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BUREAU OF MILITARY HISTORY, 1913-21.

STATEMENT BY WITNESS

DOCUMENT NO. W.S. 461

Witness

Joseph Byrne,
72 Croyden Park Avenue,
Fairview, Dublin.

Identity

Member of Fianna Eireann, 1911 - .;
2nd Lieut. "A" Company, 3rd Battalion,
Dublin Brigade I.V's. 1913 - .
Member of 'The Squad' 1920.

Subject

- (a) National activities 1911-1921;
- (b) 'The Squad' 1920-1921.

Conditions, if any, stipulated by Witness

Nil

File No. S.1564

Statement by Mr. Joseph Byrne,
72 Groyden Park Avenue,
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I joined the Youth Organisation known as Fianna Éireann at Camden Street in 1911. At the time, personalities who later became prominent were in the Fianna with me. Amongst these were, Countess Markievicz, Bulmer Hobson, Con Colbert, Seán Heuston, Theo Fitzgerald and others whose names I cannot at the moment recall.

I graduated from the Fianna to the Volunteers in 1913 in Camden Row. I was associated with "A" Company of the 3rd Battalion. At that time the Volunteers were in their infancy and our activities were mainly confined to training, drilling and marches.

I was with the Volunteers until the latter end of 1915 when I enlisted in the British Army and in 1916 I was stationed in Portobello Barracks.

A few days before the Rebellion I was home on compassionate leave. On Easter Monday morning a knock came to my door. When I answered it there was a D.M.P. man outside who informed me I was to report back to my regiment immediately as there was trouble in the city. I said I would report at once. I then left my home and made my way to my mother's house where I knew I would find my brothers, this already having been arranged between us.

At this time the streets were lined with soldiers and I was allowed to pass through, being in possession of a military pass. I contacted my brothers at home who were living with my mother, on the Easter Monday. My two brothers and myself left my mother's house in Camden Street and proceeded down Kevin Street where we met Tom Hunter in charge of a party in Kevin Street. He told us to get whatever arms we had, that he was moving off immediately and that he was trying to get into Jacob's factory. We, therefore, returned to my mother's house for whatever arms we had, but by the time we got back Hunter had left. We did not contact him subsequently.

I stayed at home until late on the ^MMonday night when I went back to my own home, having meanwhile made an appointment with my brothers to contact or meet them first thing next morning. In the meantime they had contacted "A" Company of the 3rd Battalion in Boland's Mills and had gone off without acquainting me of their destination. At this time I was living at Usher's Island.

When I left the house that Monday morning the streets were lined with soldiers. Being in British uniform I was allowed through the ranks. I got to my mother's house in Camden Street. My mother put her arms around me, and when she saw me she said, "God bless you, I knew you would do it", and she burned my British uniform. I tried to make contact with some of the Companies and approached Peadar Glancy at a barricade on the Church Street bridge and he regretted that I could not get through to him. The barricade was between us at that time. He suggested I should

try to get across some of the other bridges and join him. I got as far as Watling Street bridge when I was arrested by a Sergeant of my regiment (Royal Irish Rifles) and I was lodged in the Royal Barracks, as it was known at that time. It is now Collins Barracks. I escaped a couple of days later with another soldier named Ryan.

When the Rebellion was over I returned to Portobello Barracks to the British Army minus my uniform, my mother having burned it. I was again placed in arrest but owing to the hurried departure of my regiment to Belfast the charge was not proceeded with. Remaining in Belfast for about a week I was drafted to France and served there until the end of the War in 1918.

Street Ambushes.

Following demobilisation, I again returned to my old Company, that is, "A" Company of the 3rd Battalion, Dublin Brigade, and reported to Captain Seán Guilfoyle who was then, as far as I can recollect, O.C. of the Company. I served about four weeks as a Volunteer when I was promoted Second Lieutenant in charge of the left half Company. From this time we carried out ambushes in Camden Street and Wexford Street. The British named these two streets the "Dardanelles" and Wexford Street the "Narrows". Ambushes were carried out with great success three nights a week. Numerous casualties were inflicted on the military and Black and Tans. As a result of one ambush there were military funerals through these streets every day for a whole week. Eventually the British Forces, I believe, refused to come through the area. I was

the officer in charge of these operations. In addition to strictly military operations, my Company carried out a number of raids on the offices of agents of Belfast firms during the Belfast Boycott period.

For street ambushes the Company was divided in halves - a right half Company and a left half Company. The former paraded on Monday, Tuesday and Wednesday nights, and the latter on Thursday, Friday and Saturday nights. Our operational area was Harcourt Street, Harcourt Road, Camden Street, Wexford Street, George's Street and Dame Street. The method was to have a scout in front of us patrolling, to report back any approach of lorries or tenders. Only about six of us took part actually in this type of operation and we worked in groups of two on each side of the street. On receiving reports that military were approaching I ordered my men to be in readiness. As the military came within our range we attacked with grenades. This was our mode of operation. I had my men posted at each corner of Kevin Street and Cuffe Street where we inflicted two or three fatal casualties - there may have been more. I had one man named Fintan Lalor slightly wounded - a scratch on the knee. It was a repetition of this every night we were out and in all cases we inflicted casualties.

The Squad.

I was transferred to the Squad some time in 1920. First of all I was approached by Captain Gullfoyle about joining the Squad as they were looking for reinforcements. Originally, the Squad comprised twelve men, referred to as "The Twelve Apostles". Prior to the formation of the Squad, specially selected men from different Companies in the Brigade

were hurriedly mobilised to carry out the type of work that the full-time squad eventually performed. Special men were being taken from Companies to go to them when they were being reinforced and when Captain Guilfoyle spoke to me I agreed to the transfer. This meant that I was to be whole-time, day and night, with the Squad, with pay. I worked under Paddy Daly (ex-Major General). I reported to the Engineer's Hall, Gardiner's Row, which was the Dublin Brigade Headquarters. From there I was sent to the dump at Morelands, Abbey Street, where I remained until word came in for work for us to do. Hence, we were 'standing to' at Morelands and awaiting instructions from the members of the Headquarters Intelligence.

I remember an evening in December, 1920, when I was instructed, with others, to proceed to Henry Street to assist in the shooting of D. I. O'Sullivan. About four of us comprised the party. A couple of us were detailed not to take part in the actual shooting but to cover off the men who were to do the job. I saw the D. I. being shot by a member of the Squad and when the shooting was over we returned to Morelands.

Some time after the shooting of D. I. O'Sullivan we were again ordered to proceed to Grafton Street and patrol the area there and should we meet up with any members of the Auxiliary Force we were to fire on them. I remember an Auxiliary coming out of Robert's Café accompanied by a lady. He was recognised by one of our men, and Ned Kelliher fired on him, killing him.

On another occasion I was detailed to accompany an officer to Sutton Cross where a District Inspector would be pointed out to me and I was to shoot him. Fortunately he did not make his appearance that night.

Dan McDonnell was the Intelligence Officer who accompanied me, and as far as I know, the man we were after was never caught. I cannot say why we were after him. My instructions were simply to shoot him when he was indicated to me.

Attack on troop train at Killester.

In the spring of 1921, the Squad under Paddy Daly, proceeded behind Killester railway station to ambush a troop train proceeding to Dublin from the North. Our party consisted of from 25 to 30 men and we were armed with grenades and revolvers. An ambush area was selected and we were instructed to take up positions. The train, we were given to understand, would be preceded by a pilot engine and when this engine had passed we were to take up our positions for attack. A portion of the railway, having already been loosened, was to be lifted by some of our men, the idea being that when the troop train proper passed on to the broken rail it would topple over and we were then to attack it and cause as much confusion as we possibly could. For some reason or other the troop train pulled up just before it came to the broken part of the railway and as nothing happened we did not attack it.

Capture of Armoured Car, Abattoir.

In May, 1921, Paddy Daly our O.C., told us that it was proposed to capture an armoured car at the Dublin Military Abattoir with a view to rescuing Seán MacEoin, a prisoner in Mountjoy Gaol, under sentence of death. Daly asked us did we know the Abattoir and we said we did but to make sure he described it to us in detail. He then detailed our men

to take up a position in the Abattoir. I was detailed to proceed to the far end of the Abattoir to round up anybody that I would meet there. This operation was timed for a certain morning in May. We assembled at Morelands on a number of mornings before the actual capture of the armoured car took place. Each morning the Squad went up to Aughrim Street where we waited for a pre-arranged signal to be given for us to enter the Abattoir. The signal was that the blind of a window in the Superintendent's house was to be lifted. For two mornings the signal was not given and we returned to our dump. On the third morning we again took up our positions in Aughrim Street vicinity and this time the signal was given. The armoured car came along. It was allowed to enter the Abattoir and the crew were given time to dismount from it and go about their ordinary business in the Abattoir. When we thought sufficient time had elapsed we entered. Each man of the Squad took up his allotted position. I saw Pat McCrae holding up the driver, remove his military cap and take over the car, saying, "Don't worry, it's not you we want, it is your tin can". Other British soldiers seeing what was happening opened fire with revolvers. We replied, wounding two of them. One soldier was killed as he was leaving the office, he having attempted to run back to use the telephone when he was challenged by one of our men. The telephone was ringing and when the Squad man detailed to look after it took the message it was from the Curragh Camp inquiring about a supply of meat, and our man told them to ring back in about twenty minutes and and they would get all the meat they required. He then cut the telephone cord. This lasted about ten or fifteen minutes. In the meantime the armoured car

was driven out. I was ordered to remain behind and see that our men cleared out of the place. Mick Kennedy, the man who answered the telephone, being the last man to come out, abused me for being there no matter who ordered me as it was his job to be always the last man to leave the job. He claimed this as a right. Kennedy and I jumped on a tram and made for Mountjoy in time to see the armoured car fight its way out. We took up positions in the avenue and joined in. One of our men was wounded in this scrap. I am unable to say if the wounds were inflicted by the enemy. The car was later driven to the Howth road and burned. For this job I had six rounds of .45 revolver ammunition.

The Burning of the Custom House.

On the morning of the 28th May, 1921, I was in my home when a messenger arrived and told me to report immediately to the dump at Morelands. I arrived at Morelands and our instructions were to proceed and take possession of the Custom House, that we were to work in conjunction with the Dublin Brigade as it was intended to destroy the Custom House completely. Some members of the Squad were given the task of rounding up the staff in the Custom House, then assemble them at a point in the Custom House and not allow them to leave until our job was completed. Others were detailed to burn papers and documents.

We arrived at the Custom House close to lunch time and proceeded to carry out our instructions. On the whole, the staff were generally submissive. Some of them, of course, objected to being held up and ordered about but when they saw that we meant business they accepted the inevitable. As far as I could see everything was going well for us until some members of the Dublin

Brigade observed enemy lorries coming down Eden Quay, and thinking that these lorries were going to attack the Custom House, they opened fire immediately. From that on confusion seems to have broken out and members of the Squad and others of our men attacked the Custom House and also opened fire, with the result that it threw the fire of the British directly on to the building. Within a short time the Custom House was almost surrounded with Black and Tans and Auxiliaries.

At this point, by a pre-arranged signal, which was the blowing of a whistle, members of the Squad evacuated the Custom House, fighting their way out as best they could. It was a case of every man for himself and I escaped through the back entrance and got safely away. The Custom House was well alight as Johnny Dunne and myself were leaving.

Later that evening Michael Collins said he was anxious to see the result of our attempt to destroy the Custom House, so Johnny Dunne and myself were detailed as escort to him. We walked down from the Engineer's Hall in Gardiner's Row and mingled with the people. Collins did not say anything but smiled when he saw the place was still burning, and then moved off. We went up Abbey Street, turned into O'Connell Street and to Parnell Street. Immediately on entering Parnell Street, Auxiliaries were holding up people and Collins was held up. I heard him abuse the Auxiliary. He said to him, "How dare you. Do you not know who I am?". Give me your name and number. I'll deal with you later". The Auxiliary apologised and Collins went on his way. Apparently the Auxiliary was so excited about the incident that he left us by also. We proceeded to Kirwan's public-house, Parnell Street, and Collins stood

us two glasses of malt and he said, "that's alright
now, boys, you can go".

SIGNED

Joseph M. Byrne

DATE

16th December 1950

WITNESS

William Jerry Condi

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