

ORIGINAL

BUREAU OF MILITARY HISTORY 1913-21

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No. W.S. 1535

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BUREAU OF MILITARY HISTORY, 1913-21.

STATEMENT BY WITNESS.

DOCUMENT NO. W.S. 1535

Witness

Hugh Early,
43, Tyrconnell Park,
Inchicore, DUBLIN.

Identity.

Commandant, Liverpool Battalion, I.R.A.

Subject.

Activities of Liverpool Battalion, I.R.A.,
1917 - 1921.

Conditions, if any, Stipulated by Witness.

Nil.

File No2859.....

Form B.S.M. 2

ORIGINAL

STATEMENT BY Mr. HUGH EARLY,

43, Tyrconnell Park, Inchicore, Dublin.

I joined "C" Company, 2nd Battalion, Dublin Brigade, Irish Volunteers, in January, 1917. In October, 1917, I was arrested for the posting up of seditious literature. There were other Volunteers also arrested with me and we were all charged and brought before Justice O'Mahoney. O'Mahoney allowed us all out, remarking that it was a shame to have arrested us. His sympathies were at this time, I suspect, with the movement for independence. He subsequently left the British Service.

I went to Liverpool in November, 1917, and took up employment there. There was no organised body of Volunteers in Liverpool at this time - only a Circle of the I.R.B. A number of us who had been in the Volunteers got together and raided a Territorial Army Hall from which we removed thirteen rifles. We handed the rifles over to Niall Kerr who afterwards gave us a lecture and told us not to be foolish, that we might cramp their style and close down the work they were engaged on. He was, of course, referring to the activities of the I.R.B. Circle in Liverpool.

Shortly after that we organised the Volunteers in Liverpool. There was only one unit or Battalion in Liverpool sub-divided into Companies. Tom Kerr, a son of Liam Kerr's, was the O.C. The strength of the unit at this time was only somewhere between thirty and forty. Up to 1920 the principal activity of the unit was training and recruiting. Recruiting for the Volunteers was done through our members contacting other Irishmen living in Liverpool and, where such men were suitable, enticing them to join the Volunteers.

In October, 1920, Rory O'Connor, who was Director of Engineering of the I.R.A. or Volunteers, and George Plunkett, came over to Liverpool and contacted Tom Kerr and myself. We were planning to blow up the Dock gates at Liverpool, and a plan for this operation had been submitted to G.H.Q., Dublin. There were four main entrances into the Liverpool Docks. The water was kept at the necessary level in the Docks by large Dock gates. At low water in the river there would be a difference of twenty-five feet between the level of the water in the river and that of the Docks. ^{ONE} ~~The~~ gate might serve three or four different docks. All the trans-ocean going vessels berthed in these docks. If the dock gates were blown out by explosives it would mean a sudden drop of twenty-five feet or so in the water level of the docks, resulting in the grounding of the ships and the general entanglement of the vessels on breaking their moorings. It is hard to really visualise what would have happened; some of them might even turn over on their side. At least it would have caused great confusion and damage and upset sailings and communications for a considerable time.

The British Authorities in Dublin raided the house at which Dick Mulcahy was staying. Mulcahy was then Chief of Staff of the I.R.A. He succeeded in getting through a window and escaping, but a number of documents belonging to him were found by the raiding party. Among the documents found was our plan for the destruction of the Dock gates. During the next few days these plans were published in all the leading English newspapers including the Liverpool papers. The British now placed a very strong guard on the Docks and that was the end of our proposition. The Docks in Liverpool are fenced in.

Within a week we had a new plan in motion. Outside the Docks there are roadways and streets of Warehouses. Most of these

Warehouses dealt in cotton which is a very inflammable material. We planned to set fire to these Warehouses. We procured bolt-cutters to cut ~~and~~ the locks on the Warehouses and, on the night of the 27th November, 1920, we set fire to fifteen of these Warehouses and two timber yards. The one I set fire to was in Effingham Street. I was accompanied by two other men, one of whom stayed at the door and the other man took up position at the corner of the street. We were armed with revolvers. We had bottles of paraffin which were held for us by sympathisers in places nearby. I went upstairs to the top of the Warehouse and set a couple of bales alight. I then came down and set five or six bales on the ground floor alight. I had to cut the bands on the bales with the bolt-cutters. Having set the bales alight I made my escape.

That night one of our men named Matt Ginnity, who was from Kells, County Meath, was badly beaten up by a mob in Parliament Street where he was doing a similar job to mine. A local man named Ward, who was one of the mob, was shot by one of our men. It was Bobby Duggan from Wexford that did the shooting. For the following few days the British press made great play of how the young Catholic boy Ward, while returning from his religious duties, was shot by the Sinn Féiners. Also arrested that night were Tom Kerry, our O/C., Mike O'Leary, his brother Denis and Hugh McCaughey from Tyrone. A man named McPartlin, who was minding the door for me, was arrested a few days later. McPartlin was charged with the murder of Ward, but they had no evidence to connect him with the affair and he was acquitted.

In Effingham Street the Warehouses were so badly damaged that the walls were bulging and people in the adjoining streets had to evacuate their houses. Fire Brigades from as far away as Manchester,

St. Helen's and Prescott were called in to deal with the fires. The newspaper, "Morning Post, gave an account of the burnings as follows :-

"Warehouse and Timber Yard fires - Saturday, 27th November, 1920. Time 8.25 p.m..

1st report:

There were fifteen fires in Liverpool and Bootle stretching in a line four miles in extent. Among the fifteen were :-

- 1 Cotton Warehouse in Effingham Street
- 2 " " " Jordan Street.
- 2 " " " Tabley Street.
- 1 " " " Sparkling Street.
- 1 " " " Vulcan Street.
- 1 Timber Yard " Sandhills Lane.
- 1 " " " Derby Road.

In Jordan Street damage was £30,000. Total damage estimated at £250,000. A man called Ward was shot dead.

2nd report:

The damage in the Liverpool Fires is estimated at £1,000,000. All leading Fire Insurance Companies are involved. In the case of several of the fires the Warehouses are in ruins. One street in Bootle had to be closed to the public because the Warehouse walls were bulging dangerously. Beside the person charged with the murder of Ward, four other men were detained under the Defence of the Realm Regulations."

Peter Boland, who was next appointed O/C. of the Battalion after Tom Kerr's arrest, was himself arrested within a month of Kerr's arrest. I was then appointed Battalion O/C.

After the burnings there was a period of quiet which we devoted to reorganisation. Our next active operation was to set fire to a ring of farm houses around Liverpool. The English Press described it as a "ring of rebel fires around Liverpool." Starting at the Wirral Peninsula we ringed Liverpool with a series of farm fires extending from as far south of Liverpool as Speke to Crosby seven miles north. The farms were selected because they were the easiest to get away from; but it happened that one belonged to a Black and Tan, but we were unaware of this at the time. The newspapers reported that there were "one thousand tons of agricultural produce destroyed."

Hall Road Station is situated almost on the sea front, and five Volunteers were arrested there. Paddy Lowe was wounded at Rimmer's farm by the owner. Lowe was arrested as a result and subsequently received a sentence of five years. A lot of farm machinery and hay and so forth were destroyed in these fires. It was really a prestige affair and a hit back for the reprisals carried out by the British forces in Ireland. This operation took place on the 9th March, 1921. The "Morning Post" report was that "there were thirteen outbreaks at different farms. The Corporation Tramways Athletic Grounds at Green Lane were also burnt down. Areas affected stretched over many miles and embraced nearly the whole of the agricultural districts around Liverpool and the Wirral Peninsula on the Cheshire side of the Mersey. Three thousand tons of agricultural produce was destroyed. Five men were arrested in Hall Road Station neighbourhood. One man who had been shot by the owner was captured at Rimmer's Farm, Roby - he had two revolvers in his possession."

About this time we were asked by G.H.Q. in Dublin to look up some place that could be shot up and destroyed in the same way as

the Black and Tans had destroyed Balbriggan and Trim in Ireland. We selected a place called Upton as being the most suitable and giving the best facilities for escape. However, G.H.Q., Dublin, did not pursue the matter any further.

The main duty of the Battalion in Liverpool was the collection of arms and the transferring of them to Dublin. Paddy Daly, now a Doctor in the Irish Army Medical Services, acted as liaison officer between us in Liverpool and G.H.Q. in Dublin.

The next operation we carried out was that of raiding for passports. At this time Austin Stack was Minister for Home Affairs in the Dáil Cabinet and he issued a decree forbidding emigration from Ireland. A group of about sixty emigrants sailed from the North Wall, Dublin, to Liverpool under the protection of the R.I.C. in defiance of this order. We were notified about this almost immediately and, from the moment they arrived, they were kept under observation by our men. The emigrants arrived in the normal way and were lodged in three boarding houses pending the sailing of their ships to America. The police in Liverpool had patrols watching the houses where they were lodged. We went to the houses and started a song, dance and Musical party with them, and then, under the guise of this celebration, we held them up and collected their passports from them. The police on duty were quite unaware that anything was taking place. We also collected the passports of some other isolated individuals at different times.

The Volunteer who was shot at Rimmer's farm during the burnings at the farms was named Lowe and was a Lieutenant in our Battalion. Rimmer was boasting of how he had shot Lowe and we decided to burn Rimmer's farm. There was a policeman on duty at Rimmer's farm. We fired at this policeman and he apparently decided that discretion was the better part of valour and retired. We burned

four ricks of hay and corn and an amount of farm implements.

A week prior to the affair at Rimmer's farm we raided the homes of Black and Tans and Auxiliaries whose addresses were secured by raiding the mails in Ireland. A list of names and addresses had been sent over to us by Headquarters in Dublin. We raided nine houses and in two cases the houses were set on fire. At a house I went to one night two women saw me from the top windows and commenced to scream when I was at the door. We had to clear off so as not to attract further attention on ourselves. Otherwise we would soon have a howling mob around us. These raids took place on the 7th May, 1921.

The "Morning Post", in giving an account of these raids, stated that "seven houses were raided. In two cases houses were set on fire. In a house in Anfield the tenant and his wife were bound and gagged". (This was not true). "A house in Everton was attacked. The attackers worked in groups, varying from six to fifteen and, in all, about one hundred and fifty men must have been engaged on the enterprise. The entire contents of one house was destroyed by fire. One family had been rendered destitute and is dependant upon the charity of neighbours. The head of one household, who is seventy-seven years of age, attacked a man who challenged him armed with a revolver, threw him to the ground and only released his hold when another raider pressed the barrel of a revolver to his temple and told him he would blow his brains out. An Airdale Terrier fought with the raiders. They shot him and straightway decamped by motor cars. The dog followed the raiders some hundreds of yards before falling dead". (Some dog!) "Fifteen raiders entered two houses together. An ex-Navyman threw a hand-gewind machine at them and they scuttled away. So far no arrests have been made". The orders issued to our men for that affair were that there was to be no shooting.

In May, 1921, or it may have been the end of April, we laid plans to burn a large area in central Liverpool comprising the Cotton Exchange. Surrounding the Cotton Exchange were dozens of Cotton Brokers' offices and those offices were packed with samples of cotton which would be very vulnerable to fire. There were two main water supplies into Liverpool; one at Revington Pike and the other from a lake in North Wales. There was a control house at Holton. We planned to blow up the control house at Holton, and the St. Helen's Company were to deal with the other pipe line. We had sufficient explosives on hands to do the jobs, but we had no exploders. We made an application to G.H.Q., Dublin, for two exploders and two such weapons were sent across to us. The exploders that were sent across from Dublin were found to be unsuitable or of no use so we had to postpone the whole affair and the Truce intervened before we could get the plan in motion again.

On the 3rd and 7th June, 1921, we were engaged in cutting communications. This was an operation ordered by G.H.Q., Dublin and was on a national basis and included London, Manchester, Newcastle and St. Helen's amongst other places. On the morning prior to the night fixed for the operation we received instructions from Dublin to hold our hand as the other areas were not ready and would not be so until the 7th June. We were at this time a bit fed up postponing jobs, so we decided to go ahead with it and at any rate it would have been impossible to call it off as our plans were too far advanced and our communication lines were not that rapid. The wires were cut at Seaforth, Litherland, Ford, Knowley, Roby, Allerton and Mossley Hill. On the Cheshire side of the Mersey wires were cut and trains brought to a halt from Bromboro' and Port Sunlight. There was a serious dislocation of communications over a wide area and large areas were isolated for several days. In all, five hundred circuits were put

out of action. Underground cables were also destroyed. On the 3rd of June, Lieutenant Denis O'^{Keefe}~~Keefe~~ of our Battalion was arrested and on the following Saturday night, which was the 6th June, I was arrested by two Detectives. I was taken to Scotland Yard, London, and from there to Mountjoy Jail, Dublin. From Mountjoy I was taken to Ballykinlar Camp, County Down, where I was interned. En route I was handcuffed to Michael McElligott. Here again I will quote the "Morning Post's" version of the wire-cutting operation.

"Wires were cut at Seaforth, Litherland, Ford, Knowsley, Roby and Allerton, - with the result that both telephonic and telegraph services between Liverpool and the North of England were greatly interfered with. Two or three days will elapse before they can be fully restored. In one case forty wires were left dangling on the roadway. No arrests have been made. Near Mossley Hill Station two telegraph poles were cut down. Between Seacombe and Wrexham the poles were across the metals and early-morning trains were delayed. Three hundred circuits were affected".

A later report dealing with a similar operation on the 7th June read - "In the Liverpool district wires were cut at Huyton, Gatacres, Garston and on the Cheshire side of the Mersey. In Wheathill Wood where one hundred and ten wires were cut there was some revolver firing between police cyclists and three of a party of supposed Sinn Féiners; one bullet which was fired grazing an officer's head. A force of police surrounded the wood until morning but the men escaped. Four men were arrested on the Cheshire side of the Mersey".

The Liverpool Battalion, all in, was about three hundred and ten strong, but of this strength only about one hundred and thirty men were active Volunteers who could be relied on. A large portion of

this number were engaged on gun-running, the storing of arms and the care of them and bringing them to and from the boats. Arms used to come to Liverpool on the boats from America. Such arms had to be taken off the American boats and smuggled out of the Docks and subsequently back again to be handed over to the individuals of the crews of the Dublin-bound boats. The men engaged on this work had to keep very much under cover and avoid publicity of any sort. It was a very ticklesome job and any slip-up would reveal the whole system of smuggling such items to the enemy. Arms came to Liverpool from London and all over England and these had to be handled by our men.

Nearly all of our men in the St. Helen's area, Earlstown Companies and also some from Wigan were miners by calling. Charlie McDonagh, who came from Liscaul, Roscommon, was in charge of St. Helen's Company, and James Kelly was in charge of the Earlstown Company. As miners, their particular duty was to fetch or steal a certain amount of gelignite out of each charge used in the mines. Their collection usually averaged about one hundred weight per week. The major portion of this was smuggled to Dublin.

The armament of our Battalion was solely comprised of small arms - rifles were of no use to us. One consignment of rifles came from London in cricket bags and the taxi-driver must have wondered why he was not allowed to lift the bags off the taxi. Jack Phelan, a student in Hammersmith Training College, was one of those who took them off. Phelan was later killed in the Upton Ambush in County Cork. The other two men helping Phelan with the rifles were Reggie Dunne and Joe O'Sullivan. These two men were later executed for the shooting of Sir Henry Wilson in London. The men dealing with the import and export of arms were organised in a special section.

The Liverpool Battalion comprised the Company areas of
Bootle, Birkenhead, St. Helen's and Earstown.

I became a member of the I.R.B., I think, at the time that
I was appointed Battalion Commander, but at no time did I hold any
appointment in the organisation other than member. I could never
see much use in the organisation and I was only a nominal member.

SIGNED:

Arthur Early

DATE:

3/12/56

WITNESS:

Markus Lewis Bell