

ORIGINAL

BUREAU OF MILITARY HISTORY 1913-21

BURO STAIRÉ MILÉANTA 1913-21

No. W.S. 782

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BUREAU OF MILITARY HISTORY, 1913-21.

STATEMENT BY WITNESS

DOCUMENT NO. W.S. 782

Witness

Thomas McShea,
Ardfarna,
Bundoran,
Co. Donegal.

Identity.

Member of Irish Volunteers, Bundoran,
1913- ;

O/C. Bundoran Battalion, South Donegal
Brigade, 1919 - .

Subject.

National activities, Co. Donegal,
1910-1924.

Conditions, if any, Stipulated by Witness.

Nil

File No. S.2095

Form B.S.M. 2

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STATEMENT OF Mr. THOMAS McSHEA,

Ardfarna, Bundoran, County Donegal.

I was born and reared in Bundoran area. When I had finished my National School education I went to serve my apprenticeship as a carpenter. I spent five years in my apprenticeship and then commenced as a journeyman tradesman and doing small contract work up to the time I was arrested by the British Forces in the year 1921.

The first nationalist organisation I joined was the Ancient Order of Hibernians in or about 1910. As a member of the A.O.H., there was little demanded from me. I attended at quarterly branch meetings and paid regular subscriptions to the organisation. I remained a member of the A.O.H. up to late in 1913 when Owen MacNeill started the National Volunteers which I joined.

The National Volunteers did not arouse great local interest. Some drilling in military formation was carried out. Our Drill Instructors were all British Army Reservists. We had no arms, and the whole affair seemed to be a move to counteract the activities of the Ulster Volunteers who had been previously organised by Sir Edward Carson.

After the Great War of 1914-1918 broke out, all the British Army Reservists were called up for British War Service. The National Volunteers by this calling up lost their Drill Instructors and local leaders.

About September, 1914, a split took place in the National Volunteers over the question of Ireland's attitude towards England's war aims and the policy outlined by John/Redmond, leader of the Irish Parliamentary Party, for his supporters. The local effect of this split was that the Hibernians withdrew all their members from the National Volunteers and took no further interest in the Volunteers.

The loss of the British Army Reservists at the outbreak of the war and the subsequent split caused a big easing off in local Volunteer activities. I think it was about this time that Ben Ryan was made O/C. of Bundoran Company. Ryan was a smart young fellow at drilling and training Volunteers. Patrick Doherty was also a local leader and was active at drills and organisation work.

When the National Volunteers were organised in 1913, I resigned from the Hibernians and I joined a local Sinn Fein club. At this time Sinn Fein was arousing great interest and was beginning to capture the imagination of the young people.

In the year 1915 and up to Easter Week 1916, the Volunteer organisation in Bundoran area made little progress. There was little doing. We had no arms and there was no lead given to us from any outside leaders. We were left to our own devices. We did not matter much.

SWIFT MacNEILL.

In 1918 Mr. Swift MacNeill had been a member of the British Parliament for South Donegal constituency for about 32 years. He was in 1918 an old man and although a non-Catholic had been a member of the Irish Parliamentary Party under the leadership of Mr. John E. Redmond. Mr. MacNeill's reputation as a man was good and as a nationalist representative for South Donegal he had given long service to the country in parliament. When the time for the General Election of 1918 came along and candidates were being selected, Mr. MacNeill was again asked to stand for South Donegal by the Irish Party organisation - The Ancient Order of Hibernians. He refused to stand and as a reason stated that during his long service in the British Parliament he had made many friends in South Donegal and that he then suspected that with the uprising of Sinn Fein some of his best friends would be working against him if he stood again as a candidate, and he thought it would be better to stand down before any ill feeling would be aroused.

About January, 1918, Mr. de Valera and Mr. Sean MacEntee came to South Donegal and held a meeting at Ballyshannon to prepare the constituency for a bye-election which Mr. MacNeill's state of health indicated might soon be necessary.

About this time a Sinn Fein meeting was held in Bundoran which was addressed by Sean Milroy and Alderman Cole of Dublin, James Dolan, Manorhamilton, and, I think, Ben Maguire of Leitrim.

At the time this meeting was held, Father McCarville was the chaplain to St. Joseph's Orphanage, Bundoran, and was an enthusiastic supporter of Sinn Fein. He was prevented from speaking at this meeting by an order from the Bishop of Clogher. This order did not forbid him appearing on the platform at the meeting and he appeared on the platform. Another priest who attended this meeting and was on the platform was Father Loughran O'Ceiran who had been known as a staunch nationalist and Gael for many years.

What made this meeting one of more than passing importance was the fact that as a sequel to the meeting a contingent of Sinn Fein supporters travelling from the meeting towards the town of Ballyshannon was attacked by soldiers, then in training in Finner Camp, when on the public roadway opposite the camp. The soldiers were all former members of Carson's Ulster Volunteers. This affair developed into a serious affray in which hard knocks were freely given on both sides. A young man named Teevan from Ballyshannon received serious injuries from which he subsequently died.

General Election 1918.

In the General Election in December, 1918, Mr. Peter J. Ward (now County Registrar for Donegal) was the Sinn Fein candidate, and a Mr. Donovan, Belfast, a Barrister-at-Law, stood in the British Party's interests. In Bundoran area there were no polling

stations for this election and all the voters in this area had to travel to Ballyshannon to record their votes. In Ballyshannon there were eight polling stations which covered a wide area. The scarcity of polling stations and the long distances that some of our voters had to travel was a particular handicap to the young Sinn Féin organisation. The Hibernians had all the advantages that ample funds gave them in cornering all means of transport for the voters travelling to record their votes. In Bundoran district the overwhelming majority of the voters were supporters of Sinn Féin. Even one member of the R.I.C. voted Sinn Féin. Soldiers serving in the Army recorded their postal votes for us.

On the declaration of the poll in South Donegal, Mr. P.J. Ward was declared elected with a majority of about 500 surplus votes over his Irish Party opponent. This result was a resounding victory for Sinn Féin in our constituency which contained a large Unionist population. During the election all the schools were closed, as the great 'flu was raging in the district at this time. Many of the younger teachers, including two by the name of Judge, and Joseph Murray, now a Garda Superintendent, came out to help us and did great work at canvassing the voters.

The Sinn Féin election agent for South Donegal was Mr. P.M. Gallagher, Solicitor, Donegal town, who had been an exemplary Nationalist all his life. There were so many who did great work during the election that I could not, with justice to many, mention other names, as I could not now remember them all. Mr. Gallagher comes to my mind for an important part of the election preparations for which he was solely responsible and which produced good results. He held classes for all election works in Donegal town at which he lectured on election law. Those lectures he held regularly from the campaign opening up to the eve of the polling. He held examinations by questioning us at each lecture on what he had gone over at his previous lecture. In this way all the principal election workers got a really good

knowledge of election law and practices. I acted during the elections as sub-agent for Bundoran area.

Reorganisation of the Volunteers.

About January, 1919, a move to reorganise the Volunteers was made in Bundoran area. I cannot now remember what state the Volunteer organisation was in before this reorganisation took place. At the reorganisation a Battalion staff for the South Donegal No. 1 Battalion was set up and a defined area allotted to it. At the election of a Battalion staff the following officers were selected and their appointments confirmed by General Headquarters:-

Battalion O/C.	Thomas McShea,	Bundoran,
" Vice O/C.	Patrick Doherty,	do.
" Adjutant	Patrick Gilvarry,	Kinlough,
" Quartermaster	Joe Meehan.	

The Companies which comprised the Battalion, as far as I can remember now, were - Bundoran, Ballyshannon, Kinlough, Cliffony, Tullaghan and Pettigo. Pettigo may not have been included at the start but may have come in soon after the reorganisation.

At the time the Battalion was formed, a Brigade organisation was set up in which Mr. Peter J. Ward was appointed Brigade O/C., and Mr. Seamus Ward of Ballyshannon, was appointed Vice O/C. I cannot now remember who the other Brigade officers were. I don't remember any changes in either the Brigade or the Battalion staffs from the time the reorganisation took place up to my capture by British forces in 1921.

In 1919 some ex-British Service men from the 1914-1918 war joined the Volunteers and these men proved most useful for drilling and training the Companies in the Battalion. We had practically no arms except a few shotguns in 1919. I remember that Count Plunkett came on a visit to Ballyshannon and he stated that, if the Volunteers had any money available, arms could be purchased from.

General Headquarters, Dublin. He conveyed this information to Father McCarville who sent for me. I had some cash at my disposal at the time and I went to Dublin with it.

I cannot now remember how I got in touch with General Headquarters when I arrived in Dublin. I think I was told by some person to call at an office in Bachelor's Walk. I was, however, met at the railway station in Dublin by a friend, Bernard Kelly, of Ballyshannon, who was then living in Dublin and travelling for a firm in the drapery trade. After making contact with General Headquarters I was instructed to call at a hall in Blackhall Place and there I was offered a Martini single-shot rifle. This weapon was made up in a paper parcel, the stock of the rifle being removed from the barrel to make the parcel more compact.

I walked with this parcel under my arm from Blackhall Place to Gardiner's Place or Gardiner Street in which Mr. Kelly lived. He took my parcel and re-made it to represent a pair of blankets. He made a splendid job of the parcel, and he affixed his firm's label to it. I took the parcel by train to Manorhamilton and from there I finished my journey to Bundoran by cycle.

On my journey to Dublin I had arranged previously with Mr. Kelly that he should meet me at the station. When he arrived at the station he saw a Black Maria (Prison Van), waiting there, and he naturally feared that it might be waiting for me. When I arrived at the station I also saw the van, which startled me. It turned out that the van was at the station for some German Plot prisoners who were on the train under armed escort.

In 1920 a strike was called by General Headquarters as a protest against the British Military Authorities' action in forcing Irish railway men to carry military personnel and war material on Irish railways for use against the Irish Republican Army. The Irish Labour Party took a leading part in the strike which took the form of a one day strike. As O/C. of the 1st Battalion, I got instructions in connection with this matter.

The Great Northern Railway had a line terminus in Bundoran, and all the railway engines used between Bundoran town and Bundoran Junction which is about 35 miles from Bundoran town, were housed at Bundoran terminus. I consulted with a man who worked at the railway station about the best and simplest way to immobilise the engine. This man recommended that we should remove the engine's fire box grates or bars. This man worked on the repair of the local engines and he knew all about the ways to stop them running.

Myself and two other Volunteers - Owen Gallagher and Joe Meehan - went along at 2 a.m. on the morning of the strike to the station accompanied by the railway man who had previously advised me. We found two young fellows at work cleaning an engine in a shed. We put those fellows in a store and we locked them in. We found one of the engines with a fire in it to rise steam for an early journey. This man who had volunteered to help us drew the fire from the engine and removed the fire box from both engines on the station premises. We carried the fire boxes away for about a mile across fields where we dumped them in a river where they remained for some months. As a sequel to this the railway people to punish the local population closed down the station at Bundoran for some time. The affair took place about April, 1920.

General Raid for Arms.

About September, 1920, we received a G.H.Q. order to raid our district for arms. This raid was to be carried out simultaneously all over the country on a fixed date. In Bundoran area we carried out raids on premises in both town and country districts. We gathered, through raids on houses and where arms were handed over to us voluntarily, a collection of shotguns and old revolvers, most of which were of little military value. Amongst houses raided were some belonging to Unionist families. An inclination to resist us was apparent in a few places but we succeeded in all the raids without any attempt at active resistance.

Cutting Roads, Telephone Wires etc.

In connection with the work entailed by our efforts to upset as much as possible enemy communications, our principal job in this respect was to cut telephone and telegraph wires and connections serving Finner Military Camp. We assembled on an appointed night in the vicinity of the Camp and we cut all the telegraph poles between the railway line and the Camp with the exception of one pole which was actually within the Camp's precincts. All the poles were sawed through, ten or twelve in all, before any effort was made to knock the poles or to disrupt the wires. When the cutting of the poles was completed we all got together on several poles and by using our combined strength we were able to upset the poles and to cut and break all wires. This job was so complete that the Railway Company was asked by the Military Authorities at the Camp to convey a number of poles to Bundoran, which the Railway Company did and dumped the poles on the railway embankment at the nearest point to the Camp. We had friends working on the Railway who gave us word that the poles were under way and we were convenient waiting on the night they arrived, and as soon as it was possible we sawed each pole in the middle, thus rendering them useless. Another consignment of poles was ordered, but this time they were conveyed to the station premises. We received notification of those poles' arrival and we went at night to the station and sawed them up like the others. This was the last attempt made to replace the poles until after the Truce in July 1921.

Burning of Evacuated R.I.C. Barracks,
and Mullaghmore Coastguard Station.

Pettigo is an Orange district. On the night we went to Pettigo to burn the evacuated Barracks there the local Orange Band was out playing on the street. When we arrived at the barracks we heard the Band playing but we did not see them. We found that the Sergeant's wife and family were still living in the barracks, and we had them removed to Brennan's Hotel. When we had this done we

set fire to the barracks. The local Orangemen seemed to have sense enough to retire quietly to their homes during the time we were engaged in this burning as we saw none of them whilst there.

Our next burning job was the destruction of Mullaghmore Coastguard Station. This station was occupied by at least one coastguard who resisted our efforts to gain admission by refusing to open the door for us when we asked him to do so. We forced our way into the building and set fire to it. This burning was not a success as the fire only destroyed a portion of the building. The greater portion, which was two-storied, was untouched by the fire.

On the next day, which was Sunday, we went by car to Mullaghmore to complete the burning. On our arrival at Mullaghmore we found that there was a police guard on the Coastguard Station and also a large crowd of sightseers, many of whom came a distance by motor cars and other conveyances, in the vicinity of the station. Those strangers were apparently attracted to the scene of our previous night's work by the report that the burning was the work of the I.R.A.

On our arrival I went over to the policeman who was guarding the place and commenced to talk to him. I condemned the action of the people who had set fire to the station. The policeman was delighted to get some person to talk to him, as at this time there was a strict boycott on the police and any person seen talking to a policeman was liable to punishment. Whilst I was in conversation with him and occupying his attention, the other boys went round the motor cars in the vicinity and took any tins of motor spirit they found in them. At this time cars usually carried spare tins of petrol, as petrol stations were few and long distances apart. My distracting of the policeman's attention from his job enabled my other boys to gain admission unnoticed to the unburned portion of the building and sprinkle it with petrol and set fire to it. Then we all got into our cars and drove off. Before we were out of sight of the burning building we saw that it was well alight and in a short

time later it was completely destroyed.

Raid for Ulster Volunteer Arms.

Sometime in the summer of 1920, we received information that a few houses belonging to Unionists in the townland of Cloyhore near Belleek, contained a store of Ulster Volunteer arms. We mobilised a number of men and went to the district and raided the houses. The first house we visited refused our demand for admission and we threatened to burn the house if they did not admit us. There was a lot of straw in the farmyard attached to this house and when we started to carry this straw to the house in preparation for starting the fire the inmates surrendered and opened the doors to us. We thoroughly searched this house and other local houses but we found nothing.

Destruction of Income Tax Papers.

Our next activity was to destroy the papers of an Income Tax Collector near Ballyshannon. This man's name was Patton and he was a Unionist. This activity was carried out as a result of an order made by G.H.Q. and it took place on the first Saturday night in April 1920, when all Income Tax offices were to be destroyed simultaneously all over the country.

When we arrived at Patton's house we informed the inmates what our purpose was and they made no objections. The daughter of the house made a request that she should be allowed to take her father's Will, which was in the part of the house where the official papers were kept. We allowed her request and we then collected all the official papers in bags which we carried to the River Erne and dumped them in the river.

On our journey back and when crossing the bridge at Ballyshannon we walked into a party of British military, apparently guarding the bridge. The presence of this party on the bridge on that night was both a surprise and disconcerting to us. It

turned out, however, that their presence on the bridge had nothing whatever to do with our activities that night but was a precautionary measure adopted to prevent Easter Sunday celebrations of the 1916 Rising on the following day by checking up on people using the bridge during the night.

Attack on Bundoran R.I.C. Barracks.

About August 1920, plans were drawn up by the Brigade staff to attack four R.I.C. barracks on the same night. These attacks were planned for Ballyshannon, Kinlough, Ardara and Bundoran.

In the Bundoran attack, ~~which the Bundoran Co. carried out~~, men were placed covering both front and rear of the barracks. We opened fire from both front and rear positions with rifles and shotguns and in a few cases with revolvers where there were no other arms available. The police immediately replied to our fire. The shooting had not lasted long when the military from Finner Camp, $1\frac{1}{2}$ miles distant, arrived at the scene of the attack. Immediately the military arrived we evacuated our positions and cleared off.

After this operation, intensive raiding in Bundoran district took place. At the time of this attack the town was full of summer visitors which made the carrying out of any large-scale attack a matter of danger to innocent civilians. There was a general evacuation of summer visitors from Bundoran. Any who did not leave immediately following the attack cleared off the next day. This operation brought on our head the condemnation of all who had an interest in the local tourist industry which at the time would be the entire population of the town.

Capture of Belleek R.I.C. Barracks.

The late Francis Carney, who was O/C. of the Fermanagh Brigade, made the plans for the capture of Belleek R.I.C. Barracks. The plans made for this capture were very simple. After the 1914-1918 war the British Government had a vast number of surplus motor vehicles on their hands and they made a gift of motor ambulances to many Local Government

bodies who had the care of sick or ailing people in institutions such as Workhouses (as they were then called) and hospitals. One of these cars was given to Ballyshannon Workhouse Hospital.

Carney had a check-up made on the movements of the police garrison in Belleek Barracks and he decided that a Sunday morning would be the best time to make the attempt on the barracks.

Nearly all the garrison in Belleek were catholics and attended an early Mass on Sunday mornings. At Mass time there was usually a policeman on duty in the barracks. He also decided to use the Ballyshannon Red Cross ambulance. The Sheeran family of Ballyshannon had charge of the ambulance. Carney called some of the Bundoran Company to help in this operation. He got Patrick Johnston to drive the ambulance. Carney sent a message to Sheeran's to have the ambulance sent out to a certain place to pick up a patient for the hospital. Carney and Johnston were waiting on the road for the ambulance and held it up. Carney was dressed in the uniform of a British Officer and Johnston was dressed in British Army Private's uniform. Carney had a lot of official-looking papers in his hands and in his pockets.

The car drove into Belleek and up to the barrack door at the proper time.

Carney got out of the car, knocked on the barrack door and when his knock was replied to he told the policeman on duty that he had business with the Sergeant in Charge and requested admission. On getting inside the door he held up the policeman. The policeman was later taken into the yard at the side of the barrack and handed over to Frank Ward of Bundoran. Carney got possession and control of the barracks as simple as all that.

The plans for taking over the Barracks were gone into in the greatest detail. Every man who was mobilised knew exactly what he had to do and where he was posted. Carney had served in the

British Army in 1914-1918 war and knew how to plan an operation and to carry it out.

The following from Bundoran took part in the capture of Belleek barracks in some way:

Joe Meehan, Battalion Quartermaster,
 Jim O'Carroll, Lieutenant, Bundoran Company,
 Patrick Johnston, Company Captain (now in U.S.A.),
 Bundoran,
 Patrick O'Doherty, Battalion Vice O/C., Bundoran,
 Francis Ward, Medical Student (R.I.P.),
 Joseph O'Gorman, Student - now in U.S.A.,
 Joseph Loughlin, Bundoran - now Garda, Dublin,
 Alb. O'Carroll, Bundoran,
 Owen Gallagher, Ardfarna, Bundoran,
 Thomas McShea, Ardfarna, Bundoran, Battalion O/C.,
 John O'Doherty, Bundoran.

My contribution in this operation was to help in the carrying out of police equipment such as uniforms, belts and the Barrack Day Book, in which was written a diary of events happening in that police district and also the destruction of the barracks. We also carried out a number of policemen's boxes which we opened on the street outside the barracks looking for arms. In some of the boxes we found Bank Notes and ammunition. I remember distinctly that one box which was locked was broken open and that Bank Notes dropped out on the street and were blown about by the wind. I remember collecting the notes and putting them back again in the box.

All the men from Bundoran Company who took part in the capture of the barracks came to Belleek in motor cars. Arriving in Bundoran we put all the stuff we had removed from the barracks into a press in the local National School and we informed the teachers and asked them

to be careful of the stuff and to be discreet about the matter.

Death of Terence McSweeney.

At the end of October, 1920, when we learned that Terence McSweeney had died, Patrick Johnston and I went around all the shopkeepers in Bundoran and asked them to close their shops on the day of Terence McSweeney's funeral. Our efforts met with a mixed reception from the people we visited. Some agreed to close their shops; some refused to do so. Others went to the R.I.C. to enquire whether it was the I.R.A. or the R.I.C. whose orders should be obeyed.

Patrick Johnston and I were both arrested on the 2nd April, 1921, and removed to Finner Camp. Our arrests were carried out during a big round up which took in a large slice of the country. Another man who was arrested at the same time was Mr. James O'Brien, C.E. I had met this man on the previous evening in connection with work I was doing for which he was the Architect in Charge. I met him at my father's place and we discussed the matter of the job I was doing for a considerable time. Mr. O'Brien, being a native of Manorhamilton where he lived and it being late when he and I had our business completed, was prevailed on to remain in my father's house for the night. I went to a neighbouring house. Before morning the whole countryside was completely invested by military and police raiding parties and Johnston, Mr. O'Brien and myself were arrested and taken to Finner Camp. Shortly after our arrest when the police had time to investigate Mr. O'Brien's background he was released as the Authorities had nothing against him.

Johnston and I remained in Finner for about two weeks and then we were removed to Derry prison. We travelled by rail from Finner to Strabane where we were halted for lunch which we had in the Workhouse then occupied by British Military. From Strabane

we travelled by rail to Derry and were taken to Ebrington Military Barracks. We remained there for about another two weeks and we were then transferred to Derry Prison. We were tried by courtmartial about the end of May, 1921, charged with ordering the closing of the shops for Terence McSweeney's funeral. This was the only charge that could be put up against us by the police. We were both sentenced to two years' imprisonment.

After being sentenced we were put in amongst the other sentenced prisoners. We were two of the many sentenced men then in Derry prison. Bernard Sweeney, for instance, was then serving a fifteen years' penal servitude sentence. One of the most common subjects of conversation amongst us was the discussion of plans to escape from the prison. This question had been the subject of planning for some time and we had made contacts amongst friendly warders who were taking communications in and out of prison for us. One of the best workers in the Councils of those who were planning to get out was John Ward, brother of Mr. Peter F. Ward. Mr. Ward had no personal interest in escaping from prison himself as he was near the end of his sentence in December, 1921.

About the beginning of December, 1921, we knew that our plans for an escape had reached a fairly advanced stage as our friends outside had made the rope ladders to get us across the prison wall and we on the inside had taken impressions of the locks and had sent the impressions outside to have keys made. When the keys were made and sent in to us we found that they did not fit the locks. Johnston, who was a motor mechanic, took over the key, and adjusted it to fit the lock and to open the cell doors.

Eventually, when we had all our preparations completed inside, we received word from the men working on the outside that we should make our attempt at getting out on the night of the 6th December, 1921. We got in an explanation that the 6th December was fixed, as the Treaty negotiations in London were on the point of breaking down and that an immediate escape was desirable.

Amongst the warders who were friendly and working for us were young Patrick Leonard and George Lloyd. The night of the 6th December, 1921, was the first time that Patrick Leonard was on intern duty on the corridors of the prison. There was another warder named Finnegan on duty that night in the prison yard. The warder on duty in the prison yard had the key that opened the door on the passageway leading from the prison into the yard. Neither Finnegan nor Leonard had a key to open the cell doors. Finnegan knew nothing whatever about our plans. Leonard knew all about our plans and it was he who brought in the final word that the 6th December was to be the date for our attempt to escape.

In order to show how successfully our plans had developed and how simple it was for us to get out of our cells unaided by any warder, young Patrick Johnston - being a tall and slim-limbed young man - had a long arm so slim that he could pass it through the round spy-hole in the prison door from which the spy-hole glass had been removed, and with the key we had manufactured take the lock off the prison door, get out into the corridor and unlock any door there. He had done this on many occasions. It was not an easy operation and required practice to speed it up. Many a night he had opened his own cell door, took the locks from some of ours, bade us the time of night, then locked our doors again and returned unnoticed to his own cell, and re-locked the door.

From careful observation for months before our attempted escape we knew that around midnight each night the intern warder on duty inside the prison gave the communicating door leading from the inside of the prison into the prison yard a kick of his boot as a signal to the warder on duty in the prison yard that tea was ready inside. As I have said the warder in the yard had the key of this communicating door and when he got the signal that tea was ready he opened the door with his key and came into the prison.

About 11.30 p.m. on the night of the 6th December, Patrick Johnston opened his cell door in the manner I have already

indicated and released thirteen other prisoners by opening their cell doors. We were joined in the prison corridor by Patrick Leonard, warder on duty in the prison. Leonard went to the door communicating with the prison yard and gave it a kick as the signal that tea was prepared. Warder Finnegan, using his key from the prison yard, unlocked the door and entered the prison. As soon as Finnegan entered the prison Johnston and I, who were waiting near the door, overpowered Finnegan. This action of ours was a shock to Finnegan. He, however, accepted the position without causing any rumpus. We questioned him about the position in the yard outside. Sometime previous to our overpowering Finnegan we heard some talking in the prison yard. We asked Finnegan about this and he told us that there were two R.I.C. men on duty in the prison yard that night and that both were armed with revolvers. He also told us that they had a five-naggin bottle of whiskey with them and that they had then drank most of it. He informed us that they were in the Doctor's (Prison Medical Officer) office which lay directly in our line of escape from the prison yard communicating door to the point at the wall from which we had planned to make our escape. Five of us then went to overpower the two R.I.C. men. One of the policemen was a powerful fellow in his middle age. Both were sitting on chairs on the opposite sides of a small table with their revolvers and a whiskey bottle on the table. Barney Sweeney and I went for the younger policeman whose name I remember was Little. This man turned out to be a troublesome business for Sweeney and I to handle. He made determined and frantic efforts to shake us off after we surprised and laid hold of him and got possession of his revolver on the table. We were getting as much as we could do to manage and control him when Johnston, seeing the danger of the situation, lifted the whiskey bottle and gave the policeman a blow of it on the forehead which knocked him out instantly. The older man did not give much trouble.

We gagged both the policemen and tied up their arms and legs and carried them into the prison proper. We laid them on the

prison corridor opposite where our cells were and we administered chloroform to each man.

Leonard at this time went into the prison yard with twelve escapees and proceeded to the outside wall adjoining on to Bennett Street where the outside rescue party were to be waiting with all their arrangements made for our signal that we were ready to go, on the inside. This signal was a white sheet tied up in a lump the size of a football and was thrown across the wall. The rope ladder was then thrown across the wall from the outside. Whilst these things were happening in the prison yard Johnston and I were in the prison corridor watching the two policemen. We were to stay on guard with the policeman until the actual crossing of the prison wall got under way.

It subsequently transpired that a B/Special was returning down Bishop Street at the time the escape was on and when he came opposite the end of Bennett Street he saw motor cars waiting near the prison in Bennett Street with their lights on. (Those cars were intended for our transport after crossing the wall). The B/Special got suspicious and raised the alarm by going to the main prison gate where a military detachment of about twelve men were on guard. We heard the soldiers rushing towards that part of the wall where the rope ladder was then across and as soon as we heard this commotion we knew that our attempt to get clear away was to prove a failure. A general alarm was raised and one of our men had actually got to the top of the prison wall when the men on the outside forming the rescue party had to clear off and the man on the wall found himself stranded there and he had to return to the prison yard taking the rope ladder with him.

Leonard had come into where Johnston and I were inside before the alarm was raised. As soon as the alarm was raised and the chance to escape had gone Johnston and I tied up Leonard and we then put both Leonard and Finnegan into a cell. Then we went into our own cells, Johnston locking the cell

doors. When we were locked into our cells our other men were still in the prison yard. The Prison Governor and a military party took charge of the prison yard. The Governor was an Englishman named Robeson and was a decent man. He told the military officer in the prison yard that our men were his prisoners and that they were to be taken in and placed in the cells unharmed.

The prisoners were all taken in and locked up, and nothing further transpired as far as we were concerned until the next day when we heard that the two policemen we had left lying chloroformed in the corridor were dead.

It may have happened that in the excitement of getting the prisoners who had attempted to escape into their cells and the checking over of all the prisoners in the prison to find if any had actually escaped that the two unfortunate policemen were neglected for some time at least.

As Johnston and I were found during the check-up locked in our cells, we escaped all suspicion of being involved in the attempted escape and we were let out for exercise on the following day whilst all the others who were involved in the attempt were locked in during exercise hours.

Warders Leonard and Finnegan were released from their bonds and from the cell they were found in during the check-up after the attempted escape that night. I dont know exactly what happened them immediately after they were found but I know they were arrested and charged with murder of the two policemen either the day after the escape or on the following day. It was when charged with the murder of the policemen that Finnegan made a statement to clear himself of any guilt in the matter of helping in any way in our escape plans. His statement told exactly what had happened without exaggeration. Finnegan involved both Johnston and I with the whole affair and we were then arrested (if that term is proper for use about a person already a prisoner) and charged with murder. As far as I know all the other

prisoners involved in the affair had been already charged.

After Finnegan had made his statement he was removed from Derry to some armed Camp in the vicinity of Belfast as a safety precaution. He was the only man in a position to prove the charges against us and was therefore a very important witness for the Crown.

We were all taken shortly after being charged to the prison hospital where a preliminary court was held on our cases to prepare the evidence to have us returned for trial to the Ulster Winter Assizes. In all there were fourteen prisoners and Patrick Leonard, the warder, and I returned for trial.

In the case of Leonard word came through friendly warders that he should recognise the Court and that he was to name James O'Doherty, Solicitor, Derry, and Tom Cunningham, Solicitor, to act in his defence. The instructions I and the other I.R.A. received from G.H.Q. were that we were not to recognise the Court.

The Belfast I.R.A. got the idea that it would be a good thing to kidnap the warder Finnegan so that he would not be available to prove the case against us. I heard that various ways and means to get a hold on Finnegan were discussed but that eventually it was decided Finnegan's brother, who lived near Carrickmacross, Co. Monaghan, should visit the camp where Finnegan was staying and get him to go for a walk in a direction in which he could be kidnapped. I heard that this plan was put into operation and that it proved successful mainly through the daring of the late Colonel Seamus Timoney who carried out the kidnapping.

The date of our trial arrived - 12th January, 1922. I am sure of the exact date as it coincided with the release of all sentenced I.R.A. pre-Truce prisoners from all British and Irish gaols.

We were taken for trial from Belfast prison to the Courthouse on the opposite side of Crumlin Road from the prison by an

underground tunnel. When we were put into the dock, the Crown prosecutor, the Attorney-General for Northern Ireland, Mr. Richard Best, B.L., caused a sensation in Court by informing the Judge that the principal witness against us, Warder Finnegan, had disappeared. The Judge ordered our removal back to the prison in order to have the matter of Finnegan's disappearance considered. Before we could be removed from the dock a warder rushed into the Courthouse with the information that Finnegan had been seen on the streets of Belfast near the Courthouse looking into a shop window. The Judge's order to remove us back to the prison was cancelled and our trial soon commenced.

We were all charged jointly with the murder of the two policemen. Mr. Best, B.L., opened the case for the prosecution. The first witness called for the Crown was Warder Finnegan, and his answers to questions did not seem to be pleasing to Mr. Best, so he asked the Judge for permission to treat Finnegan as a hostile witness. Finnegan was then subjected to cross-examination. This had not gone far when Finnegan took a weak turn and the proceedings had to be held up until he had received medical attention. Later the prison officials gave evidence to prove that we were confined in Derry prison in the lawful custody of the prison officials. The Doctor's evidence proved the cause of the death of the two policemen. As far as I can now remember the Doctor's evidence proved that our treatment of the two policemen caused their deaths.

Mr. A. Woods, K.C., who defended Leonard, then addressed the Jury and made a most impressive speech. His words were, however, wasted, as the case was well proved against Leonard and the Jury were so carefully hand-picked that there was no doubt about their verdict.

The case was still proceeding when Mr. Denis Henry, K.C. - the Judge - addressed Mr. Best and suggested that if the Crown had no further evidence against the prisoners other than Johnston, Leonard and myself, he would order the discharge of the remainder, as ^{he} would

rule that there was not sufficient evidence against them to convict them. Mr. Best informed the Judge that he was not producing any further evidence and the Judge ordered the removal of these prisoners from the dock.

The next step in our trial was the Judge's address to the Jury. This address left no doubt in his listeners' minds that a verdict of guilty should be brought against us. The Jury then retired to consider their verdict and we three prisoners were taken from the dock to a waiting room. After about twenty minutes we were again put into the dock. The Jury returned and took their seats. The Clerk of the Crown asked the usual question, "Gentlemen, have you agreed to your verdict?". The Foreman of the Jury answered, "Yes, the Jury have agreed to a verdict of guilty against the three prisoners in the dock".

The Judge then addressed us at some length on our duty to prepare for the next world. He pointed out that we were getting a month in which to make preparations for our passage into the next world, which was in marked contrast to the time we gave to our unfortunate victims who had got no time for preparations.

The traditional Black Cap which had been laid before the Judge from the commencement of the trial was then taken up by the Judge and put on his head. He then pronounced the sentence of death by hanging. The executions were timed for the 9th February, 1922.

After the Judge pronounced sentence of death on us he showed considerable emotion, either simulated or real. He pulled off the Black Cap and rushed in a precipitous manner over to his chambers.

We were immediately removed back to the prison and taken to the prison hospital. It seems that the prison authorities were under the impression that our cases would last for a few days before sentences could be passed. So when the cases ended so

abruptly the authorities had not the condemned cells ready for our reception and we were re-taken to the hospital in Belfast prison.

On the following Saturday we - the three condemned men - were removed by special train from Belfast to Derry. This train carried a large, fully armed guard of British Military and as an additional security measure all the stations through which the train passed on its journey to Derry were guarded by armed policemen. We were conveyed by an armoured car escort from the railway station in Derry to Derry prison.

On our admission to the prison each of us was put into a separate condemned cell convenient to where the scaffolds were being erected. During our wait in the condemned cells each had a warder full time each day and two warders full time each night. We were at the start exercised together and were allowed to talk freely to each other. After the first period of exercise the warders insisted on searching us on our return to our cells and we refused to be searched stating that we had no suicidal intentions adding that we looked on such a search as an insult. When we persisted in our refusal to submit to a search after exercise, our period of exercise was cancelled. On the Monday after our arrival in Derry, the prison tradesmen commenced the erection of scaffolds for our execution and we could hear the noise of this work going on for practically an entire month.

A few days before our execution date a friend of mine from Bundoran - Mr. John Conlon - came to see me and was allowed a visit by the prison authorities. When I was being conveyed by a warder to the visiting room I saw a man being admitted to the prison and I recognised him as Mr. Ellis, the official executioner. I recognised him from photographs which I saw published in the press about this time. I said to the warder, "That man coming in is Ellis the executioner". It was also on the morning I was waiting

with the warder for Mr. Conlon's visit that I heard the noise of a carpenter making a coffin. I drew the warder's attention to the sounds I heard and said to him, "That's one of our coffins being made." The poor warder was much affected by my remarks and made a futile attempt to contradict me. I then told him "I made too many coffins in my time not to know the sounds of their manufacture."

The interview with Mr. Conlon was one of the most moving experiences in my trials from the time we started out on our escape adventure in Derry and all through our trial and sentence. In preparation for this visit I was put in a cubicle with a wire mesh front and I was locked in. A warder was then put in a small compartment separating the cubicle I was in and another similar one directly opposite where I was to which Mr. Conlon was taken. My visitor had a wire mesh in the front of his compartment. We could not shake hands and we had to talk across the space occupied by a warder. Mr. Conlon, on seeing me, commenced to speak in a voice trembling with emotion, saying, "I have called out to your place to see your mother and I found her bearing up against all her worries and troubles with remarkable fortitude". He then added, "I have come here to tell you that in case I do not see you again your mother will be my special care whilst she lives and whilst I live. As long as I have a shilling she will get half of it". He then completely broke down and had to be helped away by a couple of prison attendants. This visit affected me very much and it also affected the warder who was listening in to what was said. He was so full up with his feelings that he was unable to speak for some time.

Extraordinary efforts were made all over the country to secure our reprieve. A number of prominent unionists were arrested all over the Six Counties and in addition many prominent Donegal men. These men were held as hostages and their fate depended on what was to happen to us. The Derry City Corporation held a meeting presided over by the Corporation's nationalist Mayor,

Hugh C. O'Dogherty. Our position was discussed at this meeting and it was agreed that a deputation should go to Dublin to interview Messrs. Collins & Griffith, and the deputation was instructed that if Collins and Griffith could do nothing to save us the deputation should go to London and make every effort to get an interview with King George IV. in order to request his clemency in our behalf.

The Derry deputation went to Dublin and met Collins and Griffith. They were told by Collins and Griffith to leave the matter in their hands as they, Collins and Griffith, were travelling later that night to London and that they would raise the matter with one of the British Ministers with whom they had an appointment the following morning.

At this time Lord Fitzallen was still Lord-Lieutenant of Ireland. There was then no distinction as far as the Lord Lieutenant's duties were concerned between North and South, and Lord Fitzallen got a cablegram from a Father O'Loughlin of Luxemburg, the wording of which was like this, "Use your prerogative in Derry. Your dead brother, whose memory I honour, would not refuse my request".

I have no means of knowing what the pressures were that influenced the Lord Lieutenant to act. But he sent a telegram to the responsible Minister in the Six County Government ordering the grant of a reprieve to the three Derry prisoners.

On Tuesday night the 7th February, 1922, the Prison Governor and the Chief Warder came to each of us and told us we had been reprieved. Father Smyth, the chaplain, had been with us earlier that day and said on leaving that he was going out to make a final effort for our reprieve. In the meantime, Father Smyth asked us to pray to St. Joseph, and that he would return earlier that night with whatever news might be and if no reprieve was forthcoming we would commence the final preparations for our executions.

As stated above, before Father Smyth's return we got official notification of our reprieves. When Father Smyth did return he could only shake our hands without comments.

Before leaving this part of my story I would like to pay a warm tribute to the assistant chaplains then working in Derry prison - Father Carolan (R.I.P), Father Devine and Father Faulkner. Each of these good men did everything possible for us during this trying time. I have always a feeling that each of the priests we were in touch with in Derry ~~was~~ feeling the strain of the crisis nearly as much as we were.

After the Governor's notification of our reprieve we were transferred to the main body of the prisoners and a few days later we were transferred from Derry to Belfast prison.

On arrival in Belfast we found that all the pre-Truce sentenced men had been released from there. There were some post-Truce I.R.A. prisoners then serving sentences in Belfast. On our arrival in Belfast the prison authorities attempted to treat us as ordinary criminals. This attempt was vigorously resisted by both the sentenced post-Truce prisoners and ourselves. The clash between the authorities and ourselves caused a continuous rumpus in the prison in which prison property was damaged.

In the midst of this moving about I had a visit from Dr. Flood of Bundoran accompanied by Captain Ramage, Solicitor, Ballyshannon. These men visited me in my cell about 8 p.m. They informed me that they had heard in Donegal that we were being badly treated in Belfast. (Both these men were unionists). Doctor Flood said, "Willie" - that was Captain Ramage - "and I decided to come and see for ourselves". During the time of this visit, the visitors were accompanied by the prison Governor and the prison Doctor. Dr. Flood asked me if I wanted him to prescribe for me or if I had asked Dr. O'Flaherty - the prison doctor - to prescribe for me. I told him that I had asked Doctor

O'Flaherty for additional bread which O'Flaherty could not grant and that since then I did not see any usefulness in asking him for anything more expensive. The visitors left me with an expression of their good wishes and that we would meet again soon in more pleasant surroundings.

The next morning an old warder named Frazer came to me and said that he understood I had visitors during the previous night, mentioning the names of Dr. Flood and Captain Ramage. I said that was so. He then said, "When you have friends outside with sufficient influence to get into a prisoner's cell at 8 o'clock at night you won't be long here", adding - "So far as I know the like of this has not happened here before this visit, and if you have anything that you don't want to fall into the prison authorities' hands, give it to me and I will have it sent to where you want it sent". I gave him a few small commissions to carry out for me. He did like service to both Johnston and Leonard.

Later on that evening Johnston, Leonard and myself were told that we were required in the Doctor's office. On being taken there we got a brief examination by the Doctor and were taken back to our cells. Soon afterwards we were taken from the prison and handed over to an armed escort who conveyed us in motor lorries to Larne. We were later conveyed by boat from Larne to Stranraer. From Stranraer we were conveyed by train to Peterhead Station and from there taken by Prison Warders to Peterhead Convict Prison.

As far as I can remember we arrived in Peterhead on Ash Wednesday, 1922. I don't remember the exact date. We remained there subject to convict status until the 25th August, 1925. On the 25th August the following prisoners were removed to Barlinnie Prison, Glasgow, and after a short stay there were all removed to Belfast prison: Seamus Monaghan, Banbridge, Co. Down, Felix O'Byrne, Banbridge, Co. Down, Jim Reilly

(R.I.P.), Co. Cavan, Charlie Gillen and Tom McShea (myself).

Sometime after our return to Belfast our friends all over the country decided on an attempted rescue. For this purpose of course money would be required. In that connection Mr. J.M. Judge, N.T., Tullaghan, took on himself the responsibility of securing this. Amongst the people who contributed were himself with a subscription of £25, his brother Dan, also an N.T. in Kinlough (both resided in Bundoran) £5 and Joseph Meehan, Gaelic Hotel, Bundoran, £25. Mr. Judge then travelled to Belfast to interview a warder who, he was previously informed, would assist from inside, but instead of that he, the warder, informed the Governor that a plot was on foot for the rescue of the Derry prisoners. Great activity prevailed among the prison officials and police inside and in the grounds of the prison from then on. From that we prisoners knew there was something extraordinary afoot but we were not left long in doubt as to what it was. Next day we were told the story by a very friendly warder, Mr. Peadar Fleming. He also told us that he had already conveyed the news to Mr. Judge who had by this time left the city.

I remained a prisoner in Belfast up to the 17th July, 1926, when I was released.

It is a matter of importance in connection with the release of some of the Peterhead prisoners to know that Seamus Monaghan and Felix Byrne were released from Belfast at the time that William T. Cosgrave signed, on behalf of the Free State Government, the Border Agreement with the British Government. This document was afterwards described by Mr. Cosgrave as a "damned good bargain" in relation to its financial commitments. At the time of these early releases Seamus Monaghan was a prisoner with me in Belfast. And when Seamus was informed of his release he inquired if the Derry prisoners were also being released. When he heard that we were not being released he refused to go out until we were released with him. He had to be forcefully removed from the prison.

A thing to note about the exceptions made between us prisoners in the matter of releases is that what I call the Derry prisoners were not released when all other I.R.A. prisoners had been released. After Seamus Monaghan's release we were treated as prisoners of a special category ~~as~~ being found guilty of murder.

Signed: *T. McShea*
(T. McShea)

Date: 29/12/52
29/12/52.

Witness: *John McCoy*
29.12.52
(John McCoy)
29.12.52

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

Addendum No. 1.
(See p. 12).

In fairness to the Sheeran Brothers I would like to add - as a result of the raid on Belleek Barracks the Sheeran Brothers were arrested and suffered a long term of imprisonment for their association with that event.

Jms

Addendum No. 2.
(See p. 21).

After the capture of Finnegan by the I.R.A., the news of this action, when conveyed to Leonard's legal advisers, caused them considerable uneasiness as, in their opinion, the removal of Finnegan would do no good to any of the prisoners as his evidence was on record in the form of affidavits and his absence from the trial as a witness would prejudice their clients' interests by not affording an opportunity for cross-examination. This view of the legal men was conveyed to the I.R.A. responsible for the detention of Finnegan and he was released in time to appear as a witness at the trial.

T. McShea
(T. McShea)

BUREAU OF MILITARY HISTORY 1913-21
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No. W.S. 782