

ORIGINAL

BUREAU OF MILITARY HISTORY 1913-21

BURÓ STAIRÉ MILEATA 1913-21

No. W.S. 1546

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BUREAU OF MILITARY HISTORY, 1913-21.

STATEMENT BY WITNESS.

DOCUMENT NO. W.S. 1546.

Witness

Anthony Dawson,
Market Square,
Letterkenny,
Co. Donegal.

Identity.

Company Lieutenant.

Assistant Brigade Adjutant.

Subject.

Activities of Letterkenny Company,
Letterkenny Battalion, Irish Volunteers,
Co. Donegal, 1917-1921.

Conditions, if any, Stipulated by Witness.

Nil.

File No S.2864.

Form B.S.M. 2

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STATEMENT BY ANTHONY DAWSON,
Market Square, Letterkenny, Co. Donegal.

I was born at Letterkenny in 1902, where I received my primary education. After leaving the National School I attended St. Eunan's College, Letterkenny.

My father took an active interest in the national movement. He was a founder member of the Sinn Féin Club in Letterkenny and also acted as County Court Judge in the Sinn Féin Courts when they operated in the area.

As small boys my brothers Charles, James and myself joined the National Volunteers. After the Rebellion of 1916 we realised that we were in the wrong party and broke away from that organisation. I then joined the local Sinn Féin Club and in 1917 I joined the Irish Volunteers then organised in Letterkenny. My brother, James, was the O/C. of the Company.

In 1917 we were generally employed at drill parades, route marches and occasional raids for arms on the homes of the Ulster Volunteers. Very often we were called out to intercept and break up recruiting meetings for the British Army. British soldiers' wives, living in the town, who were in receipt of marriage allowance were very antagonistic towards us and caused considerable trouble at times. It was a usual procedure for us to compel the crowd to sing "A Soldier's Song" before the meeting was broken up.

Although there was no election contest in this constituency in 1918 - an agreement having been reached between the Nationalist Party and Sinn Féin that the Nationalist candidate would not be

opposed by Sinn Féin if the Sinn Féin candidate was not opposed in South Down - we were constantly called out to assist the Volunteers in the West Donegal constituency where Major-General Joe Sweeney was the Sinn Féin candidate.

At that period the Ancient Order of Hibernians' organisation was bitterly opposed to and very often endeavoured to break up meetings held under the auspices of Sinn Féin. In February, 1918, Eamon De Valera and Seán McEntee were due to address a meeting in Raphoe. The A.O.H. and Unionist Party became so hostile that a call for Volunteer assistance came to Letterkenny. Ninety men were mobilised in a short time and we entrained for Raphoe. We armed ourselves with pick handles, slash hooks, pieces of lead piping etc. On our arrival in Raphoe we looked a formidable force. The R.I.C. made an attempt to stop us from marching down the street but were brushed aside. The opposition parties also withdrew and a successful meeting was held without any disturbance. We then marched back to Letterkenny.

On the day of the Election in West Donegal, we were called to Churchill to protect the ballot boxes as the A.O.H. endeavoured to take complete control there and even attempted to prevent voters with Sinn Féin sympathies from registering their votes at polling booths.

After the 1918 Elections and up to the middle of 1919, our principal duties consisted in training, raiding for arms, cutting roads, railway lines and telegraph wires. Most of the raids for arms were carried out in the Lagan area, which was predominantly Unionist. Many of these Unionists were members of the Ulster Volunteer force and in that area we secured a good

supply of arms and ammunition.

In 1919 Ernie O'Malley visited this area and the Companies, who up to that time were operating on a parish basis, were then organised into Battalions and Brigades. The Brigade was under the command of Samuel Flaherty from Castlefinn and my brother, James Dawson, was appointed Vice O/C. Letterkenny Battalion was known as the 4th Battalion. I was then appointed 2nd Lieutenant in the Letterkenny Company and a short time later I was appointed 1st Lieutenant in the Company. This rank I held until February, 1921, when I was appointed Assistant Brigade Adjutant.

Early in 1919 orders were issued for the burning of all unoccupied R.I.C. barracks in the area, also the raiding of Excise Offices. Acting on these orders a party of us set out and burned Glenswilly R.I.C. Barracks.

By this time the Volunteers were kept very active, by the cutting of roads and the only railway line connecting West Donegal. At our request, the traders in Dungloe, West Donegal, boycotted the British Forces and refused to supply them with food. The British Forces found it very difficult to procure sufficient supplies of food locally and found it necessary to have their requirements of food and petrol conveyed by rail from Derry.

One afternoon in 1919 we received information that a passenger train from Derry had two wagon loads of supplies for the British forces stationed in Dungloe and that a small party of British soldiers in mufti was travelling on the train as escort. A party of ten Volunteers was hurriedly mobilised in Letterkenny and set out in two motor cars to the Railway Station at Churchill where the

train was due to halt for the purpose of setting down and picking up passengers.

We arrived in good time and took up our positions around the Station. When the train pulled in we immediately boarded it and disarmed the escort, consisting of one N.C.O. and four men, armed with revolvers. The foodstuff was immediately unloaded on to the railway line and, not having any transport to remove it, we poured petrol, which was part of the consignment, over it and destroyed it on the spot.

In August, 1920, it was decided to attack Drumquinn R.I.C. barracks in the County Tyrone. We had information that the R.I.C. stationed there were heavy drinkers and that a number of them could be rounded up in various licenced premises in the town. The entire R.I.C. force stationed there consisted of two Sergeants and eight or ten men.

It was finally decided to carry out the raid in daylight. The date fixed was the 29th August, 1920. That was Fair Day in Drumquinn and for that reason it was considered that a party of strangers entering the town would not attract attention. A number of officers and men from Letterkenny Company together with some men from Castlefin and Ballybofey Companies set out in four cars with fictitious number plates for Drumquinn. We reached the town without incident. First thing, on arrival, was to cut the telephone wires. I was acting as scout and my job was to ascertain the location of the R.I.C. through the town. Having located some of them in licenced premises I immediately reported to our party detailed for rounding them up and disarming them. This was promptly carried out. The main body of Volunteers moved quietly

in the direction of the R.I.C. barracks without resorting to shooting. Things, however, did not work out according to plan. One R.I.C. man was shot dead before an entry was effected and one Sergeant was seriously wounded inside the Barracks.

The shooting had the effect of alerting some of the R.I.C. in the upper portion of the barracks and delayed the action somewhat. However, we succeeded in collecting all the available arms and ammunition. We did not delay to destroy the barracks: we had already delayed a long time in carrying out the operation and there was a danger that Omagh, which was only six miles distant and was the headquarters of the Enniskillen Fusiliers, might be alerted. We also had to pass two occupied R.I.C. barracks on our return journey - one at Castlederg and the other at Castlefin. On leaving Drumquinn we were ordered to keep our revolvers 'at the ready' but not to use them unless necessary to fight our way through. We got back home without further incident. The arms captured in the raid were placed in my care. Our 'dump' was located in the heating chambers under Letterkenny Cathedral. It was my responsibility to see to the cleaning, care and safe custody of all arms in our 'dump'. It was a task that gave me great pleasure.

In August, 1920, we got information that Fanad Coastguard Station might be easily captured. Neil Blaney, then O/C. of Fanad Company, reported that he had information that the station would shortly be vacated. It was then necessary to make hurried preparations to attack the place. It was decided that the attacking party would be drawn from the Letterkenny Company - these men were now considered seasoned soldiers, and the men from Fanad Company were to act as scouts and guides. The attacking force

travelled by motor cars to within a few miles of the Coastguard Station, where we were guided across country by members of the Fanad Company. On arrival there we took up positions along a low wall in front of the building, and opened fire. The Coastguards were then called on to surrender, which they did in a short time and came out with their hands up. We then moved into the building and collected eleven revolvers, a good quantity of revolver ammunition, some gelignite and one Verey light pistol.

We were informed some days later that there was a British Admiralty Sloop anchored in Mulroy Bay, quite convenient to the Coastguard Station. Their job was salvaging gold from the ship "Laurentic" which was chased into the bay by German Submarines during the 1914-'18 War and sunk with £2½ millions worth of gold aboard. If the Marines had come ashore to the assistance of the Coastguards we would have been taken completely by surprise, as we had no knowledge of their presence or of any danger from that direction.

During the period 1919-'21 a District Inspector of the R.I.C. named Walsh was stationed in Letterkenny and occupied the house next door to my home. This was very annoying to myself and my brothers as we were always very careful not to attract attention when returning home late after being engaged in some action against the British forces. We discovered in 1920, after the attack on Drumquinn Barracks, that Walsh was friendly. He had a perfect description of Dr. McGinley and my brother Jim as being two of the men engaged in the raid but informed Dr. McGinley that he was taking no action in the matter. In 1922 Walsh was appointed Assistant Commissioner of the Garda on the formation of that force.

During a large scale raid by British forces in Letterkenny in November, 1920, my brother Jim and James McMonagle were arrested. From that date until February, 1921, when Peadar O'Donnell was appointed Brigade O/C., the responsibility of running the Brigade rested on myself and the O/C., Letterkenny Company, Hugh McGrath.

After Peadar O'Donnell's appointment I was appointed Assistant Brigade Adjutant. The Brigade Adjutant, Patrick Doherty, resided in Carndonagh over forty miles distant, and could not keep in touch with all the units in the Brigade.

A 'Flying Column' under the command of Peadar O'Donnell was operating in West Donegal in May 1921. Large detachments of British forces from Derry were sent to that area in an effort to capture the Column. Our men were having a very hard time trying to evade being captured. Peadar O'Donnell instructed me to carry out an attack on British forces in Letterkenny in an effort to relieve the pressure on the men operating in West Donegal. I got in touch with Hugh McGrath, O/C., Letterkenny Company, and we made arrangements to attack an R.I.C. patrol in the town.

On a night in June, 1921, we occupied positions in the town and eventually a patrol of one R.I.C. Sergeant and three Constables came along. We opened fire on them when they came into range. Constable Carter was shot dead and the Sergeant was wounded. This action had the desired effect by drawing off the British Forces from West Donegal. The British forces then concentrated in the Letterkenny district, in the belief that the Column had moved in there. The British forces in Letterkenny had declared their intention of carrying out reprisals for the shooting, by burning the homes of citizens in the town with national sympathies. District Inspector Walsh took command and

with difficulty prevented any reprisals.

At this period we raided the Post Office in Letterkenny and carried off bicycles, telegraph and telephone equipment and stores which we thought might be useful to us later.

I got in touch with a British Army Private stationed in Letterkenny. He told me that he could steal a machine gun from the stores and would sell it to me for £18. I got the money and made arrangements to meet him and pay him when he produced the gun. At the same time I was uneasy as this could be a trap if the man was not sincere. I waited for him to produce the gun on several occasions. Finally he told me that he could get no opportunity to take the gun out.

We made plans on two occasions in June, 1921 for a daylight attack on British forces in Letterkenny town, but on each occasion the British forces did not turn up although we remained in the ambush position for several hours.

There was no further activity of a military nature in Letterkenny until the Truce on the 11th July, 1921.

SIGNED:

Anthony Dawson

DATE:

6th December 1956

WITNESS:

J. Conway

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