

W.S. 935
ORIGINAL

BUREAU OF MILITARY HISTORY 1913-21
BURO. STAIRÉ MILEATA 1913-21
No. W.S. 935

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BUREAU OF MILITARY HISTORY, 1913-21.

STATEMENT BY WITNESS.

DOCUMENT NO. W.S. 935

Witness

Sean Harling,
112 Newgrange Road,
Cabra,
Dublin.

Identity.

Commandant, 2nd Battalion Dublin Brigade,
Fianna Eireann;

Courier to President De Valera and Dail Eireann,
1919-1921.

Subject.

Courier work for President De Valera
and Dail Eireann, 1919-1921.

Conditions, if any, Stipulated by Witness.

Nil

File No. S.1243

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STATEMENT BY SEÁN HARLING,

112, Newgrange Road, Cabra, Dublin.

In December, 1919, I was a Commandant in the 2nd Battalion, Dublin Brigade, Fianna Éireann. I was also a member of the Fianna Circle of the Irish Republican Brotherhood. Sometime in December, 1919, Garry Houlihan who was then O/C., Dublin Brigade, Fianna Éireann and Centre of the Fianna Circle of the I.R.B., instructed me to report to Diarmuid O'Hegarty, Secretary of Dáil Éireann, to take up a position as courier in his office. This was a full time job for which I received a salary. I reported to O'Hegarty at 76 Harcourt Street where the Dáil Éireann Office was then located. There was very little going on at the time - just ordinary routine office work.

In January, 1920, the office at 76 Harcourt Street was raided by British Military and Diarmuid O'Hegarty/^{was arrested.} Following this raid the office at 76 Harcourt Street was closed down. Another office was obtained over Messrs. Hogg & Robinson, Seed Merchants, Mary Street. Mick Collins, as Minister for Finance, had already his office in the same building. Diarmuid O'Hegarty, who had been tried and sentenced to six months imprisonment, was released after serving about four months, reported back to the new office in Mary Street and resumed his position as Secretary of Dáil Éireann. We remained in Mary Street for about another two months, and then moved to premises over the Leyland Rubber Company in Middle Abbey Street. The office staff comprised Diarmuid O'Hegarty who was in charge, Eamonn Price, Molly Ryan (now on the Dáil staff), Miss Hogan (now in the Department of Defence) and myself.

At that time the office of the Department of Agriculture was in Earl Street. The office of the Department of Home Affairs was in Henry Street. But Finance was still in Mary Street over Hogg & Robinson's.

Cathal Brugha was Minister for Defence. He had not a special office as such, nor had he an office staff. He carried out his duties as Minister from his business office in Messrs. Lalors', Candle Manufacturers, Ormond Quay, of which Firm he was a Director.

The Adjutant-General, Gearoid O'Sullivan, had an office about four doors away from Cathal Brugha near the Metal Bridge. W. T. Cosgrave, as Minister for Local Government, had his offices in Clare Street at that time. The general work of the couriers was to keep in touch with each of these offices and convey correspondence as required. This continued until two of them were caught and then Collins thought that some of us were being followed. He, therefore, made a suggestion at a Ministry meeting that a tobacconist shop should be purchased, given to me and that I would control all communications from that shop. I was then quite young and did not like the idea of being in a shop all the time. Collins suggested that the cost of the shop would be roughly £1,000. The following morning I informed him I had an unemployed brother, Frank, who had a small shop at 96 Upper Church Street and I added that I thought I could get him to take control of the communications under my supervision. Collins thought this was a good idea. But he naturally informed me of the grave risk my brother was taking since he was not in the Volunteers or any other national organisation. Eventually this arrangement was agreed on and my brother was placed on a salary. It worked out very successfully and my brother was never caught. Nor was anyone ever suspected in connection with it.

At the same time I was doing Western communications. I was in touch with the Western Commands from the Broadstone railway station. The I.R.A. had not yet been organised in Divisions. A letter for any of the Commands would reach them within four hours. I lived in 20 Phibsboro' Road adjacent to the Broadstone. The method of communications with the Western Commands was by engine drivers on the trains. The principal engine driver^{involved} was Patrick Killian. He was

directly in touch with Mick Collins. Others who also carried dispatches were Joe Claffey and Mr. O'Neill. They used to bring the return dispatches as well which they dropped inside the house to my mother. She, in turn, brought the messages down to the communications centre in Church Street for final delivery. That was the general run of things for the whole year until President De Valera came back from America. Collins instructed me to report to the President at Dr. Farnan's house, No. 5, Merrion Square. This was the first house he came to on his arrival, I believe.

From then on I was completely with the President and that ended my former type of work. There was only Kathleen O'Connell, himself and myself then and everything had to be attended to for him.

We left Dr. Farnan's after about a fortnight and went to "Loughnavale", Strand Road, Sandymount. Miss McGarry bought this house from Dáil Éireann funds in her own name. My duties then were to keep daily in touch with each of the Ministers, bring all communications from them to the President, and bring back the replies to them. This was the general work which went on daily. I continued to supervise the communications office in Church Street.

From the time the President came home to the Truce a lot of people were seeking interviews such as newspaper people etc. In this respect very special precautions had to be taken to ensure that these people would not be followed by British Agents. The method I used was I came into town in the mornings and got in touch with Collins. For example - he'd tell me the Hearst Press in America wanted an interview with the President. I would see the President and find out if he would grant the interview. Once the President 'okayed' it I would arrange for a 'safe' house where the interview would take place. I had a list of these - some in Leinster Road, Pembroke Road, Fitzwilliam

Street, etc. I would then go to the hotel where the newspaper correspondent was staying, inform him that the President had agreed to see him and to be ready at the hour which I would arrange to pick him up. I'd use two cars. I'd send one for the President and I'd go in the other myself for the correspondent. I always made sure the President had arrived in front of us. This was done by the President's driver remaining until he saw us coming along the street. Then he would drive off. This method was used in the interview with Lord Derby, Sir James Craig and General Smuts.

General Smuts came in the middle of the year. Then there was Archbishop Clune. That was early in December, 1920. When Sir James Craig came for the interview he stayed at the residence of Lord Justice O'Connor in Pembroke Road. Lord Derby stayed at the Gresham Hotel and most of the foreign correspondents stayed at the Shelbourne Hotel.

On the evening before the President granted the interview to Sir James Craig I went to the residence of Lord Justice O'Connor and had a chat with Sir James in connection with the coming interview. I informed him that I would call for him at 10 o'clock the next morning. When I arrived he was ready and we left for a solicitor's house in Sutton. The latter, whose name I cannot remember, was sympathetic to our cause. The President had gone on in Batty Hyland's car and Sir James and myself in Joe Hyland's car. When passing through Clontarf Sir James asked me would it be indiscreet if he asked where he was now. So I said, "No, Sir, you are in Clontarf". He said, "Oh, this is where King Brian fought the Danes".

The interview lasted about a half hour. After it was over I brought Sir James back to Lord Justice O'Connor's. Later that evening an engine driver of the Great Northern Railway handed me a poster on which was in large wording "Sir James now in the camp of the enemy".

The interview with Lord Derby.

I went to the Gresham Hotel to inform Lord Derby the President would meet him. It had been arranged that the interview would take place in O'Mara's house in Fitzwilliam Street. The same method was adopted as in the case of Sir James Craig. I called at the Gresham to see Lord Derby and was met by an English Protestant Minister who had accompanied him from England. He said I could not see Lord Derby. I then informed him that if I could not see Lord Derby the matter would have to end there, as my instructions were to only deal with Lord Derby personally. I was then brought into the room to Lord Derby and informed him that the President was prepared to meet him that night. I told him I would call for him at 7 o'clock. I told the President about the Protestant Minister and he said under no circumstances was he to be brought to the interview. So when I called for Lord Derby the Minister was about to accompany him. But I told him the interview was only between Lord Derby and the President, but he still insisted on coming. Charlie Price was the head waiter at that time in the Gresham. I asked Charlie to tell the Minister he was wanted in the reception room. Charlie did so and when the Minister went to the reception room I got Lord Derby into Joe Hyland's car and away. That interview lasted about an hour.

One day I was returning to Loughnavale with the President's mail. Included in the mail was a very important cinematograph film of the President's American tour.

When I got off the tram at the corner of Ailesbury Road I was about to proceed along Sydney Parade towards the level crossing and on to Strand Road when I saw a tender of Auxiliaries coming from the Sandymount direction. I threw the complete parcel of mails and film over a garden wall at the corner of Ailesbury Road, and stood there.

The tender stopped and two Auxiliaries got out and after questioning me commenced to beat me. They then drove away and I arrived at the President's house with my face puffed and two black eyes. But I had the mails and film safe.

The President gave me the film as a present but in later years he said he would like to have it back. So I returned it to him.

After spending about four months at "Loughnavale" we moved to "Glenvar", Mount Merrion Avenue, Blackrock.

The work at "Glenvar" was much the same as at "Loughnavale". It was looking after correspondence with the Ministers and conveying it. This continued every day.

Before we occupied "Glenvar", the late Mr. Batt O'Connor, a building contractor, constructed a secret dump in a rockery in the garden. It had a secret system of opening and closing. Each night before curfew all documents and correspondence were placed in a deed box which was then put in the rockery, and removed in the morning.

On the night of 28th June, 1921, I was in the Study with the President. I saw a detachment of British soldiers extended across the meadow advancing in the direction of the house. I told the President: we had not any time to dump the Deed Box which was always on the Study floor. The President instructed me to get away. So I crossed the back meadow to the grounds of Professor McNeill's house and on to Nutley Avenue. It was then after 10 o'clock. Curfew was in force between 10 p.m. and 5 a.m.

I made for the tram depot in Blackrock and I slept in a tram until 5 o'clock next morning when curfew was over. Then I returned to "Glenvar". Miss McGarry was in the house and informed me that

Kathleen O'Connell and the President had been arrested the night before. I asked her for the particulars. She told me that the officer in charge of the raiding party and the President were speaking in the study while the soldiers were searching the house. They found nothing. But when the Sergeant returned to report to his officer the Deed Box was discovered on the floor. The first document in the box was one emanating from the Department of Defence from Cathal Brugha stating that he was about to intensify the campaign. Mr. De Valera was then known as Captain Hayden, a retired British Army officer, and had papers to that effect. The officer informed him that the contents of the Deed Box were of a very seditious nature and he would have to take him to Dublin Castle. Miss O'Connell then said the Deed Box and its contents were her's. But the President said they were his. The officer said, "We wont argue; the two of you had better come along".

I then left for Brendan Road, Donnybrook, to report to Mick Collins. I met him at 6 o'clock in the morning. Collins told me he had already been notified by his agents in the Castle of these arrests. He added that the President was not now at the Castle but was in Portobello Barracks. He instructed me to proceed to a house on Rathmines Road and to remain there until I got information as to what was happening.

I went immediately to this house and later that morning, the 29th, (the arrest was on the 28th) a workman in civilian clothes from Portobello Barracks came to this house. He asked me if I had been sent there by Mick Collins. And when I said yes, he said, "Well, the 'long fellow' is having a posh time in officers' quarters". He added that if I hung on he might have news for me later on. About 12 o'clock this same man returned and told me that the 'long fellow' would be shortly coming out. Roughly, about ten minutes later

the President and a staff officer walked down the military road of Portobello to the corner. After a few minutes, approximately, they parted and the President walked towards Portobello Bridge. I then left the house to contact him at some point along the road. But a Dartry tram came along; the President jumped on it and I missed him. I reported back to Mick Collins giving him a full account of what happened. That evening I had a note from the President telling me not to go to "Glenvar" as he did not want me to become known. The next day (Saturday), the Lord-Mayor of Dublin, Alderman O'Neill, sent his valet Buckley to contact me at my home in Phibsboro' and tell me the Lord Mayor wanted me very urgently. I reached the Mansion House about 2 o'clock on that Saturday and Alderman O'Neill informed me that a British dispatch rider had been sent to him two hours earlier and had left a letter addressed to "Eamon de Valera, Representative of the Irish People, Mansion House, Dublin, Ireland".

The Lord Mayor gave me the letter and asked me to deliver it to the President. It was a large, buff coloured envelope. On the lower corner of it was printed, "If undelivered, return to 10, Downing Street, London". "O.H.M.S." was on the top of the envelope. I had this letter but I had also instructions from the President not to go to "Glenvar". I considered this was an important letter and I decided to go to "Glenvar". So I took a taxi to Blackrock Park. I was walking up Mount Merrion Avenue when I saw the President coming down it, minus his moustache. I told him what had happened and he opened the letter on the road. He said he had been rushing to catch the 3.30 train for Greystones but that this letter put an end to that. He then remarked, "It looks, Sean, as if we would be in the Vice-Regal very shortly, but at the moment we have a heavy evening before us". So we returned to "Glenvar" where he instructed me to call an immediate Ministers' meeting for 40 Herbert Park.

The calling of a cabinet meeting then was a headache. It meant that I had to contact each Minister personally as no written communications were issued for a cabinet meeting. W. T. Cosgrave lived at Templeogue and Count Plunkett in Bray. But since they were on the 'run' it was a problem where you found any of them. But until you found each of them your job was not complete. You had to find Diarmuid O'Hegarty too. It was easy to find Collins. He was about the only one who used to leave word where he was going.

Cabinet meetings were usually held at 40 Herbert Park or 36 Ailesbury Road. It was usual for the President to go to them on an ordinary push bicycle and I usually accompanied him.

The meeting was held that Saturday night at 40 Herbert Park, and at it the decision was reached that the text of the letter from Downing Street should appear in all the Sunday papers. Curfew was on but we had to get the text into the press. I 'phoned the different papers and asked their representatives to meet me. I met them in the house of a Miss Macken which was at the corner of Mount Merrion Avenue. It was from there that the text of the letter was given to each Dublin newspaper with instructions that it must appear in the Sunday morning issues. I believe the papers went to considerable trouble to do this and the publications duly appeared.

After that I went underground because it was expected trouble would break out again and the President did not wish that I should become known at all.

(Signed) Sean Harling
 Date 30th March 1954

(Sean Harling)
 30th March 1954.

Witness: Sean Brennan, Lieut.-Col.
 (Sean Brennan) Lieut.-Col.

