodging patrols and search parties on the way.

Late in 1920, G.H.Q. issued instructions to the Mid-Limerick Brigade to trace the movements of Brigadier General Decies (at the time in command of the Black and Tans in the south) who was considered a very dangerous man. His description was given to the Fianna with instructions to report to the Brigade immediately if he was seen in the city. One of our members spotted him one morning as he was going into William St. Barracks. The watching of the barracks was carried out by our members. On the third morning we discovered that he was staying in a shop in O'Connell St. named Herbert's, which carried on the business of selling books and stationery. We discovered the number of the car he used, I.K. 909, and got one of our members to look for a job as messenger in Herbert's. This member got envelopes from his room which proved who he was. At the time, the British O/C. of Limerick was using a car numbered M.D.2341, and Decies often used it to go from William St. Barracks (Black and Tans) to the New Barrack (military). It was now discovered that Decies used to leave the New Barracks every morning about 9 o'clock for a tour of the area. The brigade decided to attack the car as it was turning a corner from a short road from the barracks into O'Connell Avenue. Most of the attacking party did not know this car by sight and had to depend on a signal from the scouting party. As a big amount of motor traffic was liable to come out of the barracks the party were instructed to depend on the signal. I had been there on two mornings, but the car did not come. After several mornings watching, a car was seen leaving the barracks and the alert signal was

given. As the car approached the corner it was seen that it M.D.2341 in which Decies often travelled. The all-clear was given and as the car approached the corner it was attacked only to discover that the only occupants of the car were the driver and an officer.

One incident in connection with Decies that deserves special mention occurred while our member was still employed as a messenger in Herbert's. After the Brigadier had left his lodgings one morning, the Fianna boy got into his bedroom and carried out a search for documents. He discovered a diary in a coat pocket. The diary was carried out of the premises and immediately copied and returned. Some valuable information was obtained by this move.

One evening in 1921 I was instructed by the I.R.A. Brigade I.O. to go to the G.P.O. and get in touch with an I.O. there named McGrath and collect the R.I.C. code messages destined for the central control offices in William St. I inquired for McGrath and explained my mission. While I was talking to him, he offered me a cigarette; after lighting his own cigarette and mine, he handed me a match box which contained a copy of the changed code sent out by R.I.C. Headquarters in Dublin. All code messages to the R.I.C. were collected in this way from the G.P.O. by Fianna members.

Early in 1921, we were instructed by the I.R.A. to transfer all available arms under our control to some place outside the city area. A vacant house in Tirvoe, about three miles from Limerick, was selected and all our arms and ammunition transferred there. Several members stayed in the house at night, but, as most of us were working, it was necessary to leave there every morning for work. This house was pretty isolated, being built on its own near the bank

of the Shannon, and it was thought safe enough from interference in the daytime. The idea of transferring the arms was for a big ambush planned for a spot about five miles from the city.

We occupied the house for several weeks and looked after our very precious store as best we could, hoping that the operation planned would come off soon or that we would be allowed to transfer our stuff back to the city, where we could keep it much easier and safer. What happened we never did discover, but one day a big party of R.I.C. in lorries raided the house and captured our store - rifles, shotguns, grenades and some revolvers, with some explosives we had recently captured. This move practically cleaned us out except for some revolvers which had not been transferred.

During 1921, we ran regular arms instruction classes for the members, usually held at some place adjacent to the city. On 22nd May 1921, a class was to be held in a small wood in Rosbrien, a short distance from the city. I had arranged to meet Gus Gabbett at 3 o'clock that day to go to the class. Several N.C.Os. from my company were to be present. As we entered the scrub we saw, a short distance from us, some of our members sitting on the ground and some strange men standing around whom we took to be I.R.A. men. As we approached I shouted to the party "Coméon, put your hands up", a cry wellknown at the time. Imagine my surprise when four forms came out from behind some bushes and said: "Now, for a change, put your arms up". The place was completely surrounded by R.I.C. and the party sitting on the ground were already prisoners. We were brought over to the rest of the party and then discovered that the rifle which was to be used for instruction had already been brought into the place and was

in the hands of the R.I.C. Twelve members were captured including the Battalion Commandant (Gus Baggett); O/C. C/Coy. (T. Dorgan); Captain and 1st Lieutenant of F/Company (F. Cooney and G. Cox). We were marched to William Street R.I.C. Barracks on that Sunday evening. Sean Keane, (who had just been released from Kilkenny Jail a few days before where he was doing six months for having a dispatch and was known to the R.I.C.) was made lead the party with the rifle at the slope.

An identification parade was held in the barracks and the R.I.C. knew the names and addresses of some of us. We were all locked into one cell that evening, but we had a continuous stream of Tans and R.I.C. calling in to see us.

About 2 o'clock on the Monday morning the cell door was opened and a party of Tans came in and took out one of our members. The Dayroom was situated near the cell and a short time after he left we heard a lot of noise in the Dayroom, and the Tans asking questions. After some time he came back and another member was brought out. We asked the first member what happened and he told us the Tans were having an interrogation parade and, whether you answered their questions or not, you were in for a rough time. They put him on a form and started asking questions and, at the same time, started pulling his hair and punching him on the face and knocking him off the form.

We immediately decided that every other member brought out for interrogation would shout as loud as he could every time he was struck; that whatever was to be gained by shouting, nothing would be gained by taking punishment silently. The beatings on this night were very severe, and the shouting was heard all over William Street.

After the second member came back the worst for wear one of the Tans shouted "Next", and the procedure was repeated. I think I was about the fourth member who was brought out. On being brought from a dark cell into a well-lighted room I could hardly see where I was going. I was put sitting on a form and three Black and Tans stood in front of me and one sat at a table writing. I was asked my name and, on replying, I got a blow on the side of the head and fell off the form. As I was on the floor I got a kick and was told to get up. The usual questions were asked and with every question something happened to me. The Tan at the table asked what was the colour of my eyes and another Tan said they were brown, and immediately hit me over the eye and then exclaimed: "change that, they are black now".

I was then asked where I worked and, on replying: "The Limerick Chronicle" one of the Tans said they should raid that place in the morning. I was worried over this remark as I had a Colt .45 and ammunition in my place of employment. I had brought it there on the Saturday morning intending to collect it again on Saturday night for the parade on Tuesday. The office usually did not close until about 8.30 on Saturday. My intention was to collect it about 8 o'clock and bring it to I.R.A. Brigade H.Q., which was only across the street, but when I arrived at the "Chronicle" office that night it was closed.

After a few more questions I was brought back to the cell.

The following morning we were brought to a wash-house and made wash and clean up. Some of the boys did not come off too badly, but each and every one of us was sore.

During that morning we were standing in the barrack yard

and a party of Tans came on the scene. We were standing about three yards apart and the Tans came over and said: "Open your mouth". When you did this, they put something into your mouth and gave you a slap on the face. After a few seconds you realised you had swallowed a piece of soap.

On Monday evening we were transferred to Limerick Prison. During the week following we were tried by courtmartial in the New Barracks and sentenced to three years penal servitude. About twelve days after being captured, we were told one morning we were being transferred to some other prison. Accompanied by five other prisoners, we were brought by lorry to Limerick Station and put on a train bound for Cork.

On arriving in Cork we were brought to Cork Detention Barracks some time about 6 o'clock in the evening. Entering the barracks I was immediately struck by the awful silence that seemed to hang over the whole building. One would think that it was unoccupied, but I later learned that there were about 40 prisoners there at the time and that six of them were under sentence of death.

We had no food since breakfast, so we demanded our supper, only to be told that all meals for the day were over and they had no intention of giving us a meal. We were placed in cells and told we would be transferred sometime later that night. One of our party started kicking the cell door and, one by one, the remainder joined in. After a few minutes the whole wing was ringing with noise. The other prisoners, not knowing what the row was about but hearing the racket, then joined in with the result that the noise became terrific. The prison staff started running about trying to restore order, but the situation by this time was out of hand.

After a while, our party were collected and brought to

the main hall under an armed guard. On leaving the barracks we were attacked by soldiers who were standing around, and our escort had to protect us. It appears that an ambush had taken place that day in Co. Cork in which some soldiers were killed and we were mistaken for prisoners captured in the ambush. We were brought from Cork to Cobh and placed on a tender and brought over to Spike Island.

During my stay in Spike I took part in the hunger strike there and the prison strike that followed. During the strike we were several times attacked by the military in the small hours of the morning and beaten with revolver butts and trench tool handles.

We practically completely wrecked the building in which we were housed and it was stated that damage to the extent of £20,000 was done.

Shortly afterwards, the British decided that our quarters were no longer fit to live in and, one morning, we were placed in two destroyers and brought to Waterford and then by train to Kilkenny Jail. During our stay in Kilkenny a big prison escape took place, but owing to over-eagerness on the part of some of the prisoners in the wing where the tunnel was situated, only prisoners in that wing got out, and even then the escape was discovered before the wing could be cleared. No prisoner from the wing I was in escaped. After the escape all the remaining prisoners were transferred - some to Waterford Prison, and some to Limerick Prison.

I was in the party sent to Limerick by road and, once again - just before Christmas 1921 - I found myself back again in the prison I first started from. We were released from Limerick Prison in February 1922, on the passing of the Treaty.

Signed: Thomas Dorgan

Date: 25th April 1956

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Witness: John J. Daly