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COSANTA

BUREAU OF MILITARY HISTORY, 1913-21

STATEMENT BY WITNESS

DOCUMENT NO. W.S. 114

Witness

Eamon O'Connor

Identity

I.R.B. Tralee.

Subject

I.R.B. Tralee and I.V. activities,
Co. Kerry, 1913-1916.

Conditions, if any, stipulated by Witness

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ORIGINAL

BUREAU OF MILITARY HISTORY 1913-21

BURO STAIRE MILEATA 1913-21

No. W.S. 114

STATEMENT OF EAMON O'CONNOR, ASHE STREET,
TRALEE, CO. KERRY.

PERIOD: 1912 TO EASTER, 1916.

UNITS: TRALEE I.V.
TRALEE I.R.B.

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There were only three members of the I.R.B. in Tralee for some years before the establishment of the Irish Volunteers - Austin Stack, Joe Melinn and myself. I had been sworn in by Cathal Brugha. We remained at three for a long time; I think up to about the end of 1913. Maurice Crowe used to visit us occasionally. Diarmuid Lynch visited us on two occasions later. I remember being present at one meeting at the Rink at which he was. There were about eight at that meeting.

After the Volunteers started there was a gradual expansion of the I.R.B. It then became possible to pick suitable men. At one time the expansion was too rapid, and unsuitable men were taken in. Three of them had to be sworn out. I remained in Stack's circle for a time, until it had reached six or eight men. I then organised another circle and became centre. I do not know how many circles were in the town at Easter, 1916, nor what the I.R.B. position in the County was, but I was present at one meeting in the hotel in Dingle. Stack, An Seabeach, and Pat O'Brien of Ballyferriter were at that meeting.

When the reports of the starting of a Volunteer organisation at Athlone appeared in the Press in 1913, I discussed the matter with a number of others in Tralee. I wrote to Athlone enquiring what they were doing and what they intended to do. I got a reply but it did not give very much information. I discussed the matter with Austin Stack and recommended that we should make a start. He told me that the Irish Club in High Street were taking steps to call a meeting for the formation of the Volunteers locally, that we would let that effort go ahead and see how it developed. I was not a member of the Club, and I do not think Stack was a member.

A public meeting for the formation of Volunteers was held shortly afterwards in the County Hall. Maurice P. Ryle presided and Diarmuid Crean was appointed Secretary. A Committee was appointed also, but I am unable to recall who were members of it. Four Companies of Volunteers were formed immediately after this meeting. They were on a territorial basis as follows:-

- A. Company, Boherbue.
- B. Company, Strand Street.
- C. Company, Centre of town.
- D. Company, The Rock.

The Picturedrome was used at first for drill, and public parades were held in the sports field. Meetings of the Executive were held in the Hibernian Hall. A little later the Rink was acquired and became the Headquarters for drills, and all activities. A Committee, of which I was a member, was

appointed to collect funds. I found that a private collection had already been made amounting to about £60. The question arose as to whether we should go back to the subscribers concerned again. We did, and most of them gave us further subscriptions. The total collection amounted to almost £300.

When we moved to the Rink we had no arms or equipment. Michael Doyle made a number of dummy rifles and these were used for training. The first drill instructor was Michael Purtil, an ex-soldier. He was not a first class instructor. One Sunday at a parade at the Sportsfield, a Reservist, Sergeant Ned Leen, offered to drill the parade. He did so, and continued to be the principal instructor from then on. He was very good at the job. Parades were held at the Rink on week nights and as different Companies paraded on different nights drilling was going on there continuously.

During the early months of 1914 Companies of Volunteers had developed at many places all over the County. In June a review of about 2,000 town and country Volunteers was held in the Market, Tralee. Captain Talbot Crosbie was the inspecting officer.

About that time I was appointed Secretary of the Tralee Volunteers in succession to Diarmuid Crea who went to South Africa. I have no recollection of the town organisation being designated a Battalion or a Corps; we referred to the four Companies generally as the "Tralee Volunteers". Strength was approximately 400 up to the Split.

Arms and equipment were being gradually acquired. The first rifles were a mixed lot of seven, which were kept at my house except when in use for training purposes. We purchased from the Dublin Committee a number of Martini Henry single loaders. We got three Lee Enfields, but we exchanged these for single loaders so as to have a uniform type of rifle as far as possible. I am unable to say what number of rifles we had. The single loaders cost about 20/- or 25/- and any man who put down a subscription of 5/- was given one.

During 1914 the organisation of the Volunteers went ahead steadily. Cyclist and Signal Sections were established. There was an Executive Committee which looked after the administrative side of the work, and a Military Council which dealt with the military aspects. Equipment was being purchased. Before the Split every man had at least a haversack, most had belts, bandoliers and uniform peaked caps. There were about half a dozen full uniforms amongst the four Companies.

On 29th July the Tralee Volunteers turned out in full strength for the 1914 Oireachtas at Killarney.

~~About this~~

Early in September the Companies held elections of Officers and the following were appointed :

A Company.

Matt Walsh,
W. O'Connor,
J. Shea,
J. Mullins,
J. Moylan,

Captain.
1st Lieutenant.
2nd Lieutenant.
Hon. Treasurer.
Hon. Secretary.

'B' Company.

D. Healy,	Captain.
J. Roche,	1st Lieutenant.
J. Fahy,	2nd Lieutenant.
J. Burke,	Hon. Treasurer.
Mort Sullivan,	Hon. Secretary.

'C' Company.

C. Daly,	Captain.
P. McGrath,	1st Lieutenant.
P. Lawlor,	2nd Lieutenant.
Pat Ryle,	Hon. Treasurer.
P. Quinlan,	Hon. Secretary.

'B' Company.

J. Scanlon,	Captain.
J. McDonnell,	1st Lieutenant.
D. Mahony,	2nd Lieutenant.
A. Stack,	Hon. Treasurer.
E. Barry,	Hon. Secretary.

In September it was clear to us that Redmond's policy was leading the Volunteers away from the objectives originally laid down for the organisation. There was a good deal of uneasiness about the position. I went ~~to Dublin~~ ^{to Dublin}, saw Pearse, and told him that the large majority of the Tralee Volunteers could not reconcile their ideals with Redmond's policy. He ~~counselled~~ ^{counselled} patience and said, "You carry on the same as I am doing here". This was before the ejection of Redmond's nominees from the Provisional Committee in Dublin. After that ejection took place, a split everywhere was inevitable.

It took place in Tralee on Tuesday evening, 13th October. The four Companies paraded at the Rink. Going to the parade I was wondering what I could do to influence matters in the right direction. I went into Revingtons and bought a green flag with a gold harp and a Union Jack in one corner. It was the only ~~Irish Green~~ ^{Irish Green} flag I could get. I cut out the strip with the Union Jack and put the flag on a stick. Father Joe Breen was the spokesman for the majority who wished to follow the original I.V. Committee. I do not think there was any Chairman in a formal sense. Tom O'Donnell, M.P., was present, although he was not a Volunteer and had no standing at the parade. He attempted to influence the meeting into following Redmond. When the speeches were finished and the men asked to divide on the issue, my green flag was passed to ~~Michael~~ ^{Michael} Peady. There were shouts of "This way for the green flag" and the overwhelming majority of those in the Rink rallied round it. I had the bit of the flag with the Union Jack on it. I said to Tom O'Donnell, "This is your flag, can you get any of your supporters to hold it?". No one would. I said, "The proper place for it is in the dust", and I threw it on the floor. Later it was pinned on O'Donnell's coat without his knowledge. Peady was a plasterer, an imposing figure of a man, not unlike O'Donovan Rossa. The attendance was about 300; Less than twenty refused to fall in with the majority and they left the Rink and the organisation.

I sent the following telegram immediately to the Provisional Committee:-

"Eoin McNeill, 41, Kildare Street, Dublin.
Tralee Battalion stands firm for old
Constitution and the old Committee.
Eamon O'Connor, Secretary."

I sent telegrams in similar terms to the Companies throughout the County.

Most of the men who had left were from my own Company, 'C'. The defection that night did not, however, represent the whole of our losses to the Redmondites. Later on considerable pressure was put on many Volunteers by their employers, as a result of which they either fell out altogether or went over to the National Volunteers started soon afterwards (24th October). My own Company was, in fact, practically wiped out in this way during 1915, but it suffered far more severely in this respect than any of the other three Companies.

Seán McDermott had been in Tralee and Dingle before the Split. He addressed the Tralee Volunteers in the Rink.

The following Tralee delegates were appointed to the first National Convention of the Volunteers in Dublin on 25th October, 1914:-

'A' Company,	Matt McMahon.
'B' Company,	Joe Melinn.
'C' Company,	Eamon O'Connor.
'D' Company,	Michael J. O'Connor.

Someone of these delegates (I am not sure which) did not travel, and Austin Stack substituted for him. I introduced Stack to Pearse in Dublin. Stack was appointed as the Kerry delegate on the General Council at the Convention, and from then onwards had close contact with the Dublin men.

A County Convention was held in Tralee on 21st November, and on the following night a parade of the Tralee Battalion took place to Rath to commemorate the Manchester Martyrs' Anniversary.

About the end of the year, or early in 1915, we invited Pearse to Tralee. He spoke at the Rink and reviewed us in the Sportsfield.

The biggest event of 1915 was the presentation of Colours by Eoin MacNeill at Killarney on Whit Sunday, 23rd May. About 1,500 Volunteers were present from various parts of the County. Tralee Battalion mustered about 300, most of them armed with rifles. On that occasion Paddy Barry had the flag which we had in the Rink the night of the Split. I carried it on a stick stuck into the barrel of my rifle. I gave it back to him when we got to Tralee.

The 1915 Manchester Martyrs' Commemoration was organised and carried out by the Volunteers in Tralee. All national bodies took part. There were over 800 Volunteers in the parade.

During 1915 the attitude of a section of employers in the town hardened against the Volunteers. A number of men lost their employment. Stack was dismissed from his post as Income Tax collector in March; Cotton lost his job in the Employment Exchange in April; and in May Joe Melinn was dismissed by Slatterys. In April a branch of An Cumann Cosanta was organised in Tralee to aid men so victimised. Cotton was employed as an organiser in various parts of the County.

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We were mobilised for a parade at the Rink on Holy Thursday night, 1916. It must have been an unexpected mobilisation because I had a Circle meeting called for the same night and had to put it off. When we were in the Rink that night a lady came in carrying a violin case. She went straight through the hall to a curtained alcove at the end of it where Stack, Con Collins and some others were in conference. After a while Collins came out and I spoke to him. Earlier that night he had told me that he wanted to go home to Newcastlewest. I had said that I would have business in Abbeyfeale, that I would have a car next morning, and that he could use it to go to Newcastlewest while I was engaged at Abbeyfeale. That proposed journey of mine had no connection with Volunteer matters. I understood from Con Collins that night that the lady who had come into the Rink had brought a message from Dublin to the effect that James Larkin was sound and solid with the Volunteers, that he would be in control of the ports, that everything was set and we would soon be in action. I understood the lady to be a Killorglin girl who is now the wife of Dr, James Ryan.

I found that night that it was impossible to get a car to go to Abbeyfeale next day, and on Friday morning I went to report to Stack that I could not take Con Collins as promised. I did not see Stack, but I think I saw Collins. Some time in the afternoon of Friday a contractor named Kennedy called me over to hear a story two young lads were telling him. The elder of the two boys said that a boat had landed at Barra with three men in it, and the police were very busy. The boat had been captured by the police, he said. On my way to the Rink I met Tom McCarthy, publican, who told me Collins had been arrested and that the police were looking for Stack. I went to the Rink and met Dan O'Mahony, O.C. of the Castleisland Volunteers, there. A few young lads were at the end of the Hall. Paddy Cahill came in, went down to the young lads and said something to them which raised a cheer. He was passing out without saying anything to us when I asked him what message he had given to the young lads. He said he had told them to guard their rifles with their lives. He then left. A Volunteer named Healy came in and told O'Mahony and myself that the police had brought a man a prisoner to the Barracks. I asked him to describe him and when he said it was a tall man with a whisker, I immediately said to O'Mahony, "That is Roger Casement". Healy told us that he had been present when Stack was sent for by the police to come and see Collins at the Barracks. Stack had emptied his pockets before going.

We were mobilised on Friday night at the Rink. We were told to carry only empty rifles. Cahill gave an order before leaving the Rink that if any rifles were loaded they were to be unloaded. We marched up towards Rock Street. We got an order to double. Some Volunteer dropped a loaded revolver; it went off and I got the bullet in the leg. That put me out of action for the remainder of the period. I heard the Volunteers shouting and singing. I enquired what they were doing and was told they were making a demonstration in front of Stack's house.

On Easter Saturday I was sent to the Mercy Hospital in Cork to have the bullet removed. Before going into the hospital I went to the Volunteer Hall in Sheares Street where there was considerable activity, but I did not speak to any of the senior officers.

I was in hospital until Stack and Collins were court-martialled. Stack sent for me to give evidence at the Court-martial and I went to Dublin. At Richmond Barracks, Stack's employer, Dr. O'Connell, who was defending him, strongly advised against my giving evidence, and said it could do no good. I did not, therefore, give evidence.

At some Gaelic gathering in Killeeney, a meeting of J.R.B. was held at which I was unanimously elected Head Captain for County Kerry.

SIGNED: Eamon O'Connor

DATE: April 1948

WITNESS: Florence O'Donoghue

