

W.S. 1,047
ORIGINAL

BUREAU OF MILITARY HISTORY 1913-21

BURO STAIRÉ MILEATA 1913-21

No. W.S. 1,047

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BUREAU OF MILITARY HISTORY, 1913-21.

STATEMENT BY WITNESS.

DOCUMENT NO. W.S. 1,047

Witness

Sean McNamara (MacConmara),
Parkgorm,
Crusheen,
Co. Clare.

Identity.

Member of I.R.B. Crusheen, Co. Clare,
1910- ;

Captain and later O/C. Mid-Clare Batt'n.

Subject.

- (a) National organisations, Co. Clare, 1897 - ;
- (b) Irish Volunteers, Crusheen, Co; Clare,
1914-1921.

Conditions, if any, Stipulated by Witness.

Nil

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ORIGINAL

BUREAU OF MILITARY HISTORY 1913-21
BURO STAIRÉ MILEATA 1913-21
No. W.S. 1047

STATEMENT BY SEÁN McNAMARA, (McCONMARA),
Parkgorm, Crusheen, Co. Clare,
formerly O/C. Mid Clare Battalion.

I was 80 years of age on 23rd June last, being born in Crusheen, Co. Clare. My father was the owner of a fair sized farm, and both himself and my mother were native Irish speakers. I am not aware that any of my forbears were connected with previous national movements.

I went to the Crusheen National School until I finished in the highest class there, the 6th standard, and after that I went to learn my trade as a mason from my brother Jim. In the course of time I went out on my own and I think it was in 1907 that I commenced taking contracts for the building of houses. As a contractor I worked a good deal outside of Clare in the counties Cork, Waterford and Galway.

The Crusheen district was never, from the times of the Fenians onwards, without a branch of the most advanced national organisations. In my early youth there was a branch of the Invincibles there, and it is one of my foremost recollections to see a number of them being taken away as prisoners in an outside car by a large force of R.I.C. These men included some of the O'Gradys, Loughreys, McNamaras and Fitzgibbons. They were held for a couple of weeks and then were discharged without trial. The authorities had got information that these men belonged to the Invincibles but no evidence could be procured to warrant a prosecution. It was one of these Invincibles, Thomas Fitzgibbons, a

farmer from Shranagalloon, Crusheen, who enrolled me in the I.R.B. in 1897. The I.R.B. as I knew it then was nothing more than a political organisation, though the oath was the same as that which I took later in 1910 when I became a member of the reorganised I.R.B. I attended a number of I.R.B. meetings in the year 1897 and in the following few years, but there was never anything discussed at them but matters affecting current political questions. In that year, too, a branch of the '98 Centenary Organisation was also formed in Crusheen and it lasted until the end of the following year. The local ^{curate, Father O'Meara,} ~~parish priest~~ was chairman and he took a very keen interest in it. He delivered a number of lectures on the United Irishmen and on different aspects of Irish history, particularly incidents of the 1798 rebellion. We held several processions, usually on the anniversary of the outstanding battles during that rising; the district used to be illuminated with flags and bonfires for these occasions. A fife and drum band was also established in the parish under the auspices of the '98 Commemoration Committee. This band travelled all over the country during that year and for about seven years afterwards to meetings of the United Irish League, a branch of which was also established in Crusheen towards the end of 1898. I can remember going to Limerick with the band in 1900 to a big unity meeting held there to celebrate the reunification of the nationalist elements led by John Redmond on one side and Justin McCarthy on the other.

About the beginning of the century also branches of the Gaelic League, the G.A.A. and the Land and Labour League were started in the Crusheen parish.

I was branch secretary to all of them as well as to the United Irish League. I am pleased to say that the G.A.A. organisation has survived in the parish to this day while the Gaelic League existed for a long time too. I remained in the United Irish League until the Sinn Féin movement was launched. About 1907 my brother, Tadhg, an Irish teacher, in conjunction with Con Fogarty and Seán O'Keeffe formed a branch of Sinn Féin. I became a member but did not take a prominent part in it until my brother left the district in 1910 when I replaced him as Chairman. This branch of Sinn Féin was the second to be set up in County Clare, the first being in Carron, the birthplace of Michael Cusack founder of the G.A.A., where the man responsible was Tomás Ó'Loughlin; the third branch of Sinn Féin to be formed in the county at the time was in Cranny, the parish which produced Peadar Clancy, afterwards a prominent I.R.A. leader who was murdered with Dick McKee by Crown forces in Dublin Castle on 22nd November, 1920. The Crusheen Sinn Féin Club remained in existence I believe continuously up to 1917. In that year I met Arthur Griffith in Dublin at a Sinn Féin convention and he had a very special welcome for me. On that occasion he said to me: "McNamara, I can never forget the three 'CRs', Carron, Crusheen and Cranny". They were the first three Sinn Féin Clubs in Clare."

In 1910 I was again sworn into the I.R.B. by Seamus Mór Ó Gríofa, a Post Office linesman and a native of Kilkee. He enrolled me in the village of Crusheen where he was working at the time. He was a most sincere patriot; I know of no man in County Clare who spent so much of his time and money in those days in the cause of Irish Republicanism. We had about 17 members in the

Crusheen centre of the I.R.B. at that time. Of those I can remember Seán O'Keefe, Con Fogarty, Patrick Casey, Pat Davis and John and Michael Kearney. We held regular meetings for the first four years, usually in my father's home and after 1914 in my own home. I do not think the R.I.C. ever got to hear that this centre existed. At the meetings we spent most of the time discussing military training, using for this purpose handbooks issued by the British Army authorities. It was our great ambition to learn as much as possible about this subject as we were certain that another rising against English rule would occur in our time and we wanted to be as efficient as possible as soldiers of Ireland. In the period between 1910 and 1913 no guns came into the area through I.R.B. channels.

In the years 1912, 1913 and 1914 I spent a lot of my time away from home, particularly in 1914 when I worked in different parts of County Cork. On my return to Crusheen in November 1914 there was a very active company of the Irish Volunteers in existence there. The instructor was a man named John Connell, an ex-British soldier and a very good man at the job and highly interested in it too. The officers were Con Fogarty, Seán O'Keefe and Michael McGuane. I had no sooner arrived home than I was approached by these men and asked to take over the captaincy of the company, which I did. In the course of the next few months the Volunteer movement spread rapidly round this part of Clare and companies were formed in Barefield, Corofin, Ruan, Knockjames, Tubber and Kilkeady. Early in 1915 these companies were formed into a battalion and I was the first Battalion O/C. In those days the strength of each of these companies mentioned was between 25 and 30 men.

An Arms' Fund was started, the contributions coming from the pockets of our own men. In a short time I was able to buy 6 rifles, Martini Henri type, for which I still hold the receipt that I got from Diarmuid Lynch when I paid him for them in Dublin. I paid for one of these rifles out of my own pocket, and another man, I think it was Seán O'Keefe, paid for a second rifle. The balance of the money came out of the Arms' Fund. Later in 1915 we got seven more rifles from Ernest Blythe who happened to be in Clare at the time on organising mission. I believe Mr. Blythe had originally offered these rifles to another Volunteer unit in North Clare, Ennistymon so far as I can remember, but they would not be accepted so he then gave the guns to us. Towards the end of 1915, too, I bought 1,000 shotgun cartridges (No.6) which on Good Friday 1916 I had recharged with buckshot. We were also able to get a good quantity of ammunition for each of the 13 rifles.

In addition to these rifles we had in the battalion area a number of .22 rifles which we used for training the companies in shooting. There was any amount of .22 ammunition available. Some of it was got from Dublin and the rest from hardware shops in Ennis and Limerick. At Crusheen we used the Island Lake for shooting practice, bottles being floated in the water at which the men fired. Usually each man got 5 or 6 shots at each exercise which took place about once a week. As Easter 1916 approached there was scarcely a night in the week but the company engaged in some form of military training. On bad nights even, when the attendance was small, we adjourned to my house or to my brother's and did some ^{arms} ~~musket~~ drill in the kitchen.

Though I had a good idea that a blow against British rule in the country would soon be struck, the first news I got that a rising would occur at Easter 1916 was on Holy Thursday. On that day Eamon Corbett of Galway accompanied by a Miss Walsh of Killeany, near Craughwell, called at my house. They were travelling in a motor car. Corbett asked me if we were ready for the fight and I told him we were ready for anything. He then told me that a rising was planned to commence on Easter Sunday, and after a short conversation himself and his companion resumed their journey.

After Corbett's departure, I think it was on the following day, Michael Brennan, afterwards General Brennan, visited me and gave me verbal instructions dealing with the part my battalion was to play in the rising. He told me that it had been allocated the job of holding the railway line between Ennis and Gort, a distance of about 18 miles, and that arms for the battalion would arrive from Kerry. Next day, Good Friday, I informed my brother and Seán O'Keefe, who were engaged by me in the building of a house for the Land Commission a few miles from Crusheen, of the information which I had been given and of the orders which had been issued to me. They were getting the house ready for the roof, and after listening to what I had to tell them my brother said by way of a joke: "Let it (the house) ~~stay~~ as it is; it'll never be roofed". Incidentally, it afterwards was roofed and completed by us. I notified the other companies that they were to mobilise on Saturday night, and gave them instructions as to the positions they were to hold at different points along the railway line.

On Holy Saturday night the Crusheen Company did mobilise and ^{were ready to} occupy the positions as arranged. There were about ¹⁵~~30~~ men present and most of them were armed with either rifles or shotguns. My home was near at hand and late that night I went there to get a few hours sleep as I was very tired. I was not long in bed when a knock came to my door. I asked who was there and was told "a friend". Opening the door, I found outside Michael Brennan (later General) and Frank Shinnors of Ennis. They came to tell me that the rising was off but that for the next few days the Volunteers should hold themselves in readiness for action and that I was to send word to that effect to Gort in Co. Galway and to captains of the companies in my battalion. We also had made arrangements with Father ^{Michael} Crowe, the C.C. of Doora, to give general absolution to the Crusheen men at a place called ^{Laccannabrone}~~Knockabree~~ near my own house. One of the men from the Ruan Company, Ned Casey, happened to be with us in Crusheen at that time and I sent him off at once to tell his captain of the news which Michael Brennan had brought, and members of the Crusheen Company were sent with similar messages to Gort, the other outlying companies and to Fr. Crowe. In fairness to all concerned I would like to say that they did hold themselves in readiness for military action until the rising in Dublin was finished.

After the suppression of the 1916 Rising we held on to our arms. Those belonging to the Crusheen Company were buried under the floor of my brother's cottage until 1918, when they were taken out and used later in the fight against the Black and Tans. No person

in the Crusheen area was arrested in the widespread round-up which followed the rising, and I attribute that to a good sergeant of the R.I.C. who was in charge of the local barracks at the time. He was a decent man whose hand I would be glad to shake if I met him to-day. An opponent of ours at the time spoke in terms of criticism about the Volunteers to this sergeant, who replied "I have nothing against these men; they are doing their duty and I'm doing mine". His name was Hennessy and I don't know from what part of Ireland he came.

A week after the termination of the rising I happened to be in Gort where I had an appointment with an engineer from the Land Commission in connection with houses which I was building for the Land Commission. After transacting my business I went on to the railway station to go back home. At the station I was accosted by two R.I.C. men who asked me where I was going. I told them I was going to Ennis and was informed "You're not going home; you're coming to the barracks with us". This happened at twelve o'clock in the day. At the barracks I was put into the "lock-up", which was the filthiest place I think I ever looked at. When I protested against being confined in it, the answer the police made was that it was too good for me. I was detained in that horrible cell until 11 o'clock that night when military arrived and I was brought before an officer. He asked me where I lived and for the name of the R.I.C. sergeant in charge of the district. I gave him that information and he got into telephonic communication with Sergeant Hennessy. He came back after a while and said "Your Sergeant gives you a very good

character and on that account you can go home provided you can get some means of doing so". Having assured him that I could manage that, I was let off and got a jarvey with an outside car to drive me well outside the boundary of the town.

There was one incident which happened prior to Easter Week 1916 that I would like to put on record before I proceed further with this statement. On Holy Saturday I received a sealed despatch from General Headquarters in Dublin addressed to His Lordship, the Bishop of Killaloe. I sent Seán O'Keefe with this despatch. He met His Lordship outside the Cathedral in Ennis and handed him the despatch. His Lordship opened it and having read the contents asked O'Keefe where he was from. O'Keefe told him and the Bishop tapped him on the shoulder, saying "Good men" and walked off. Afterwards I heard that the despatch had been sent by the late Rory O'Connor, executed during the Civil War, and that it contained a request asking His Lordship to appoint chaplains to the Clare units of the Volunteers in the forthcoming fight against the British.

Following the rising the Volunteer organisation in my battalion area did not fall asunder as it did in many other places. We kept going as before, though underground. The companies mobilised and drilled but in remote places outside of the eyes of the authorities.

Early in May 1916 one of the most prominent officers in my battalion, Michael Maloney (Goggins), came to me with the news that some of the Galway men (who were out during Easter Week and who, as a result, were

on the run from the British forces) had arrived in the Knockjames area and were at present in hiding there. These men were: Liam Mellows - the Galway leader, Alfie Monaghan - a North of Ireland man, and Frank Hynes, a native of Galway. Questioning Maloney further he told me that he had some young cattle and a couple of young horses on land which he owned in the Knockjames mountains. The horses were usually confined in a paddock and he got the idea to train one of them, a filly, to work on his farm. Two evenings previously he went out to the mountain to take home the filly. She was wilder than usual that evening, and after jumping out of the paddock made off in the direction of Belloughtra. He decided not to follow her and that he would leave her so until next morning. In the morning he got up early, and taking with him his greyhound he set out again for the mountains and after a good deal of travelling he saw the filly in the distance. As he was going towards her he thought he noticed a couple of men kneeling on the ground. He approached them and when he came close enough he said "Good morning". One of the men rose from his knees and replied "Good morning". Maloney then said "You're a Dublin man". The man he addressed asked "How do you know that?" and was given the answer "Oh, sure I worked in Dublin for years". Maloney had, in fact, been employed for some time in that city as a barman, and the man to whom he had been speaking was Mellows. The other two men then spoke. They turned out to be Monaghan and Hynes.

Maloney sensed that they might be some of the Galway men and assured them that they should not be afraid of him as he was one of themselves. Mellows

asked if he knew Seán McNamara of Crusheen. Maloney said "Yes, he's my superior officer". He was then taken into their confidence and after some conversation told them to go into an old hut which stood near at hand and that they would be perfectly safe there and that he would return with food. In due course Maloney brought along the grub, which they appeared to enjoy very much as they had not eaten for a good while before.

Being satisfied with Maloney's story

I decided to collect some money for them among the most trusted of the Volunteers. I also told Fr. Crowe about the presence of Mellows and his companions and he sent me later on £4, which he made up between himself and a few other priests. The monies so collected were at once sent on to Mellows via Maloney. Among the men in Crusheen who had been let into this secret was Con Fogarty, employed at the time as a signaller at Crusheen station. I think it was the day after Maloney bringing me the news of Mellows that M.P. Colivet, prominent I.R.B. man and leader of the Limerick City Volunteers, was passing through Crusheen on his way by train to North Clare. Mr. Colivet was engaged at that time as a traveller for the Shannon Foundry in Limerick. Fogarty and himself were well known to one another and the latter mentioned about Mellows and his comrades. Mr. Colivet asked Fogarty to tell me to meet him at the station that evening when he would be going back to Limerick.

I met Mr. Colivet as arranged and he said:

"If you get a wire from me this evening come to Limerick to-morrow". I received the wire or telegram

and went to Limerick next day. In Limerick I met Seamus Ledden who handed me an envelope containing £100 in notes. I found out afterwards that this money came from the famous Daly family in the city, one of whom, Ned, was one of the executed 1916 leaders, while his sister Madge was one of the leading members of Cumann na mBan. I duly sent on this money to Mellows and it helped to keep himself and the others during their stay in the district.

Mellows spent five months in that mountain home, the hut on Maloney's land, along with his comrades. Word then came from G.H.Q. Dublin that it was decided that he should go to America and I received orders to meet him at Kearney's Castle and to convey him to ^{Michael} Father Crowe's house in Rosliven, near Ennis. I met Mellows as arranged, and we both dressed in our ordinary clothes and travelled to Rosliven via Spencilhill without being detected by the authorities. It was in the month of October, I think, and we left Kearney's Castle about 8 o'clock at night and arrived in Father Crowe's some time after nine. Father Crowe was expecting us and had received word some time previously about the whole affair as he had procured two nuns' habits for Mellows and a Miss Barry of Gort. Next morning Mellows and Miss Barry, dressed as nuns, travelled by motor car from Fr. Crowe's place to Cork, from whence Mellows got away safely to America.

I did not wait to see how Mellows looked as a "nun" nor did he dress as such before Fr. Crowe went to bed that night judging by the story the latter told me a week or so afterwards when we were talking about the Mellows incident. He said that on the morning ^(after Mellows' arrival in Rosliven) following he was saying Mass in his house and was being answered by

housekeeper. The door of the oratory opened, "and, God forgive me, as I knew it was Liam and his lady friend nothing could prevent me from turning round to see what Liam looked like. He was the most perfect nun in appearance that I ever saw".

The East Clare by-election in July 1917 was the first opportunity after the rising to provide an outlet for the energy of the Volunteers in our part of Clare. Most of them were sadly disappointed over the way things turned out in Easter 1916 and many of them were beginning to wonder if the Irish Volunteers would fizzle out like similar organisations did after the unsuccessful insurrections of the past. This by-election gave them renewed hope to be able to do some effective work for the cause of Irish freedom, and they certainly did not spare themselves in the interests of the Sinn Féin candidate, Mr. de Valera. Though he was then personally unknown to most of us, his part in the rising appealed dearly to all ranks of the Volunteers, and in my opinion this fact urged them into doing more than they would for any other candidate who might be put in the field.

The men of the Crusheen Company, and also the adjacent companies, were everywhere in the campaign, protecting meetings, canvassing voters, speaking at meetings where they were fit enough to do so, collecting money and on polling day taking voters to the polls. I was secretary to the election committee and I also spoke at dozens of meetings.

In addition to reviving the enthusiasm of the Volunteers the election campaign resulted in a number of recruits coming into the ranks. It also caused Sinn Féin

to become very strong throughout Clare. In the months which followed Sinn Féin clubs sprang up everywhere and a good many of the older generation became members. But here again I would say that the backbone and driving force behind the movement were the Volunteers.

I was still Commandant of the battalion when the public drilling started in August 1917. I was strongly opposed to it from the start as I regarded it as a bad mistake. There was no reason why we could not drill and train as soldiers in the same way as we had been doing since the *Rising* without coming out into the open to do so. In many instances this public drilling consisted of nothing more than a parade through the streets of the town or village when the local leaders made it obvious to the R.I.C. that they were the people in charge of the organisation in the district and thus made a present to the police of information which they might otherwise have difficulty in obtaining. I felt, too, that if a man was good enough to be selected as a Volunteer leader, he would be much more useful outside than behind the walls of a prison, which was his fate for taking part in public drilling in those days. The more I saw of the public drilling the more I was convinced that we were playing into the enemy's hand, and I felt so strongly about this that in protest I resigned from my rank as Commandant early in 1918, being replaced by the late Frank Barrett, afterwards O/C of the Mid Clare Brigade.

I think it was towards the end of 1917 that I built a dump for arms on my own land with the assistance of my brother. We did the work under the guise of reclaiming the

land. It was sunk into the ground and the interior was built of brick. The roof, which was on the level of the adjoining ground, was flagged and covered by a loft of stones. The entrance was stepped down to the floor and only recognised by those who were aware how the stones were laid. I consider stones ^{to be} ~~from~~ the best material of all for the purpose of covering the tops of underground dumps or dugouts in country places. When laid loosely overhead they can be disturbed and replaced without leaving any traces of recent interference. This dump was never discovered until the Civil War, when its existence was probably given away by someone who knew of its existence during the Black and Tan days. From 1918 onwards to the truce I kept guns for the Battalion and Flying Columns in it and also bombs and other explosives.

In the general election of 1918 de Valera was opposed as a candidate in East Mayo by John Dillon, leader of the Irish Parliamentary Party. Among the speakers who went there to assist de Valera were Hubert Hunt of Corofin and Micheál O'Hehir, both well known Volunteers in the county and two very inoffensive men. On one Sunday as they attended a meeting at a place called ^{Glanteron} ~~Glan~~ outside Kilkelly, near Swinford, they were attacked and badly assaulted by a number of Dillon's supporters. In consequence of this attack and other similar attacks elsewhere it was decided to send a contingent of Clare Volunteers into the constituency to deal with such ruffianism and to see that the interests of the Sinn Féin candidate did not suffer on polling day from the want of protection and helpers. Three hundred men travelled by train from different parts of Clare to Swinford. When we alighted at

that station I and a number of my pals were walking down the platform when I was recognised by the station-master, a Mr. Walsh, whose two brothers were school chums of mine. He was then talking to two gentlemen. He came over to greet me and told us to wait for a few minutes as he would like to take us down the town to treat us. He rejoined the other two gentlemen and excused himself to them, explaining who we were and that he wished to go into the town with us. "Oh, yes!" said one of them, an elderly man, "a bunch of Clare rowdies". "They are not" replied Mr. Walsh, "I know some of them and their fathers and mothers - all respectable people". *The elderly man was John Dillon and he was accompanied by his son.* After having some refreshments in Swinford forty of our party were ordered out to Kilkelly, a distance of seven miles, which we covered on foot. We put up there for the night. Next day was polling day and we were out early in the morning round the voting booths and on patrols about the place. We experienced no trouble whatever. Instead of the people of the district being hostile as they previously had been, they were friendly and generous with both food and drink.

In the fighting during the 1919 to 1921 period I did not take part in it. I was present at the destruction of Crusheen R.I.C. Barracks on Holy Saturday night 1920. A section came down from Gort, Co. Galway, under Fred Barry to give us a hand in this job, which was carried out by the local Volunteers under Seán O'Keefe and Con Fogarty. The barracks was burned to the ground.

From time to time until the truce the active Volunteers, whose confidence I always enjoyed, gave me guns and explosives to keep in the dump which I had built. As well, they frequently consulted me on occasions when anything of importance was afoot. All I possessed - my experience and my home - was available to these I.R.A. men until the truce came.

Signed: Sean Mac Conmara
(Sean Mac ConMara)

Date: 16.12.54
16.12.54

Witness: D. Griffin

(D. Griffin)

