

ORIGINAL

BUREAU OF MILITARY HISTORY 1913-21

BURO STAIRÉ MILEATA 1913-21

No. W.S. 318

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BUREAU OF MILITARY HISTORY, 1913-21.

STATEMENT BY WITNESS

DOCUMENT NO. W.S. 318.....

Witness

Mr. John Joseph Scollan,
18 St. Joseph's Avenue,
Drumcondra, Dublin.

Identity

Commandant Hibernian Rifles,
Dublin City Area 1916.

Subject

- (a) National activities 1911-1916;
- (b) Exchange Hotel, Parliament St.,
and G.P.O. Easter Week, 1916.

Conditions, if any, stipulated by Witness

Nil

File No. ...S:458.....

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STATEMENT BY JOHN JOSEPH SCOLLAN,

18, St. Joseph's Evenue, Drumcondra, Dublin.

I came from Derry to Dublin in 1911. Prior to this the A.O.H. American Alliance had held a conference in Dundalk and I came to Dublin as National Director. In the constitution of the American counterpart of the A.O.H. American Alliance we found provision for an organisation of a military nature. This comprised one Company of men organised on a military basis in each Division. At this time there were three Divisions of the Order in Dublin. The "Red Hand" in Pearse Street, "Clann na-Gael" in Parliament Street and "O'Connell" Division in Rathfarnham.

I decided to organise a Company in each Division to be known as Hibernian Rifles which corresponded to the American organisation. I started a unit in each Division and succeeded in getting about twenty men to join in each. These were all highly selected men. At this time the total numbers of members of the Divisions were 80, 100 and 150 approximately so that a unit of 20 men was a good beginning.

This took place in the years 1912 and 1913. We had no arms at this time. However, we were lucky in having plenty of Instructors available in the nature of ex-British Army men and were able to do an amount of Foot Drill and training of that nature. At the time of the big labour troubles commonly known as the big "Lock Out" in 1913 most of our members were connected with the different industries affected. I appealed to the Branches of the A.O.H. American Alliance in the United States for funds to help our members. I received from the American Branches

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over one thousand dollars. This helped to augment the Strike pay of our members and we were able to give them twelve to fifteen shillings per week.

During this dispute Captain White and Jim Larkin started the Citizen Army. Carson's Volunteers were now going strong in the North of Ireland. I wrote to America asking the organisation there to supply us with arms. They did not supply us with any and all we received from them of a military nature was a supply of Text Books (American Military) which were not of much use to us. We improvised broom handles to act as rifles and with these we practised aiming at Targets. We lost some men to the Citizen Army when that organisation was started. When the Labour dispute of 1913 was settled and Carson's Volunteers were going ahead in the North there was an amount of reaction prevalent and a feeling abroad that something in the nature of a counteraction should take place and this resulted in recruiting for our Units becoming much easier. By this time our organisation had branches in Derry, South Armagh, Dingle, Cork, Belfast, Castlebar and some other places. These were all small and none of them was ever stronger than 30 or 35.

When the Irish Volunteers were started in November 1913, certain members of the Executive Committee of that organisation were not acceptable to our members as they had taken a prominent part in the Labour dispute on the "Masters" side. Some of our members did, however, join the Volunteers.

The constitution of the Hibernian Rifles did not bar anyone from joining. It was a semi-public organisation

/open

in 1913
Dundalk

open to all religions of all natures. It was, however, highly selective. We remained a distinct and separate organisation from the Irish Volunteers. A big proportion of our members did not want any connection or co-operation with the Volunteers. In fact we did not want them and they did not want us. Personally I always felt that we should co-operate with the Volunteers. Thomas McDonagh, who was very prominent in Volunteer circles, was also anxious to have the Hibernian Rifles associated with the Irish Volunteers.

By 1914 we had secured a few rifles by purchasing them from British soldiers. When the 1914 War broke out the British Army Reservists did what they were told by John Redmond and the Parliamentary Party, and at his bidding joined the British Army. This did not, however, affect our strength very much. There was a Division of the Enniskillen Fusiliers stationed in Dollymount outside the City and from them we were able to purchase about 100 rifles. We paid about £5 for each rifle. The British troops were very badly paid at this time and were glad to sell their rifles to get some money.

Some time during 1915 James Connolly came to me and informed me that he had information that the British were building "Q" ships in the yards in Belfast. He wanted to get this information to the German Ambassador in the United States and had decided to send his daughter, Nora, to the States to inform the Ambassador there. He had no money to pay for her passage and he asked me to give him £30. I said if I gave him the money I would have to show something for it in the accounts of our funds. I knew at this time that Connolly had a number of Italian rifles on hand for the Citizen Army. The rifles were of a

/Service

Service pattern but were of little use as no ammunition was available for them. Connolly agreed to give me thirty of these rifles for which I gave him £30. Miss Connolly got to America and delivered her message, the result being that the "Q" ships were not the big success that was expected.

At this time we had lost a number of our men to the Irish Volunteers. The Volunteer Force was more attractive as they had uniforms. We had not uniforms and did not look favourably on the wearing of uniform.

The split in the Volunteers did not affect the Hibernian Rifles. We had now secured a hall in Skippers Alley for the Pearse Street Division. We also secured a big hall in 28 North Frederick Street and this became the Headquarters for the rifles in the city area. We also started a paper called the "Hibernian". The National Board of the A.O.H. American Alliance were supposed to control the rifles but in fact I did all the controlling and direction. When J.J. Walsh was expelled from Cork and came to Dublin he was appointed Vice-Commandant of the Rifles.

Each Company elected its own officers and Non-Commissioned Officers. This was on the American model. I will supply you with a list which gives the roll for mobilisation on Easter Sunday 1916 which gives the names of the officers. In addition to the rifles we had secured we now also secured ^{about} a dozen shot guns. We had long and short pattern Lee Enfield rifles. We made a special filling for cartridges for the shot guns. This consisted of three lead tags of mail bags fitted into the cartridge instead of the ordinary shot or pellets. We also accumulated an amount of ammunition for the Lee

/Enfield

Enfield rifles. Most of this was made by ourselves. We managed to get or purchase blank ammunition from British soldiers and these were fitted with lead bullets which we made. These bullets were not coated with nickel or chrome. We also made some canister grenades. We had no other type of explosives.

At the time of O'Donovan Rossa's funeral the Hibernian Rifles paraded one hundred and fifty strong with fifty rifles. Connolly and I were in close association and through him I understood it was intended to have an insurrection but I had no idea of when it would take place. There were no overtures to me by any of the leaders of the Irish Volunteers to join them or co-operate with them.

On Easter Sunday the Hibernian Rifles paraded as usual in North Frederick Street. I had seen the Sunday paper which contained McNeill's cancellation order. We carried out our usual routine training on that date. Apart from McNeill's orders to the Irish Volunteers I had a feeling that there was something serious afoot and I therefore ordered our units to again parade on Easter Monday. At 12 a.m. on Easter Monday I was at the hall in Frederick Street and had about sixty men there. When the information came that the Volunteers had seized the G.P.O. the men were anxious to know what they should do. I addressed them and told them that as far as I knew this fight which was just starting was unofficial, but as it had started we should join in and take our place in it. At the same time I said that if any man did not wish to volunteer for the fight he was at liberty to go home.

/About

About thirty men elected to join in the fight. This party were all armed. I sent word to Connolly that I was ready with assistance when he required it and asking for orders. He sent me a message which said he was very glad to get mine and instructing me to stay where I was and await orders. We secured supplies of food by commandeering from the local shops. At 4 p.m. I again sent a message to Connolly asking him to give us something to do as my men were getting uneasy. I suggested I should occupy Leavy's Public House at the junction of Upper Dorset Street and Blessington Street. Connolly again sent me a message to stay where I was.

At 12 p.m. that night I got orders from Connolly to proceed to the G.P.O. with my party. When I got there the first orders I got were to break and barricade all the upper windows. The O'Rahilly instructed me to do this. I also saw Connolly there. When we were finished with the barricading of the windows we got some rest. At 6 a.m. on Tuesday I received orders to get over to the Exchange Hotel in Parliament Street. We proceeded via the Metal or Halfpenny Bridge - eighteen of my men and nine Maynooth men. Incidentally the toll man was still on duty on the Bridge and tried to collect the halfpenny toll from us. Needless to say he did not get it. No attempt was ever made to collect tolls on the bridge again. En route we passed the Telephone Exchange and I never could understand why it was not taken as it only had a small guard of British soldiers. The British afterwards paid tribute to the assistance this was to them in quashing the Rebellion. We proceeded through the west end of Fleet Street and Cranes Lane.

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We went on to Shortalls beside the Exchange Hotel and there we found two men using the telephone. These men had been in touch with the Curragh Camp. Sean Milroy took up the telephone and by listening got good information regarding the movements of the British troops which was conveyed to Headquarters at the G.P.O. by Milroy.

We got into the Exchange Hotel and on to the roof. At this time some of the Volunteers were supposed to be trapped in the Evening Mail Office and in the City Hall. We found that the City Hall was occupied by British soldiers and we engaged them by fire. In the afternoon units of the Irish Fusiliers and Enniskilling Fusiliers advanced to storm our position and were met by a fusillade from our shot-gun men and Rifles. They were actually slaughtered by our fire. Twenty-three or four of them were killed or seriously wounded. I was on the roof near a chimney when a bullet caught Edward Walsh, one of our men, and literally tore his stomach out. He died that evening. Some time in the year 1924, 1925, 1926 or 1927 I contributed an article to the Sunday Independent giving an account of this engagement. This was a much more detailed account as my memory was much fresher then.

At about 4.30 p.m. that evening we received orders to retire to the G.P.O. A remarkable thing about this was the sudden change in the conduct of the inhabitants of the locality towards us. When proceeding from the G.P.O. to the Exchange Hotel the people were hostile towards us - now they were sympathetic and helped us to get back. On the way back to the G.P.O. two of our men were taken prisoners; they must have got detached from the main body and wandered into the British outposts around Dame Street.

/We

We remained at the G.P.O. that night. Things were pretty quiet there except for "sniping" which was going on all the time. That night Connolly asked me to go to the Coliseum Theatre which was at the rear of the G.P.O. and find out if tickets had been issued for a party of British officers to go into the theatre. The caretaker was still there and he informed me that nothing of the sort had taken place. I conveyed this information to Connolly.

By Wednesday the British had begun to encircle the city and to close the gaps in their ring. Conditions were still pretty bad in the G.P.O. When we got some rest we slept on the floors. We got some food which was not bad considering the circumstances. Wednesday was a comparatively quiet day. On Thursday morning Connolly asked me to go up to the Broadstone Station and find out what conditions were like there. I proceeded there and when going up the steps to the Station I was challenged by a British sentry. I was taken into the Station and questioned by a British officer. I told him I was a stranger in Dublin and I wanted to find my way about. He made me a prisoner and had me confined in a room in the Station. The following day I was brought to Ship Street Barracks. I was kept there for eight days in military custody. No bedding was supplied to me and food consisted of Bully Beef, hard biscuits and tea. I was next brought to Arbour Hill and from there to the Richmond Barracks. In the Richmond Barracks I was first brought to the Gymnasium and searched and from there to a Barrack room which was numbered "L 4". In that room, which was very crowded with prisoners, were Sean O'Mahoney, Sean T. O'Kelly (now President), Joe Murray, William O'Brien and Tom Foran.

I saw McDermott being picked out of a parade of prisoners by Detectives. We were next taken to Wandsworth Prison travelling by Cattle Boat to England and kept in solitary confinement for ten days. Food was poor, being the usual prison fare and now, War rations as well. About July 1916 I was transferred to Frongoch. I was also taken before the Sankey Commission. Conditions in Frongoch were generally good. We were allowed complete freedom within the Camp. We cooked our own food and there was also a canteen where extras could be purchased and there were ample facilities for recreation and education. I was Camp Treasurer. I had trouble with the Camp Adjutant (British); to get him to produce a Balance Sheet for the canteen from which I knew we were due a considerable sum as rebate. On the 30th October the Adjutant informed me that he had the Balance Sheet ready and on the following day I was transferred to Reading Jail. I handed over to Mick Collins and informed him of the position regarding the Balance Sheet and Rebate.

I was released on Christmas Eve 1916 and came back to Dublin. There was a decided change in the outlook of the people now. Whereas they were hostile to us when we were being deported, they were now friendly and sympathetic.

Signed: John J. Scollon

Date: 3rd Nov 1949

Witness:

Maureen Barry Smith

Date:

3rd Nov 1949

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