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BURO STAIRÉ MÍLEATA 1913-21

No. W.S. 91



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STATEMENT BY JAMES JOSEPH WALSH, AILESBURY
HOUSE, AILESBURY ROAD, DUBLIN.

UNIT: CORK CORPS, I.V.

PERIOD: NOVEMBER, 1913 TO APRIL, 1916.

My book, "Recollections of a Rebel", contains material in reference to the start and early organisation of the Irish Volunteer Corps in Cork. The present statement is supplementary to it, and is made at the request of the Bureau of Military History for the purpose of recording as much detail as possible in connection with the period.

Immediately after the start of the Volunteer movement in Dublin, the formation of a Corps in Cork was seriously discussed between Diarmuid Fawsitt, Liam de Róiste and myself. Maurice Conway, Maurice O'Connor and a few others were brought into the discussions and steps were taken to hold a public meeting. I wrote to Eoin McNeill and Roger Casement. Both of them agreed to attend and speak at our meeting. We arranged the meeting for the City Hall on Sunday night, 14th December, 1913, had cards of invitation printed and distributed in bundles to G.A.A. Clubs, Gaelic League Branches and every national or political society and organisation in the city and neighbourhood.

These early meetings were not attended by any one closely identified with Sinn Féin or extreme national views. They were an unknown factor at that stage.

I was Chairman, Cork County Board, G.A.A., at the time. It was arranged by our organising Committee that I would preside at the City Hall meeting. Diarmuid Fawsitt would read the manifesto issued by the Dublin Provisional Committee, and Liam de Róiste would propose a vote of thanks to McNeill who was to be the principal speaker. Party political feeling was then very bitter between the Redmondites and the O'Brienites in Cork. We had the alternatives of having no speakers prominently identified with either of the rival parties, or of inviting one from each side to speak. We wished to emphasise the non-party character of the movement, and we decided to invite Eamon O'Neill from Kinsale as one identified in the public mind with the O'Brienite party, and John J. Horgan of Cork as one identified with the Redmondites, to attend and speak at the meeting.

There were two wings of the Redmondite following - the A.O.H. (Board of Erin) and the A.O.H. (American Alliance). They were in opposition on many matters, but the latter body was the more national. John J. Horgan met McNeill and Casement at the Imperial Hotel on Sunday and signified his willingness to speak at the public meeting. As events turned out he did not speak.

At 8 o'clock there was a fair attendance at the City Hall. At 8.30, when McNeill, Casement, Fawsitt, de Róiste and myself went out on the platform, the Hall was filled to capacity. The side passages and the space at the end of the Hall were crowded. There were some Fianna boys on the stage and a crowd of about 50, mainly Gaelic Leaguers, at the back of the platform. These had come spontaneously and had not been organised by us.

I spoke first and was followed by Fawsitt, who read the manifesto of the Dublin Committee. This was enthusiastically

received and the meeting appeared to be going well. Then McNeill spoke and, concluding his address, called for cheers for Sir Edward Carson's Volunteers. A signal was given to the organised group of Hibernians in the Hall. The whole audience stood up. There was confusion, applause, hooting, hissing and shouting for a few minutes; then the lights were put out and a crowd charged with a rush on to the platform. I was struck with a chair on the head and taken away to the South Infirmary for treatment. The crowd at the back of the platform had bolted.

I learned subsequently that when the Redmondites left the Hall the lights were put on again; a crowd remained; Casement and Liam de Róiste spoke, and the Cork Corps of Irish Volunteers was formally inaugurated.

Our intention had been to ask the approval of the meeting for the Provisional Committee which had organised it to carry on until a committee could be elected by the members. We did not contemplate a larger body at that stage. Meeting afterwards, however, with the heavy work of organising the Corps before us, we thought it advisable to increase our members, and the following Committee was got together:-

J. J. Walsh,	Chairman.
J. L. Fawsitt,	Vice Chairman.
Tomás MacCurtain,	Hon. Secretary.
Liam de Róiste,	Hon. Treasurer.
Maurice Conway.	
Seán Jennings.	
Diarmuid O'Donovan.	
Maurice O'Connor.	
Daniel Enright.	
Denis O'Mahony.	
Seán O'Hegarty.	
Terence MacSwiney.	
Seán O Cuill.	
Liam Owens.	
Seán O'Sullivan.	
Patrick Corkery.	

A large number of men - 400 or 500 - had signed the enrolment forms which had been distributed at the City Hall meeting. These were invited to a meeting in the Dún in Queen Street before Christmas, 1913; about 150 attended. Fawsitt, P.S. O'Hegarty, Tomás MacCurtain, Liam de Róiste and I spoke at the meeting. Arrangements were made for drills in the Dún on two or three nights a week. For a considerable time, perhaps six months, after that the position was that we had a large number of men enrolled but poor and irregular attendance at drill.

In January or February, 1914, a store in Fisher Street was rented as a drill hall. An ex-Artillery Sergeant-Major named Goodwin gave his services free as a drill instructor. Later we got ex-Sergeant-Major Donovan who was paid a small fee and was an excellent instructor. Drilling continued regularly. After a time some of our own men became reasonably proficient, and, after a series of tests, eight or nine of them were appointed Section Commanders. Early in April the Cornmarket was made available to us for drilling by the Corporation, and soon afterwards we held the first public parade from there to Blarney on a Sunday. About 100 men took part in it. The paucity of public support for the Volunteer movement was evidenced by the hostility we encountered. In these first marches bottles and other missiles were thrown at us by the mob.

The political party leaders did not openly oppose the Volunteer movement. In the Summer of 1914 followers of the Irish Party came into the movement in large numbers, and in Cork they were given representation on the Executive Committee. There were probably 2,000 Volunteers in the city in July.

The next job was to organise the County. This proved easier. The only barrier was the hatred engendered between the rival political parties. A consequence of this was that we were faced with rival Corps in most places, and were it not for the fact that Captain Lindsay Talbot Crosbie, a Kerry Landlord, who, by the way, possessed a motor car, accompanied me, progress would not be easy. Captain Crosbie was a follower of Mr. Redmond and was introduced to the Cork I.D.A. and Volunteer movement by Diarmuid Fawsitt. He was appointed Chief Inspecting Officer for Cork City and County. With him I carried out inspections all over the County.

Our first run was to West Cork, which included such towns as Bandon, Dunmanway, Skibbereen, Bantry and Clonakilty. At Bantry there was the unique spectacle of no less than three potential armies. At the entrance we met and addressed the O'Brienites. In the middle of the great square were a few Sinn Feiners, while at the other end we addressed the Redmondites. These groups would not work together as one body, and it was the same in many parts of the County. It was a trying experience, but compensation was in store at Skibbereen where we were played into the town by a brass band that had recently been presented by that generous citizen, MacCaura, of Pulsicon fame. Later Mr. MacCaura treated us to a magnificent banquet at the West Cork Hotel. At midnight we reviewed the Volunteers of Clonakilty.

On this occasion I was dressed in the first Volunteer uniform worn in this Volunteer movement. The O'Rahilly had given an order to Messrs. Mahony of Blarney for the grey-green cloth. The Mahony firm, which I knew well, obliged me with a length which I had made into a uniform by Messrs. T. Lyons & Co. The first appearance of the new garment created something of a sensation. Inspections were carried out in other parts of the County, including Millstreet where there were two rival Corps, Redmondite and O'Brienite, Charleville and Fermoy.

We were now in the position of having large masses of men but little progress was being made in military training. Similar mass movements characterised the County. In Cork City the Corps had a nominal membership of over 1,500 in July, 1914. Men of different political affiliations worked together in the organisation, but their party allegiance was not altered.

That state of affairs was of short duration. After the outbreak of the European war, Captain Talbot Crosbie, without the knowledge or sanction of the Cork Executive Committee, purported to offer the services of the Cork Corps of the Irish Volunteers to the British War Office. Then came Redmond's speech at Woodenbridge. It was imperative that we take a firm stand on the issue involved in the divergent policies now being proposed to the Volunteers. Redmond advised them to fight for the Empire; the majority of the original Volunteer Committee, and the majority of the Cork Committee, advised them to remain loyal to Ireland. The Cork Committee did all that was possible to maintain unity, but without avail.

The split in the Cork Corps took place at a parade held in the Cornmarket on 30th August, 1914. On that occasion I made one of the few good public speeches of my career. Liam de Róiste and J.L. Fawsitt spoke also on our side. For the Redmondites Captain Talbot Crosbie and John J. Horgan, Solicitor, spoke. An impassioned appeal to the Redmondites from one of the lesser speakers caused the ranks to break, and for a while pandemonium reigned. Order was, however, restored; and when the Volunteers divided only about 50 were on the side of the Committee.

On October 15th I was ordered to take up duty in Bradford. That order was part of the policy of victimisation initiated by the Government against men who had opposed the recruiting of the Volunteers for the British Forces. I was in Bradford until May, 1915, when I was dismissed from the Postal Service because of a letter I wrote to the Cork Corporation, of which I was a member. On the 6th May I was arrested at Mallow on my way to Cork. An order was served on me forbidding me to reside in Cork. That night the Cork Volunteers had, without my knowledge, arranged to welcome me at Glanmire Station. They came to meet the train and when they learned that I had been arrested they held a public meeting in protest at which Diarmuid Fawsitt spoke. Soon afterwards he also was ordered out of Cork City and County. I came to Dublin and had no direct contact with the Volunteers until Easter, 1916. I was a member of the A.O.H. American Alliance during that period. The only Branch of that organisation in Dublin had rooms in North Frederick Street. It had a membership of about thirty, and many of them were in the Volunteers, and not all in the same Company.

On Easter Monday morning a number of G.A.A. officials, who had attended the Annual Conference on the previous day, were in my shop at Blessington Street. I came down in uniform and carrying my rifle, as I anticipated big events. One of the G.A.A. officials, Billy Aherne of Cork, accompanied me as far as Fairview, where I joined a body of Volunteers under the command of Oscar Traynor and Frank Henderson. I did not know the men in this group and they did not know me. There was some confusion and uncertainty, and news came that the fight was off. About 1 o'clock Traynor dismissed us with the order to reassemble at 3 o'clock. I went home to Blessington Street. I had had no food since early morning. There was no one living in my house, so I prepared some food for myself.

After thinking things over the idea struck me of mobilising my colleagues of the A.O.H. American Alliance. I went at once to Scollan, the Secretary, got the list of names and addresses from him, and within a couple of hours had collected twenty of the thirty members. About six o'clock Scollan and I brought those twenty men to the G.P.O. and handed them over to James Connolly. From that forward they were known as the "Hibernian Rifles". Six of them were killed during the Rising, two on Tuesday morning at the City Hall, two at the G.P.O., and the others at other posts during the week. These men had arms, as they were members of different Volunteer Companies, but they had not been mobilised before I collected them.

At some time during Easter Week I heard Connolly tell Pearse that the total mobilisation was 650.

SIGNED:

DATE:

WITNESS: _____

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