

ORIGINAL

BUREAU OF MILITARY HISTORY 1913-21
BURO STATE MILITARY 1913-21
NO. W.S. 1,758

ROINN



COSANTA.

BUREAU OF MILITARY HISTORY, 1913-21.

STATEMENT BY WITNESS.

DOCUMENT NO. W.S. 1,758.

Witness

James J. Burke,
10, Edenvale Road,
Ranelagh,
Dublin.

Identity.

O/C, Irish Volunteers & I.R.A.,
Dublin, 1918-1921.

Subject.

Easter Week, Dublin, 1916.

Conditions, if any, Stipulated by Witness.

Nil.

File No S. 1,278.

Form B.S.M. 2

ORIGINAL

BUREAU OF MILITARY HISTORY 1913-21

BURO STAIRE MILITIA 1913-21

No. W.S. 1758

STATEMENT OF JAMES J. BURKE

10 Edenvale Road, Ranelagh, Dublin.

I joined the Volunteers at the inaugural meeting in the Rotunda in 1913. I was attached to "A" Company, 4th Battalion and remained in that Company up to the Rising.

Prior to the formation of the Volunteers, I had an itch for writing, and in 1906, when I was 16 years of age, I contributed my first article to Sinn Féin. I met Griffith then for the first time, and afterwards I was editing his papers, "Nationality" and "Young Ireland", during his absence in prison. He was in prison in 1918 and 1919 on account of the German Plot.

I joined the Irish Republican Brotherhood in 1914. Eamon Ceannt got me to join. Cathal Brugha and Eamon Ceannt were amongst those whom I knew in the Circle when I joined. Michael Collins came later on.

Early in 1915 I was dismissed from my job to join the British Army, and immediately reported to Volunteer Headquarters, when I was appointed Quartermaster in the Volunteer training camps. I was Q.M. of three camps, a Wicklow camp, the Galtee camp and the Western camp in Athenry.

I took part in the Howth gun-running. I got a bayonet in the left side, just under the heart, in the gun-running, and Eamon Ceannt came to see me in bed. He smilingly unrolled a package which he had brought with him, gave me a Howth gun and said, "That may be of use to you later on". Shortly afterwards when I was again on parade I was promoted to Company Adjutant.

After returning from the camps, about which I have written in "The Irish Volunteer", I was also writing for the "Irish Worker", James Larkin's and later James Connolly's paper.

Through my association with the "Irish Worker" I got to know James Connolly very well, and as a result of our friendship he told me that he was about to start a Rising. He told me that one day about the middle of January, 1916. The story appears in "The Torch" of 13th November, 1943, copy of which I will lend to the Bureau. It also appeared in "An t-Oglach" of January, 1926, and in "Nationality" just before the Civil War, in which I had probably put it to try and get the people to join together to prevent civil strife. It was quoted in "The Voice of Labour" of 8th April, 1922, by somebody who already knew of the whole affair.

Previous to Easter Week, 1916, the Volunteers had manoeuvres, and it is of particular interest that one night the manoeuvres covered the exact positions which the 4th Battalion afterwards occupied in Easter Week. We covered the whole ground, as if the people knew what was going to happen and that this was a preliminary run over the ground. That was about a month or five weeks before the actual Rising. We definitely covered the whole ground, because it struck me immediately when we were in position in Easter Week that we had been all over the same ground not long previously. The other Battalions probably did the same thing, but this was the 4th Battalion covering the South Dublin Union and the areas leading to it.

On Holy Thursday as I was coming out of Whitefriars Street I met Cathal Brugha, whom I knew very well. He said to me, "I suppose like myself you are getting ready for the big day". I said, "Yes. When is it going to be?" He told me that I would know soon enough.

On Easter Sunday we were to mobilise for Larkfield, Kimmage, but on Sunday morning the cancellation order appeared in the paper. During Easter Sunday, I cannot say what time,

I got a notification to stand-by and await orders. I was to stand by at home, or if I left home I was to leave word where I could be found.

At about eleven o'clock on Monday morning a notice was handed to my Mother at the door by a lad who had not time to wait. This notice told me to mobilise the Volunteers on my list and bring them along to Emerald Square, Harold's Cross, at, I think, half past ten, but I did not get the notice until eleven o'clock. Certain people in the Company had lists of Volunteers whom they were to mobilise. I immediately called to Gullistan Terrace, Rathmines, which was on my way, and mobilised James and Paddy Morrissey. We called at another place - I forget the name - but the Volunteer there had already gone, he had been notified before we called.

When we got to Emerald Square there was neither sight nor sound of the Volunteers. Myself and Jimmy Morrissey were in uniform, Paddy Morrissey had no uniform at the time, he was only a youngster. The three of us were wondering what to do when a woman said to us, "They are gone down Cork Street". We went down Cork Street and had not proceeded very far when we saw a crowd at the corner of Jameson's Distillery and a policeman outside the gate of the Distillery. The policeman stepped out and asked us where we were going. I took a small .32, which I carried since the time of the camps, and told him that was our business. He quietly moved back and we proceeded on our way. The three of us had Howth guns, Mausers, and 60 rounds of ammunition each. We also had rations for 24 hours, which had been handed out at the previous parade a week before. They were iron rations, bullybeef. We knocked at the gate of Jameson's. We were told that the gate was bolted and barricaded and that we had better move off to the Union. We went across the canal and out on to the

Mountshannon Road opposite the back of the Union at the Rialto Gate. We tried the door and got no reply from the gatekeeper. We found out later that he had been gagged and tied up and was incapable of opening the gate, which had been barricaded.

We proceeded to get over the wall, and just at the small galvanized building underneath the wall we saw Volunteers in uniform moving around. We got over the wall and I saw Captain George Irvine, to whom I reported. Captain Sean McGlynn was there also, as well as 5 or 6 Volunteers. This, I believe, was the casual ward. Volunteers who had arrived before us were in course of ejecting the people who had been in it, and were using their mattresses and other belongings to barricade the windows, which were right along the top of the building facing the wall over which we had come:

Sean McGlynn greeted me and so did George Irvine. Sean then said that he was going back to the main body but would return and tell us what move to make later. That must have been after eleven o'clock.

Having prepared the windows, we got into position facing the Mountshannon Road, smoked for a while, with our rifles at the ready, and it must have been before midday when we saw a large body of British troops approaching down Mountshannon Road. I do not know if the order to fire was given, but as soon as they came within a distance of 40 or 50 yards fire was opened on them by five Volunteers at the windows. The soldiers immediately scattered, and we did not see them in force again. Now and again a head would appear over the wall and a shot would ring out from our outposts. For about twenty minutes, or so it seemed, all was quiet.

In the meantime I had called George Irvine and told him that we would not be able to do much in our position. We

could neither see the enemy nor hope to do any good. We could not advance. I suggested that as Sean McGlynn had not come back as promised, one of our Volunteers should be sent back to the main body to find out where we were to retreat to. Captain Irvine agreed, and Volunteer Paddy Morrissey was sent with the message. As soon as he had left the building we heard a volley and Paddy Morrissey crawled back wounded in the leg. We were surrounded. We moved to the back of the building, broke down windows, and in the process of doing so fire was opened on us from the side, indicating that the troops had already occupied the grounds and had our hut surrounded. I saw a British soldier now and again and opened fire. Shots immediately began to ring out from all sides. Volunteer Traynor was killed by a bullet which came through the side of the building, which soon became perforated by bullets.

Willie Corrigan and myself went to another window and were breaking the glass there when bullets crashed the remaining glass, of which some evidently got into Corrigan's eye because his face was covered with blood. My face also got some scratches from the glass.

The position now was hopeless. I do not know whether I suggested to George Irvine that we should make a run for it or not, but there was a cry, "Put up your hands", from outside and before we knew where we were the troops were in the building. This was about an hour after we had opened fire. So ended the fight in the Union after all our preparations. We were only an hour in action. We should not have been left there at all. We should have fired a volley and retreated to the main building, which I think was the original intention. It was not expected that the troops would have come down so soon, I think. My recollection is

that it must have been before 12 o'clock when the British troops put in an appearance. They must have made a move even before the G.P.O. was properly ready for the Declaration of the Republic.

There is very little more to be said, except that out of the six who were in the place, five of us were sentenced to death - George Irvine, Jimmy Morrissey, Willie Corrigan, a fellow named Sean Dowling, who is dead since, and myself. I had an Adjutant's badge on my uniform, two stripes, and this was immediately noticed by the Intelligence Officers who wanted to know what I was.

Paddy Morrissey managed to get to hospital, he was brought there by the troops with his leg badly shattered. He escaped from hospital a few mornings afterwards in a milk cart. He was never formally arrested.

We were taken prisoners and brought up to Kilmainham, not the jail but Kilmainham Police Station which is facing the back of the jail proper. We were kept there for a few hours, and "G" men, Military Intelligence Officers and others came in from time to time to look at us and ask us questions. That evening we were moved to Richmond Barracks and placed in the guardroom. We remained there until Saturday. During the few days we were in the guardroom we could see the flames and the glare of the fires in the city.

We were brought over to Kilmainham jail, where some drunken soldiery of the Dublin Fusiliers immediately set upon us, kicking us, beating us and threatening us with bayonets. As a matter of fact my tunic was ripped off me with bayonets, and our shirts and other articles of clothing were saturated with blood. We looked at one another the next morning and we thought we were dead. The Dublin Fusiliers were the worst of

the lot. The English soldiers were mostly decent. Most of them were young fellows who did not know one end of a rifle from the other as far as I could see.

We were put in the condemned cells in Kilmainham, four, five and maybe six of us together, thrown in heaps. During the first night we were taken out one by one and threatened with all sorts of abuse, such as, "Come on out. It's your turn now. You're going to be done in". We were asked to give them information, and they wanted to know, "Who is Sinn Féin?" They seemed to think that "Sinn Féin" was the name of our leader.

From the following Monday, or maybe Tuesday, we were brought backwards and forwards daily to Richmond Barracks, and we saw most of the leaders who were eventually executed. We saw the two Pearses, MacBride, and Heuston. I think we saw them all except James Connolly who was a prisoner in the hospital. Day after day the courts-martial were sitting, and each evening we were brought back to Kilmainham.

It is of interest to recount, though it may not be worth while for historical purposes, that Thomas MacDonagh told me to plead ignorance about the Rising, the idea being, to my mind at any rate, that he and the other leaders were anxious that we would not give the British an opportunity to "do in" too many of us. It was a safeguard for the future as well.

My turn came to appear before the court-martial, and as far as I remember Wylie was appointed for our defence. The judge, or the chief of the court-martial, wanted to know how did my tunic get into such a state, and where all the blood came from. I was proceeding to tell him about it when I was told that I was not asked any questions. That was as far as they got about querying what happened. We were all charged with the same thing, taking up arms against His Majesty the

King - I forget the exact words. We were not told about the findings after the courts-martial. We were just marched back again.

On Sunday morning, 7th May, we were at Mass in Kilmainham. Eamon Ceannt, Sean Heuston, and Mallen, I think, were there, and up in the gallery of the church were some women members of Cumann na mBan. When Mass was over we were being returned to our cells and I asked Eamon Ceannt how he was. He said "I am all right". I said to him, "Will they do us all in?", and he answered, "They will do us in, they will do in the other signatories and myself, but I think you will be all right. I'm glad to see you are here". He did not know that I had turned out for the Rising until then. The interpretation that I put on his remark was that he was glad that his faith in me had been justified, that he was glad to see that I had not let him down after bringing me into the I.R.B.

On that evening a knock came to the cell door. The door was opened by an orderly who told me to stand up. An officer stood at the door. "Stand to attention", he shouted. I stood to attention. He said, "You have been found guilty and you have been sentenced to death". He paused after that, and I walked over and sat down, thinking that what I had expected was about to happen. He called me back, "Come here. Stand to attention. The sentence has been commuted to one of penal servitude for three years". He said that as if he were sorry that he had to say it. He thought he would impress me by the pause which he made after the first sentence.

Next morning Eamonn Ceannt, Sean Heuston, Mallin and others were shot. That was the 8th May, the morning after I had spoken to Eamon Ceannt after Mass.

BUREAU OF MILITARY HISTORY 1013-21
BURO STAIRE MILEATA 1013-21
No. W.S. 1,758