

ORIGINAL

BUREAU OF MILITARY HISTORY 1913-21
BURO STAIRÉ MILEATA 1913-21
No. W.S. 421

ROINN  COSANTA.

BUREAU OF MILITARY HISTORY, 1913-21

STATEMENT BY WITNESS

DOCUMENT NO. W.S. 421

Witness

William Oman,
8 Joyce Road,
Drumcondra,
Dublin.

Identity

Member of Irish Citizen Army 1913 - .

" " 'G' Company, 1st Battalion,
Dublin Brigade, I.V's. 1919 - .

Subject

- (a) National activities 1916-1921.
- (b) City Hall, Jacob's Factory, and
College of Surgeons, Easter Week 1916.

Conditions, if any, stipulated by Witness

Nil

File No. S.1574

Form B.S.M. 2.

ORIGINAL

BUREAU OF MILITARY HISTORY 1913-21

BURO STAIRS MILITARY 1913-21

NO. W.S. 421

STATEMENT OF WILLIAM OMAN,

8 JOYCE ROAD, DRUMCONDRA.

My brother, George, became associated with the Citizen Army as a result of the 1913 strike. When a unit for boys was formed at Liberty Hall, I joined it because of my brother's association with it. I was about fifteen years of age at the time. Owing to the fact that I was a bugler, I was transferred to the Citizen Army proper after six months' membership of the boys' unit.

In February 1916, Dr. Kathleen Lynn, who was medical adviser to the Citizen Army, examined me and advised that I needed an immediate operation for appendicitis. I had taken ill after field manoeuvres on a Sunday and, on returning to Liberty Hall, I immediately went to Dr. Lynn's residence. She made arrangements to have me taken into the Meath Hospital. On leaving Dr. Lynn's residence, I returned to Liberty Hall where I approached Commandant James Connolly and asked could I speak to him for a few moments. He said: "Certainly", and asked me what my trouble was. I asked him could he postpone the scrap for a few weeks. He remarked that it was a very modest request and inquired why I made it. I informed him of my consultation with Dr. Lynn and the outcome of it. He told me to go ahead, that I would have nothing to worry about and that I would be all right. From that conversation, I understood that I would be out of hospital in time for the scrap.

I subsequently learned from Dr. Lynn that, on the night prior to my operation, she was consulted by Commandant Connolly on the advisability of my being operated on at all, as I had been associated, some time previously, with the removal of gelignite which had come from Scotland. She informed him that, even if I said anything about the gelignite while under the ether, it would be attributed to my rambling. On receiving this

assurance, Connolly permitted me to undergo the operation.

I was two weeks in the Meath Hospital and I was then sent to Stillorgan Convalescent Home for two weeks. After the second week in the Home, the matron asked me would I care to stay a third week and I agreed. On the Friday of the third week I received a 'phone message to report back to Liberty Hall immediately. On receipt of the message, I reported to Liberty Hall and found that it was an armed camp. My brother had brought my rifle and equipment down to Liberty Hall. From that until Easter Monday, I was a permanent member of the guard in Liberty Hall. That was following the raid on the premises for the paper "The Gael". The feeling at that time was that the rising was very near.

On one occasion, we were all equipped with small arms, during the period of our guard, and we took up positions all around Liberty Hall, out on the street corners. After an hour or two we were called in. A cargo of new American shotguns had been landed and they had been brought safely into Liberty Hall.

One night while I was on guard duty, a person arrived with a telegram. The officer of the guard, Captain Sean Connolly, wondered was it a ruse on the part of the military authorities to find out if the Hall was guarded. On another occasion, the whole guard was called out, and every window in the place was manned - the roof and all. Two men were sent out to reconnoitre and one of them reported that troops were stationed outside the fire station in Tara Street. The military did not approach the Hall, however.

One evening, about two weeks before the rising, Commandant Connolly informed Captain Sean Connolly that to him would go the honour of leading the attack on the Castle. Captain Connolly called the N.C.Os. and men together and gave them instructions. They were to inspect the position to which they

were allotted. The original plan was that my brother, George, leading an advance party of four and myself in front of the main column would march up Dame St. around to the main gate of the Castle. We would march up Castle St. and enter a private house beside the steps that lead down to Ship St. By the time we were in our position, the main party would be arriving at the main gate. We would get five minutes in advance of them. We were to go into an overhead viaduct, overlooking the upper and lower gates of Ship St. barracks, while the main body would be attacking. Martin Kelly was to occupy the "Mail" office, and Elmes was to occupy Henry & James'. We understood from our officer commanding that the garrison at Jacob's would occupy two houses in Stephen St. overlooking the barrack square in Ship St. opposite Leitrim House. The original intention was to control the whole square. Sections of about four men were to occupy the Corporation buildings (think it was the Rates Department), overlooking the main gate of Dublin Castle, a publichouse opposite the Lower Gate, the Engineering Post beside the City Hall, and Sinnott House. The main body, under the command of Captain Sean Connolly, was to occupy the City Hall. Captain Connolly was very well acquainted with the City Hall.

According to the original plan, it was never intended to occupy Dublin Castle. The reasons given by Sean Connolly were that the buildings were too spread out, and also that it contained a British military hospital. Our O/C. explained to us that, to occupy it, would be very simple, but , to retain it, would be very difficult, with the number of men at our disposal, as we would have to hold prisoners and feed them, and also the sick and injured who were already in the hospital. We had, of course, carried out mimic attacks on Dublin Castle towards the end of 1915.

On Good Friday 1916, I was sent for by Commandant Mallin.

He told me to procure a .32 revolver and to proceed to Amiens St. I was to patrol Amiens St. on a bicycle from the Five Lamps to Amiens St. railway station and, if I saw any movements of troops or a big force of police in the vicinity I was to return to Liberty Hall immediately and report. Having procured a bicycle and a .32 revolver, I cycled over to Amiens Street. I was not too long there when I observed Commandant Connolly walking down Amiens St. He stood to look in a shop window - Houlihan's, basketmakers - near the Five Lamps, and, after a short perusal of the window, he entered the shop. I was amazed at that and I glued my eyes on the building. Shortly after Commandant Connolly entering, I saw P.H. Pearse doing as the Commandant had done. He was closely followed by Sean McDermott. I don't think I waited to see more of them going in. I patrolled up and down on the bicycle for approximately two hours, when I was ordered to report back by another member of the Citizen Army.

On returning to Liberty Hall, Commandant Mallin called me into a small room and he asked me did I see anything. I told him what I saw. He informed me that it was a meeting of the Provisional Government. He then told me that the "Aud" had been sunk, with the German guns. He simply said: "I don't know where we go from here". I went back to the guardroom.

We knew at this time that we were going into action on Sunday. On Saturday evening, my brother and myself bade our parents farewell.

On Easter Sunday morning, the order was published in the "Irish Independent" cancelling all field manoeuvres. I remember Commandant Connolly was in bad temper that day. He took out the whole Citizen Army and we did the route that was originally mapped out for us. We crossed Butt Bridge and went by Tara St. College Green, Dame St., around into Castle St., Christchurch, High St., Francis St., around by Thomas St. and Marshalsea Lane and back by the quays.

It was the general impression amongst the whole Citizen Army that, on the Sunday, Commandant Connolly was going to attack and occupy Dublin Castle. He had not told anyone of this intention, but things were in a fluid state after the cancellation of the orders by MacNeill. A few weeks prior to the route march, each member of the Citizen Army had been called in before Commandant Connolly and Commandant Mallin and asked if he was prepared to act without assistance of the Volunteers. Commandant Connolly explained that he would think no worse of any man who was not so prepared, but that he was anxious to know the position and how many men he could rely on. Connolly gave us the impression that he was more or less despondent over the whole affair, that the Volunteers would not take part in the rising, and that he was going to act on his own and take the Castle.

When we returned to Liberty Hall from the route march on Easter Sunday, Commandant Connolly made an extraordinary statement to the Citizen Army. We were paraded in front of the Hall, and he announced that he had something to say to us. He told us that we had been mobilised with a purpose in view, and until that purpose was achieved or we went down in the attempt, we were to consider ourselves soldiers. Pointing to Liberty Hall, he said: "That is your barracks" and we all trooped in. Immediately on entering the building, he called Captain Sean Connolly and informed him that he would be the officer on duty for the night, which meant that we would be up all night.

In the small hours of Easter Monday morning, Connolly sent out men to bring messages to Pearse and the other leaders of the Volunteers. There was a meeting held there during the early hours of Monday. We came off duty at 6 a.m., had a feed and lay down, fully dressed, with our equipment beside us.

At about 11 a.m. on Easter Monday, I was called to the room where the conference had been held. When I came into the presence of Connolly and Pearse, they both informed me that I would not do, as I was wearing uniform. I was instructed to send someone in civilian attire. I sent my brother, George. He told me afterwards that he was sent to the Royal Barracks to watch the movement of troops and to report immediately to Liberty Hall on noticing anything in the way of large concentrations or movements of troops. By the time he left the vicinity of the Royal Barracks, we had already occupied our positions. He told me he had to pass the barricade at the Four Courts.

Between 11.30 and 11.45 a.m. on Easter Monday, Captain Sean Connolly sent me to Beresford Place to sound the fall-in for all troops. I sounded the fall-in inside the building first, and then outside. While we were assembling, the Volunteers from the Kimmage Garrison marched in front of Liberty Hall. We fell into marching order. I always marched with the officer commanding the company. If there were two officers, I walked just behind them. On this occasion, I fell in beside Captain Sean Connolly. Commandant Connolly was already on the square. As we were about to march off, Commandant Connolly approached Captain Sean Connolly, shook his hand and said: "Good luck, Sean! We won't meet again". He also told him how much time he had to get to the Castle. As we passed the fire station at Tara St. Captain Connolly's brother, Joe, was leaving it to join the Citizen Army at Liberty Hall, and he waved to us. As we were proceeding along Dame St. the Captain asked me did I know where George was to have gone with his section. I said I did. He directed me to take three men and occupy it. As we came to the City Hall, I saw the sections breaking off to take up positions at Henry & James' and the "Evening Mail" office. The main body, with my party included, turned towards the main gate and we

approached it in extended formation. I was in a quandary what to do as, according to the original plan, my small party should have been five minutes ahead of the main body. The policeman on duty made towards the main gate to close it. As he did so, Sean Connolly brought his rifle to the "present" and fired. The policeman fell. Sean Connolly immediately turned to me and said: "Run". I left him and, with my party, ran up Castle St. We entered the hallway of a tenement house, crossed the yard (crossed the graveyard) and occupied positions close to the viaduct where we were to take up position originally.

The positions we occupied commanded the upper and lower gates of Ship St. Barracks. For quite a while, there was no stir, but we could hear the firing from the main gate. I saw troops come out on the roadway inside the inner gates. I fired at them and they immediately took cover. After that, we had quite a lull. We saw no troops or movements of any description despite the fact that we could hear firing and felt that the fighting was going on.

As the day wore on - I suppose it would be about two o'clock - I began to wonder how things were going. When I attempted to move out a few yards from where we stood, I was fired on by a single sniper. We had a certain amount of protection from the arch, but, if we moved a few yards, we were exposed to fire from Ship St. or any of the Castle buildings.

Between three and four o'clock, we heard the sound of cheering. To my great surprise, troops were going to the relief of the Castle, and not leaving the Castle. They came down Christchurch into Little Ship St. in open formation. Of course, they saw us. I dropped one of the home-made bombs but it did not go off. They fired on us from the street. As I was under the impression that they ^{would} form an outer cordon around the Castle and so surround us, I decided to evacuate

the position. In Werburgh St. the mobs were cheering the troops. I held a consultation with the others, and we decided that each man should take his chance individually in getting away. I decided that, on account of the mob, they should not take their equipment with them. The others left and I remained there by myself until about five o'clock.

I was in uniform, but had the good fortune to have brought an overcoat with me, although it was a real warm summerlike day. I put on the overcoat over my uniform and abandoning all equipment, discarding my hat and pulling up my stockings over my trousers, I walked into Werburgh St. When I got as far as Christchurch Place, I heard one of the mob shouting: "There's one of them". I ran, with the mob at my heels. I had only to go about 150 yards to my home. Before my people could get the door open, a man came up and stood beside me at the door while the mob was trying to get at me. I was then taken into the safety of my own home.

The first thing I did on reaching my home in High Street was to discard my uniform and I got into civilian attire. I was anxious to have a good sleep, but decided that it would not be safe to stay in my own home that night. On my father's suggestion, I went to my granny's house in Blackpitts, where I stayed the night.

On Tuesday morning, a friend of the family informed us that there would be no difficulty in my approaching Jacob's as the British military had not come near it yet. Having had a good feed and a wash and brush-up, I set out for Jacob's. Fortunately for me, four or five Citizen Army men, who had retreated from Davy's publichouse at Portobello Bridge, were already in Jacob's and they identified me. When I entered Jacob's, I was immediately brought before the commanding officers, Thomas McDonagh and Major McBride, who questioned

me on my activities from the time I left Liberty Hall. I told them what had happened to me. Commandant McDonagh informed me that he would appoint me as his orderly while I was in the building. I was to make myself conversant with all the posts in the building, so that I could take commands from him to the various officers. He also showed me, in the office, a list of the names of the men in the garrison. If inquiries were made regarding particular individuals, I was to check with the list and supply the required information.

On Wednesday, Commandant McDonagh sent out a reconnoitring party on bicycles. They went as far as Baggot St. where they were fired on by the British, one man, O'Grady, being shot.

At night time, some of the garrison in Jacob's would get out through the windows and place empty biscuit tins on the footpath, as an alarm.

One day, while in Jacob's, I had a very unique experience. I was in the room with Commandant McDonagh and Major McBride when there was a knock on the door. I opened the door and the Volunteer who was there said that there was a lady at one of the doors; she was dressed in widow's weeds and wore a British emblem - Dublin Fusiliers - in her coat, but she stated she had a dispatch for Commandant McDonagh. I was standing by while the Volunteer was giving the message. After a short while, Commandant McDonagh directed that the lady be brought in under escort. It was customary to blindfold visitors when they were being brought in, and on this occasion the lady was blindfolded. I observed that she was dressed in black, with a British army emblem on her coat, and had a handkerchief over her eyes. I was watching the escort removing the handkerchief from her eyes. Just as this was done, I got a slap on the shoulder and she said: "Hello, Bill". She was Chris Caffrey and had come from the College of Surgeons with a dispatch.

She had dressed herself in widow's weeds in order to get through the British lines. She removed the dispatch which she carried in her mouth, and handed it to Commandant McDonagh. After having a short chat with me about the College of Surgeons and the Citizen Army, she left Jacob's. Shortly after her departure, Commandant McDonagh told me that the garrison in the College of Surgeons was in a really bad way for food and that Commandant Mallin had asked him to return all Citizen Army men to the College of Surgeons. I then accompanied him on a tour of Jacob's building and he gave special orders in the different posts.

Late that night, fourteen or fifteen men assembled in the basement on the ground floor. They included five or six Citizen Army men. Some of the men were loaded with flour and cakes, in sacks. The officer in charge of the removal of the men and supplies of food was Lieut. Riordan, who was a school-teacher. Commandant McDonagh had told him to take the supplies of food and the Citizen Army men to the College of Surgeons, and to return to Jacob's himself. Commandant McDonagh turned to me and said: "I'm not letting you go. I am keeping you beside myself". Then he asked me what I thought of that arrangement. "Well", I said, "you are in command, sir". However, just as the party were about to depart, he changed his mind and released me to go with them.

Our party left Jacob's by Peter St. gate, passed up by the front of the building and crossed to Digges St., where we wheeled left to enter the back of the College of Surgeons. We were a long time there before we succeeded in getting in. Joe Connolly, who was the officer in charge at the back of the College, was the first officer I met whom I knew. Commandant Mallin came down to us and took over from Lieut. Riordan. He thanked him for the food supplies, etc. and counted the men being handed over. Jim Joyce, section commander in charge of

Davy's, was one of them. After a few minutes' conversation, Lieut. Riordan returned to his own post at Jacob's.

I found things very different in the College of Surgeons to what they were in Jacob's. Commandant Mallin had a very, very strict code of discipline prevailing in the building. The first thing they did was to serve me out with a Martini rifle and fifty rounds of ammunition. Commandant Mallin told me that one of the officers would show me the whole portion which they held. Lieut. Michael Kelly brought me to Noblett's corner, through the buildings, including the Turkish baths. I remember it was some time before I found out where they had the breach in the wall. The majority of the officers there were ex-Boer War men. I met there Captain Christy Poole, Captain McCormack and O'Neill, who were seasoned soldiers. I was about to walk across the room, when O'Neill gave me a kick, warning me not to do so as it was very dangerous. A telephone was ringing, and they told me not to answer it. Being conversant with all the tricks that would be adopted, they said that if I lifted the receiver, immediately there would be a burst of fire on that particular spot.

I stayed with the main garrison in the Lecture Hall of the College of Surgeons. Any man who was available had to assemble at a given time for the rosary. We had to make down our beds and, in the morning reveille, which was not sounded, of course, we had to make up our beds and fold them up, etc. Due to the fact that there were so many injured in the College - Maggie Skinnider was one of them - no noise or hilarity was allowed. We had to observe a certain amount of quietness, whereas in other posts there would have been singing and laughing.

On Saturday, a dispatch arrived regarding the surrender. Commandant Mallin called a conference of the officers to

discuss the advisability of moving out and taking to the hills or surrendering. The majority of them were in favour of discarding our uniforms and equipping ourselves as a flying column, but Connolly's endorsement of General Pearse's order prevented such action, as far as Commandant Mallin was concerned. All the men were ordered to report into the Lecture Hall, where they were addressed by Mallin. He explained to them the position, as far as he was aware of it, and informed them that, as a soldier, he intended to obey the order of his commanding officer - and that was to surrender - despite what other people might think. He ordered them to discard all equipment, guns, etc. until further notice. He then called me aside and said he was going to send me out, under a white flag, to contact the nearest British Commander in the area. Before I could do so, however, he received word that there was a British officer coming up York St. under a white flag.

As the British officer entered the College, by way of York St. entrance, Joe Connolly whipped out an automatic to fire at him, but he was overpowered by others near him. He, like the majority of us, did not want to surrender, but Commandant Mallin had explained to us that the bigger the number of us to surrender, the greater would be the problem for the British. On being asked to forecast the outcome, he did so, very prophetically. He said that, in his opinion, we would be interned in the Curragh and that he himself would be shot, with the other commanding officers, etc. "But", he said, "I question if they will shoot Lizzie" - that was the nickname we had for the Countess. We were told by the British officers to leave all equipment in the College and, at a given time, to march out by the side door into York St.

At the appointed hour, we marched out into a double line of troops, with an advance party of about twenty and a

rear party of the same number. We proceeded from York St. into Stephen's Green, down Grafton St. where the mob attempted to attack us. The British officer displayed great courage. He gave the rearguard the order: "About turn, present arms", and he told the crowd that, if they did not get back, he would shoot them. His action frightened off the mob, and we marched in peace down Grafton St., up Dame St. and into Dublin Castle. After being about an hour in Dublin Castle, we marched out and proceeded up Christchurch, Thomas St. and into Richmond Barracks.

We were brought first into the gymnasium at Portobello Barracks, where the C.I.D. proceeded to pick out the officers. It was not till later in the week that the younger fry were segregated from the older men. I was in a room with Tom Clarke and Sean McDermott. I remember one day McDermott was taken to the toilet and, on his return, he brought back a lump of sweetcake, which he had evidently bribed from one of the sentries. He divided it amongst the boys who were in the room. He told us it cost half a sovereign. When the older men had been taken away, there was no one there but the boys and those who were for trial. I was one of 121 boys released, under age, from Richmond Barracks.

The Citizen Army was re-organised in 1917, Jim O'Neill being commandant. As far as I was concerned, I have nothing of note to record from 1917 until I joined the Volunteers in 1919.

While a member of "G" Company, 1st Battalion, I took part in the usual patrols, etc. The 1st Battalion area was relatively quiet because of the fact that there was a number of dumps in it. On one occasion, while attached to "G" Company, I was sent out to time a convoy of Black and Tans, coming from Gormanston to the North Dublin Union, and

arriving at the latter place at approximately seven o'clock in the evening. For three nights I timed the convoy as to what time it arrived in North King St. Very elaborate preparations were made to ambush them. I remember they brought sawed-off shotguns to fire into the first car. The attack was to open on the first car from the corner of Anne St. which would jam the whole convoy from Capel St. to Anne St. Corner where the bombers and revolver men were laid, in such positions that they were not opposite each other. However, for some reason or other, the convoy did not come on the night arranged for the ambush, although when I timed it the following night, it did come.

One night while I was attending a parade in Blackhall St. I was asked by the commanding officer how I was fixed at my work. I told him I could be in or out, and no one would ask any question. I worked in a small firm. Six men were picked out of the parade. When the parade had been dismissed, we were informed by the O/C. that there was to be an attack on the Custom House on the following day. We then left Blackhall St. and went down to the Custom House to examine the position we were to take up, which was at the corner of Beresford Place and Store St, right opposite the main door of the Custom House. We received very explicit instructions as to what to do in the event of a party of Tans passing our position. We were not to fire at them or attack them. If, however, a party of Tans came to attack us, we were to hold on for as long as we could, and then, while retreating from the Custom House, to fire at them, forcing them to follow us. The reason for this was to give the men inside the Custom House a fighting chance of getting away. We were to be in our position five or ten minutes before midday or one o'clock - I am not sure which.

On the following day, I was walking down Talbot St. towards a laneway which would take me directly to my position,

when my O/C., Bob Oman, came along and told me to take up position immediately. The first thing I observed was men bringing petrol, or paraffin oil, or inflammable material from lorries into the Custom House. When an Inspector of the D.M.P. passed our position, I suggested to the O/C. to hold him and take him into a hall, but he said: "No, leave him alone". The O/C., who was my uncle, was sitting in a doorway, four or five yards away from me. The Inspector went into Store St. Police Station. He must have observed us lying around. I have an idea there was a connection, because shortly afterwards a sergeant and policeman left Store St. and walked over to the main door of the Custom House. They were about to enter, then appeared, from where I was looking, to change their mind, and they walked up towards Beresford Place, on the Custom House side. They had not proceeded ten paces, when a young lad left the Custom House, with a gun in his hand, and raced after them. When he overtook them, he told them to reverse back to the Custom House, but they refused. My O/C. ordered me to go over and give the young lad a hand with them. I went over and threatened the two men that if they did not enter the Custom House I would plug them, because I saw that they were drawing attention. They returned to the Custom House front door, where they were taken in, and I was ordered back to my post.

The next thing was the arrival of the Tans. The first I saw of them was when they wheeled around towards Liberty Hall. I heard the scream of the cars coming into Beresford Place, at Liberty Hall, and they kept coming at a terrific rate. I had to admire their courage; they seemed to have no fear. They jumped over the sides of the cars, with guns in their hands, and immediately pandemonium broke loose. Firearms were discharging. Bombs were exploding. During this time, we were standing in our position. When the Tans moved towards Gardiner St. the Volunteers there opened fire on them and went

up Gardiner Street. When we saw the Tans at Gardiner St. we opened fire, turned and ran. As we were passing Monks' Bakery, the D.M.P. opened fire on us from Store Street. We kept running and assembled at the Gloucester Diamond. Our ruse apparently did not succeed, as the Tans did not follow us. We had a discussion as to what we should do. One man said: "They'll throw a cordon around the area and the best thing to do is to get out". We did not have much time to discuss our position as, just then, we observed an armoured car coming up Gloucester St. and we decided to go to our homes. I took two men of my own company with me, as I was acquainted with the locality. We went by Summerhill into Hutton's Lane, and made our way to where I was then living - Ignatius Road. After having a cup of tea, my two comrades went home, leaving their guns in my house.

Signed: William Oman

Date: 7th November 1950

Witness: J. Keane Comdt.

BUREAU OF MILITARY HISTORY 1913-21
BURO STAIRE MILEATA 1913-21
No. W.S. 421