

ORIGINAL

BUREAU OF MILITARY HISTORY 1913-21

BURO STAIRÉ MILÉATA 1913-21

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BUREAU OF MILITARY HISTORY, 1913-21.

STATEMENT BY WITNESS.

DOCUMENT NO. W.S. 1592.

Witness

Edward Seery,
Lockardstown,
Ballinea,
Mullingar,
Co. Westmeath.

Identity.

1st Lieut., Loughanvalley Company,
Irish Volunteers, Co. Westmeath.
Battalion Vice O/C.

Subject.

Activities of Loughanvalley Company,
Irish Volunteers, Co. Westmeath,
1917-21.

Conditions, if any, Stipulated by Witness.

Nil.

File No S.2906.

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BURO. STAIRÉ MILEATA 1913-21

No. W.S. 1592

STATEMENT BY Mr. EDWARD SEEHY,

Lockardstown, Ballinea, Mullingar.

I was born in the above locality and attended the local National School where I received my education. The subjects taught at school at that time were just ordinary and there was no emphasis on any Irish subjects that would tend to develop one's patriotic feelings. After the Rebellion in 1916 and particularly after the executions following the collapse of the Rebellion one began to take a greater interest in Irish political affairs and to develop a great admiration for the men who took part in that attempt to attain independence for the country.

In the latter part of 1917 a Company of the Irish Volunteers was started in Loughanvally which is near here. I don't remember who really started the Company - I think someone came out from Mullingar. At the start there were only six or seven men in the Company. The late William Fox of Loughanavally was in charge and it was he and another man named Connell who induced me to join. I did not take any oath or make any declaration on joining then. We had to pay a small subscription weekly towards Volunteer funds.

O'Connell, who had served in the British Army, acted as instructor to the Company and we had training parades once and sometimes twice per week. Fox was appointed Captain of the Company. I was soon made 1st Lieutenant and a man called Kelly was 2nd Lieutenant. We had no arms of any sort then. Parades were then held in secret. At this time it was not easy to join the Volunteers as, apart from being a hush hush organisation, they were very selective as regards the type of men who were allowed into the ranks. Only men of good standing

and who were deemed to be reliable in every way were admitted. Our country had such a history of failures through the activities of informers, that it was only natural that Volunteer Headquarters should be very careful.

Early in 1918 the Conscription Act for Ireland was passed in the British Parliament and only needed the King's assent to make it law. A great wave of hostility towards conscription swept the country and everywhere the people pledged themselves to resist it unto death. The clergy took a leading part in this resistance movement. The strength of our Volunteer Company now quickly increased to twenty-five or more. We now paraded openly for drills and exercises and were, of course, watched by the R.I.C.. We welcomed this scrutiny as we knew they would be reporting to their headquarters which in turn would inform the British Government, and we were anxious to display our determination to resist Conscription. Numerous anti-conscription meetings were held at which we paraded. We collected money for the national anti-conscription fund and the Volunteers went around and had everyone sign the anti-conscription pledge. Other than this there was nothing outstanding done to meet the menace. We had confidence in our headquarters in Dublin and awaited their instructions.

When the crisis had passed over, our Company strength fell to about twenty. We still had no arms of any sort. As well as I can remember it was at this time that a Battalion organisation came into being in the area. William Fox was appointed Officer Commanding the Battalion and I was appointed Vice O/C.

The Battalion Adjutant was Patrick Mahon from Myvore. The Quartermaster I think was Michael O'Connell, our former drillmaster.

The Companies comprising the Battalion were Loughanvally, Castletown, Milltown and Myvore. The whole Battalion was about eighty strong, probably something more. The only armament the Battalion possessed was a few shotguns, the property of individual members, and a few small calibre revolvers with a very, very limited amount of ammunition for both types of weapons. We were one of the Battalions which made up the Mullingar Brigade. I think the Brigade O/C. at this time was David Burke. Although the Battalion strength was small it covered an extensive area. The countryside around here was sparsely populated. Parades and training were carried on as usual and meetings of the Battalion Council, which comprised the O/C. and Battalion Staff and the Captains of each Company, were held regularly. Such meetings were usually held in the Loughanvally area. The R.I.C. at this time did not make any serious attempt to interfere with us or probe in our activities.

In the end of 1918 a general election took place throughout the country and in this the Volunteers took a very active part. The Sinn Féin organisation which could be said to be the political wing of the Independence Movement decided to contest all the seats in the country against the Irish Parliamentary Party which was now led by the late Mr. Dillon. The Sinn Féin candidates were pledged not to take their seats in the British House of Commons, but to set up an Irish Parliament in Dublin. This was a complete new departure in Irish politics and appealed to the Irish people as a whole, in view of the frustrated efforts of the Nationalist Party to secure a measure of self government from the British Parliament.

The Volunteers were actively engaged in canvassing voters on behalf of Sinn Féin and in making collections for the election fund and in parading to meetings held on behalf of Sinn Féin.

The Nationalist followers were very hostile to Sinn Féin and were abetted by the R.I.C. who closed their eyes to their acts. In view of this it was necessary to have a strong Volunteer party at each Sinn Féin meeting to ensure that the speakers got a hearing and to keep order. Although the election campaign was a heated one there were no serious clashes with either the Nationalist element or the R.I.C. in our area. On polling day the Volunteers did duty at the different polling stations and, as well, indulged in a spate of personation on behalf of the Sinn Féin candidate. Larry Ginnell was the Sinn Féin candidate and he headed the poll by a big majority. There was great rejoicing throughout the land and everyone now awaited the next episode in the history of the country. The Irish Party was practically wiped out.

Early in January 1919, the first Dáil met in the Mansion House, Dublin and, having reaffirmed its allegiance to the proclamation of the Irish Republic of 1916, proceeded to set itself up as the Government of that Republic. Ministers were appointed to administer the different departments of State. The Dáil now decided to float a Loan to get money to finance its undertakings. The Volunteers again took a major part in the work of pushing this Loan. They canvassed widely for it and collected subscriptions. As I have said, this is a very thinly populated part of the country, so the total amount collected here would be much less than in other Battalion areas. The Battalion Commandant acted as Receiver for

the money collected and he passed it on to someone who was the official agent in Mullingar.

The Dáil now took over responsibility for the Volunteer force which now became the Army of the Republic. Every officer and man was required to take an Oath of Allegiance to the Republic represented by the Dáil. All our officers and men took this Oath without hesitation. No compulsion was used to get any Volunteer to subscribe to the Oath who did not wish to do so. Failure to take the Oath meant that he ceased to be a Volunteer.

Sinn Féin was now well organised in the area and generally the Volunteers were members of that organisation also. The Courts set up by that organisation now got under way and soon the people were bringing their cases for litigation to them, and the old established British Courts were ignored. Local men of standing acted as Judges in the Courts and their decisions were accepted and loyally abided to by the people. Common sense was more the potent factor used in arriving at decisions in the Courts rather than reference to the written Law. The Volunteers undertook the police work of the countryside and made a great success of it, even in the towns. The people as a whole co-operated with them which they never did with the R.I.C. and this, combined with their local knowledge of people and places, made their work in detecting crime comparatively easy. This was a quiet, law-abiding part of the country and it was not necessary to make any spectacular arrests.

A general raid for arms was ordered by G.H.Q. in the harvest time of 1919. Apparently G.H.Q. discovered that the British authorities were going to collect in all the shotguns and other arms in the country and the Volunteers were ordered to forestall this move

by collecting the arms themselves. Every house in the area which was known or suspected of having arms was visited by our men. We collected a number of shotguns of various types and some small amount of cartridges. We also collected a few .22 sporting rifles and a few small calibre revolvers. Nothing in the nature of service weapons was procured. The collection of the arms went off quietly and there was no need to resort to shooting at any time. Most of the people were only too willing to get rid of the weapons. The guns and material collected were put into wooden boxes and concealed in walls and in the faces of turf banks. The British forces - mostly the R.I.C. - went around to the houses looking for the weapons also, but we had always collected them before they got there.

In the end of 1919 and early 1920, as a result of attacks made on them, the R.I.C. withdrew all their men from the small outlying posts and concentrated them in the larger ones in the towns. There was no barracks in this area at this time. There had been a police station in Castletown some years earlier but this had been evacuated. The R.I.C. were never a popular force in this country and their actions during the Fenian Rebellion and Land League days were well known to everyone. Now they were more unpopular than ever and were detested by the vast majority of the people who looked upon them as the real enemies of the country. They were, in fact, the intelligence agents of the English Government and without them the military and other forces would have been powerless and 'at sea' so to speak.

The Volunteers now intensified their **police** work and kept perfect law and order in the country. The R.I.C. had shed all semblance of being a police force and were now a purely armed branch of the British Military Garrison in the country. The Volunteers were obliged to

make a few arrests locally in connection with land disputes or causing local disturbances. Arrested men were immediately brought before a Sinn Féin Court or a Military Court.

The cases were generally settled by imposing a fine or by arbitration and the arrested men then released. We thus avoided holding them in detention and having to guard and feed them. We had no local place of detention in the area.

The R.I.C. were getting more active by now and occasionally they staged hold-ups and searches for arms and documents, but as yet had not arrested anyone and no Volunteer was 'on the run'.

About this time a reorganisation of the Volunteer force took place and our Battalion was now incorporated in the Athlone Brigade. Seamus O'Mara of Connaught Street, Athlone, was the Officer Commanding this Brigade. We now had to attend meetings of the Brigade Council in Athlone which was a long and hazardous journey at this time.

The Black and Tans, as the R.I.C. reinforcements were called, were now in force in the country. These men were all either English, Scotch or Welsh, with a sprinkling of Northern Irish, Orangemen, and were mostly ex-soldiers of the 1914-1918 War. They neither dressed nor behaved like policemen. They were purely adventurers or soldiers of fortune with a very poor sense of discipline and in many cases were utter blackguards. The object, apparently, of the English Government in letting loose this force on the country was to create a reign of terror and so break down the Irish resistance movement.

Hold-ups by the R.I.C. and Tans now became more frequent accompanied by a system of terrific questioning. So far they did

not beat up anyone in our area or do any destruction. A few men from the Castletown area were arrested and interned in Ballykinlar Camp, County Down. The Tans were equipped with Crossley Tenders or small lorries which were very fast and silent and ideally suited for carrying out surprise raids as they could arrive at a selected spot without making any noise while approaching. This made travelling and keeping communication very difficult as one had always to be on the alert to avoid running into one of those parties of Tans and R.I.C.

The only activities that could be carried out in our area up to the Truce were the destruction of communications. Telephone and telegraph wires were being continually cut and the roads blocked by felling trees across them and by cutting deep trenches across them. The roads in the vicinity of Loughnavally were trenched several times but when the Tans came on the scene they made the local people fill in the trenches again. They also compelled them to cut up and remove the trees from the roads.

We also raided the local mails several times but never found anything of any value in them. We also took up and destroyed the cycles which were on issue by the Post Office to the local Postmen.

In November, 1920, John Keegan of the Castletown Company was arrested by British forces. He had a revolver on him when he was captured. He was courtmartialled and sentenced to two years' imprisonment.

During the Belfast good boycott there was very little of activity of that nature in this area. None of the few shops around here stocked or dealt in Belfast goods.

The position of this Battalion at the Truce was not good.

We had no service weapons of any nature. The shotguns collected during the arms raid were still all available but had deteriorated very much owing to having been stored under damp conditions. We also had the few small calibre revolvers previously mentioned. For a time we had the use of the Lee/^{Enfield rifle} without ammunition which was given to us by the Brigade for the purpose of imparting instruction on it. The country around here was not suitable for carrying out ambushes with short range weapons like shotguns and only rifles would be of any avail.

Sometime prior to the Truce a big round-up and search of the area was carried out by the British Military and Police. They gave the area a thorough a comb out, even using aeroplanes in the operation. They arrested several of our men but released them shortly afterwards - inside a few days. The enemy forces were really looking for men from the Offaly area whom they believed were hiding in our area. This was not the case. In addition to the few men from Castletown who were arrested there were also a few of our men 'on the run' as enemy forces had raided their houses for them, but had failed to contact them. There was no one killed or wounded in the area.

There was no one shot in our area for spying for the British Forces and I don't think that any person was engaged in such dirty work. We filled a good number of shotgun cartridges with slugs which we made locally, but it was almost impossible to keep shotgun cartridges dry with the result that the paper coverings of the cartridges became swollen and they would not fit into the guns. We also constructed some home-made bombs of a type. Those consisted of cannisters and pieces of piping filled with gelnite

and fitted with a length of fuze and a detonator. I don't know where the gelnite came from. We never used any of the bombs and I cannot say if they would be a success. Having to light the fuze before throwing them would be a serious disadvantage.

There was an intelligence organisation within the Battalion and Companies and those were used to keep watch on persons suspected of being in sympathy with the enemy. There were no important enemy posts in our area and so they had no scope for picking up information in that way. The Post Offices in the area were of no value as they did not handle any material for enemy forces.

The position at the Truce was that our Battalion, although small in numbers, was still intact and morale was high. We were continually looking forward to obtaining some rifles and ammunition from Headquarters and starting active operations against the enemy. The Truce came upon us as a great surprise and a disappointment in that we had not had any opportunity to have a decent crack at the enemy. As the Truce wore on we realised that our hopes of getting arms had been forlorn. There just were not any available.

SIGNED: Edward Scery

DATE: 7th March 1954.

WITNESS: James Bonway

