

ORIGINAL

BUREAU OF MILITARY HISTORY 1913-21

BURO STAIRÉ MILEATA 1913-21

No. W.S. 425

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BUREAU OF MILITARY HISTORY, 1913-21.

STATEMENT BY WITNESS

DOCUMENT NO. W.S.425.....

Witness

Liam Daly,
188 Clonliffe Road,
Drumcondra,
Dublin.
Identity

Member of Irish Volunteers,
London, 1913-1916.

Subject

Biographical note on Sean Russell.

Conditions, if any, stipulated by Witness

Nil

File No. S.234.....

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STATEMENT BY LIAM DALY,

Seán Russell

Except to those who participated in the Insurrection of Easter Week, 1916, and continued the fight up to the Truce and later, the name of Seán Russell only signifies a name of an individual. Like the (man from God knows where) another Russell, Seán's death is shrouded in mystery and uncertainty, but his activities from 1914 when he joined the Irish Volunteers to the Truce, was known to all of the higher Executive of the Volunteers and Irish Republican Army, if only they would give the truth even at this late stage.

My personal experiences with Seán date from approximately January, 1916, until the early stage of the civil strife of 1922. When I first met him, he was about 22 years of age and was a section commander in "E" Company, II Battalion, 1st Dublin Brigade, and even at this early stage and without any military training he infused a high standard of efficiency in his small group. I will not go into detail regarding his work during Easter Week as the pen of Oscar Traynor has already given a graphic description. In Frongoch, he had grown a beard which he kept until his release at Christmas 1916. He held himself rather aloof from his fellow-prisoners, and associated only with those he was in close contact with during that famous week.

At the re-formation of "E" Company, II Battalion, he naturally assumed his section control and took a more active interest in the remainder of the Company under the Captaincy of Jimmy Sheils, 1st Lieutenant Billy Byrne, 2nd Lieutenant Tom Ennis, and Adjutant M. Colgan. About March, 1917, J. Sheils was unable to attend the Company owing to ill-health and an outside officer was appointed temporary in his place. This officer was none other than Dick McKee. After a few weeks J. Sheils resumed control of the Company and in a fortnight later resigned. Dick McKee returned to officiate at an election for a new Captain, and the unanimous choice of the Company fell on the quiet, unassuming, but efficient section commander, Seán Russell. From that day on the morale and efficiency of "E" Company became a bye-word, not only in the Dublin Brigade, but also to G.H.Q. In every phase of the Company's work Seán took a leading part, and as section commander had to prove my position in giving the Company semaphore signalling instruction and Swedish drill. Other section commanders had to take the whole Company in various other forms of military training, i.e. field training and extended drill, route marches and street manoeuvres. Naturally all these activities came to the notice of the Brigade and G.H.Q., and in a short while Seán was promoted to Vice Brigade O.C. He left behind him in the Company good men who did valiant work in the days to come. I as an individual, became a better soldier and man by his acquaintanceship. Even in his high position Seán kept a fatherly eye on his old Company and often entrusted work of an important nature to its members. Billy Byrne became the next O.C. Company.

About March, 1919, I proposed Seán's name to membership of the I.R.B. and in a short period he was sworn in. On returning from our Centre meeting on the day he was sworn in, I realised what a momentous thing I had done in proposing Seán. He spoke in a quiet tone but with a crispness and brevity of words that was a part of him. I shall never forget those words. "Liam," he said, "were it not for Easter Week, I would be in a Monastery; now, I have taken the Oath .. well". He then shrugged his shoulders. I then realised that a man had spoken who unless that Oath was fulfilled, would rather die a soldier's death or in a prison cell.

It was at about this period Seán was promoted to Vice Brigade O.C. and within a period of two months Michael Collins took Seán from the Brigade and gave him the hardest job in G.H.Q., i.e. to organise the munitions and provide factories for the manufacture of munitions; even when in this high position Seán kept his Company contacts. I remember an occasion when Seán sent me to act as a guard at the National Volunteer Headquarters in Farnell Square at the time of its dissolution when Colonel Maurice Moore seemed to be the only figure in it. Seán asked me to get everything that would be of military value and bring it to him. During my searchings at the National Volunteer Headquarters I came across about twenty-five boxes of .22 Morris Tube cartridges, amounting to 2,500 rounds in all. These I took and gave to Seán. This was in 1918, and in 1919 and 1920 most of the .22 stuff was used to make detonators for the number 9 bombs replacing the Mills grenades. Seán had kept this stuff

to help his work in the trying job as Director of Munitions.

On another occasion in August, 1920, Seán asked me to supply and fit an electric motor in a munitions factory he established in Percy Place. During the period I was doing the work, I had a Popular Mechanics Magazine in which a detailed description of the Thompson sub-machine gun was given. I gave the magazine to Seán and within three months (how he did it, I do not know) Thompson guns and instructors were over from America and were in the hands of the I.R.A. I was appointed, amongst my other duties, as an Instructor to the II Battalion. Certainly it is due to Seán that this gun which was so effective, was introduced into Ireland. These contacts with Seán as Director of Munitions has fully convinced me that Seán in no small measure was one of the main causes of Britain asking for a Truce and cessation of hostilities.

Another point showing how with all his other activities he kept contact with his comrades of "E" Company, is the fact that resulting on the Mount Street executions, Frank Teeling, who was wounded, was captured by the military and was eventually tried and condemned to be executed. That this execution did not take place was due to Seán. He organised the rescue from Kilmainham Prison of Frank Teeling and his companions. Then came the Truce and transitional period leading up to the Treaty, and from the signing of the Treaty to the greatest tragedy of Irish history, the Civil War.

In the third week of December, 1921, at the I.R.B. Centre meeting, the Supreme Council of the I.R.B. refused to give a decision regarding the signing of the Treaty, and had left it to the rank and file to discuss and voice various opinions, and this caused the trouble that smashed the I.R.B., and in no small way led to the Civil War. At this meeting I noticed Seán sitting on a form, his head lowered and arms folded and occasionally looking round at his companions. It was then I realised to the full the portent of his quiet remark made on the day he was sworn in. He had made a man-made oath to God and intended to carry it out as a God-made oath to man. My reasoning that day was - I had gone on strike for a 6d. increase in my pay but was willing to take 3d. knowing that if I held out for 6d. I would lose all, as I was nearing the end of my tether.

My saddest meeting with Seán was when he was held a prisoner at Hare Park, Curragh; when he saw me, he looked through me. I knew I had lost caste with him. I was in a way his warder, i.e. Barrack Engineer Officer.

My next and last contact with Seán was in 1933, when I wrote him asking his co-operation in compiling a history of "E" Company, II Battalion. The letter I got in reply further emphasised my realisation of sixteen years earlier. In it he says, "I am sorry I cannot co-operate in your scheme, as the work for which "E" Company was formed has not yet been accomplished. Therefore, no history of this Company can be complete until its aims are attained".

I cannot find words to express adequately the feelings I have towards Seán, who, in my opinion, is the only Irishman that was incorruptible, and may his memory be such as to induce this virtue in Irishmen to come. His end came, I believe, in the Mediterranean (middle of the Earth). His future, I am sure, in the middle of Heaven.

SIGNED

Liam Dwyer

DATE

15/9/50.

WITNESS

William Ivory Comdt

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