

ORIGINAL

BUREAU OF MILITARY HISTORY 1913-21

BURO STAIRE MILEATA. 1913-21

No. W.S.

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BUREAU OF MILITARY HISTORY, 1913-21.

STATEMENT BY WITNESS.

DOCUMENT NO. W.S. 857.....

Witness

Seamus Finn,  
Athboy,  
Co. Meath.

Identity.

Adjutant, Meath Brigade  
Irish Volunteers, 1916-1917.

Subject.

Reorganisation of Irish Volunteers,  
Co. Meath, 1916-1917.

Conditions, if any, Stipulated by Witness.

Nil

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STATEMENT BY MR. SEAMUS FINN,

Athboy, Co. Meath.

Part 1.

In common with the men throughout the country, the Meath Volunteers felt in 1916 that they had been badly let down and there was a good deal of disappointment and resentment amongst them. They had mobilised at Tara on Easter Sunday night and had been sent home, only to find that due to muddling at General Headquarters they had been denied their long watched chance to strike a blow for the freedom of Ireland. Still their spirit was not broken, and in many places they threw defiance in the teeth of the enemy by hoisting the tricolour on various vantage points in the country.

It was during one of these flag-flying escapades that I made contact with them in my native Athboy. One night after the Gaelic League class was over a few of us stayed on in the school house to have a talk on what was to be done. I was at a loose-end then, and having learned something about the neighbouring areas from informal talks with, amongst others, Pat O'Growney and Barney McConnell, I offered my services to look up the men in these places and talk things over with them. Among those present at these talks in Athboy were: P. O'Growney, B. McConnell, Seán O'Grady, P. Carey, Patrick and George Butterfield, Liam Doyle, Ml. Hoey, Joe Martin, Jas. Doyle and myself. My offer was accepted and O'Grady, who was

an insurance agent, and I were appointed to make the contacts with the outside districts. This was about the month of July 1916.

My first contact was with the Drumbarragh men. I travelled to Kells and there met Hugh Smith - owner and editor of the "Meath Chronicle", Seán Hayes, P. de Burca, B.A., Michael Sweeney and Phil Tevlin. I explained what had been done in Athboy and that I had been deputed to look them up and find out what steps could be taken to get Meath re-organised. I found them reticent and displaying little enthusiasm and sensed that they felt resentful and disappointed. I must confess that I found this resentful feeling, even at this early stage, was going to react against any immediate move being successful, but as our mutual acquaintance improved there were signs of a change of mind and a possibility that they would be interested in the effort being made.

All our discussions took place in the "Meath Chronicle" office, then situated at Kells, and were intermingled with games of chess, of which game Hugh Smith was a keen student. In the meantime other ground was being broken and Seán O'Grady, who was from Co. Clare, had contacted Con McMahon, another Clareman, in Navan. This contact proved very fruitful and resulted in a group being got together there. These early recruits numbered among them Patrick Loughran, Michael Gaynor, Tom Gavigan, Joe Woods, Pat Fitzsimons, Larry Clarke and a few others whose names escape me at the moment.

I undertook to look up Trim but made no impression there. My first call was to Seamus O'Higgins, and while he was sympathetic he counselled patience and care in moving. He promised to look around and let us know the prospects there. I then met some men from Killyon - Mick Keegan and Pat Colclough - and found them even more disappointed and angry than the Drumbarragh men. They were outspoken and laid the blame on some of the local Meath officers that they had not been mobilised for Easter Week.

Soon after this I had the good fortune to meet a man called Murphy, known as "Gregg", who was having a holiday with some friends near Delvin, and with his help succeeded in getting a few men in Delvin. These were Michael Fox, Jas. Kieran, James Bray, J. Brannigan, James Parsely, Tom Kelly, Terry Fagan, Ed. Leonard, Larry Ginnell (Jnr.) and one or two others. In each of these places I arranged for weekly meetings and asked that each man should exert himself to increase our strength. Murphy had been out in Easter Week and was instrumental in getting us in touch with some of the Dublin Brigade, a source from which I got very valuable assistance.

Early in August I received a letter from a friend named Michael Fitzpatrick, a Corkman living in Dublin. This man had fought in Jacob's during Easter Week and had escaped rather than surrender. He made his way to my lodgings in Leinster Street on the Sunday after, only to find that I had not been there since Easter Sunday early. His clothes were in a bad way, so he helped himself from my scanty wardrobe and started home for Cork.

He was now back in Dublin seeking to be reinstated in his job in Clery's. He asked me in his letter to go up and meet him in Clery's, which I did. We had a long chat and I told him what was being done in Meath. He told me about Cork and others parts of the country and brought me to see the Misses O'Hanrahan off the North Circular Road. I met others there and was glad to feel that I could come back to Meath with a report of the progress being made in other places. Then my friend Fitzpatrick was drowned while bathing at Dalkey. At his funeral I made other contacts, among them the Price family of Killarney Parade. Eamonn, or Bob ~~was~~ many of us knew him, had just been released from an English jail and came home armed with authority to establish a G.H.Q. and take over the re-organisation of the Irish Volunteers. It was a lucky meeting, even though under such sad circumstances, and I returned to Meath well pleased with myself and the progress I had made.

After reporting to a meeting in Athboy I next day betook myself to Kells where I again met the Drumbarragh men. When I had finished giving them all the details they agreed to come in, and I suggested that they should call all the units together in Navan and set up some kind of County Authority. This had been suggested to me by Bob Price. Hugh Smith asked me, in view of the contacts we had made in Athboy, to undertake this and the others ~~con~~cursing. I agreed. Accordingly I called them together, asking each group to send two or three to meet

at Larry Clarke's, Brews Hill, Navan. As far as I can remember there were present - Con McMahon, L. Clarke, Ml. Gaynor, Pat. Loughran, Navan, Seán Hayes and Phil Tevlin, Drumbarragh, Michael Fox, Delvin, Seán O'Grady, B. McConnell and Seamus Finn of Athboy. I explained what I had done in Dublin and how I had arranged for future communication with Price and G.H.Q., and all agreed that the time was opportune for going ahead. We then went on with the appointing of a Committee to do the work and after some discussion, which was rather outspoken, by some of the disappointed Easter Week men, we finally made the following temporary selections: Chairman - Con McMahon, Secretary or Adjutant Seamus Finn. We could not agree on any other appointments due to the unwillingness of those present to allow their names to be put forward, so we finally decided that all those present should act on the County Committee and that each one would act as an organiser to push forward the work. It was left to the Chairman and Secretary to arrange the next meeting.

While we were occupied thus another movement was gaining much ground throughout the country. Sinn Féin, the political and cultural side of the movement, was making huge progress. Cumainn were springing up everywhere and many old, middle-aged and young men were joining. The young ones were in the majority and most of the Cumainn were manned by them. We found these very useful recruiting centres for our work, and among them we found some fine fellows that became our main basis for Volunteer activities. Hand in hand with them ran the G.A.A. clubs, particularly

hurling clubs, and it was noticeable that where there were good Irish classes and hurling clubs it was easy to get men to join the Volunteers. Our efforts had made such progress that when the general release of Easter Week prisoners took place Meath was in a fair way to being ready to take its place in the continuation of the fight.

On instructions from Price we told our Volunteers to become members of Sinn Féin, the G.A.A. and the Gaelic League, and where these organisations did not exist to arrange for the formation of branches. This was easily done as the feelings of the people had been aroused by the executions of the leaders after the Rebellion, and it was only necessary for anyone with a bit of cheek to stand up after Mass in almost any place and make a speech about Easter Week to succeed in getting a Sinn Féin Cumann started. Once this was effected the rest was easy, as many young men only needed to be shown how to become Volunteers. I have a vivid recollection of one of the first of these meetings which was held at Ballinlough. The speakers were: P. O'Growney, Seán O'Grady and myself from Athboy, and Hugh Smith, P. de Burca, B. Fitzsimons and Ml. Sweeney from Kells. On the outskirts of the crowd we noticed a couple of men taking notes, and drew the attention of some of our listeners to them. They quickly decamped towards Oldcastle, but as none of us was arrested we presumed that they decided that we had not made any seditious statements, or maybe our attempts at oratory were so harmless that they saw no reason to make any report.

Incidents like this were common through the country, but while many of the speakers were interested only in Sinn Féin we used these occasions as cover for Volunteer work.

Towards Christmas there were rumours of impending release of prisoners from English jails and I was instructed to get in touch with Price. I went to Dublin and met him. He told me that the rumours were true and that some early releases were expected. It seems he was in touch with some of the jails, and had kept the men there informed of the feelings of the people. He was the first person I heard speak of Mick Collins, which he did with much enthusiasm. Price sent me back with the news that among the early releases, it was expected that Seán Boylan would be one and that I was to look him up whenever he came home. I duly reported this at our next meeting. There was much satisfaction and the pre Easter Week men expressed the hope that we would be able to unravel the mystery of the Easter Week disappointment.

We continued our efforts to get new members and succeeded here and there. I travelled to Ballinlough where John Keogh undertook to make a move. I also went to Bohermeen where John Newman showed good enthusiasm and he, likewise, promised to talk to some people. O'Grady and McMahon worked hard too, and made some useful contacts on their rounds as insurance agents, so in all we hadn't done too badly and had laid a fairly good foundation by the time the general release took place from the jails in England. This took place early in 1917, and a short time previously

I received a message from Price to call up and see him. When I met him he discussed with me the position in Meath and seemed satisfied with what we had done. He stressed that I should contact Boylan immediately, he came home and invite him to a meeting.

Some time before this I received word from Seamus Higgins in Trim to call over, and when I went he told me that there were some men in Trim and surrounding districts who were anxious to form a company. I gave him all the information I had from Price and the state of other parts of the country, and he assured me that Trim would be ready immediately. A meeting was arranged for O'Hagan's, which I attended, and a good lot of lads came together. Among them were: Seamus and Seán Higgins, Mick Hynes, Mick Giles, Joe Lalor, Harry and Pat O'Hagan, P. Duignan, Paddy Mooney and some others. With Trim organised it was easier to move into South Meath. Seamus O'Higgins and I made contacts in Summerhill - Eamon Cullen - and in Longwood, where the Giles family were in the front rank getting things going.

Early in 1917 I went to see Boylan at his home in Dunboyne and found that he had been notified by Price at G.H.Q. of the progress we had made. I arranged with him to call a meeting for Navan later in the year when we could discuss future moves. At this meeting, held in Larry Clarke's, Brews Hill, Navan, it was unanimously agreed that Boylan be appointed in charge of our future activities, Con McMahon willingly giving way in his favour. Con was put second-in-

command and I was left as Adjutant. After this our efforts were redoubled and new Companies were formed in almost every parish in the county. All through the spring and summer we kept going, so that in the early autumn we found that we were in a position to hold a county convention.

A county convention was held at Philperstown, Dunderry, on the second Sunday of August 1917 and was a very representative gathering. It was scheduled to start at 3 p.m. and began fairly punctually, a tribute to the eagerness of those attending as most of them had to travel rather long journeys. A draft scheme of organisation had been drawn up by the county committee, submitted to G.H.Q. for approval and was now put to this meeting for their consideration. After much discussion and some alterations it was finally adopted, and continued to be our scheme of organisation until the formation of the 1st Eastern Division in April 1921 when Meath was made the kernel or nucleus of the 1st Eastern Division and the staff were all promoted to act as the Divisional Staff. The scheme was as follows: the county boundary, with the addition of Delvin, Westmeath, to be the boundary of the Brigade; the Brigade to be divided into six Battalions, each of which to comprise four or more Companies, each Company to consist of not less than twelve men. The Battalions numbered one to six and covered the following areas:

Battalion No. 1. - Dunboyne, Kilcloone, Kilmore, Kilbride and Summerhill.

- Battalion No. 2 - Trim, Boardsmill, Ballivor, Longwood, Enfield, Dunderry.
- Battalion No. 3 - Athboy, Kildalkey, Delvin, Archerstown, Fordstown.
- Battalion No. 4 - Kells, Moynalty, Loughan, Kilbeg, Newcastle.
- Battalion No. 5 - Oldcastle, Ballinlough, Carnaross, Stonefield, Moylough, Ballinacre.
- Battalion No. 6 - Navan, Yellow Furze, Kilberry, Johnstown, Clongill, Bohermeen and the Commons.

The convention then elected the Brigade Staff and the following were chosen:

- Brigade O/C - Seán Boylan, Dunboyne.
- Vice Comdt. - Seán Hayes, Drumbarragh.
- Adjutant - Seumas Finn, Athboy.
- Quartermaster - Seamus Higgins, Trim.

The following were elected Battalion Commandants:

- 1st Battalion - Christopher Lynam, Dunboyne.
- 2nd Battalion - Patrick Mooney, Trim.
- 3rd Battalion - Seán O'Grady, Athboy.
- 4th Battalion - Padraig de Burca, Kells.
- 5th Battalion - Seán Keogh, Ballinlough.
- 6th Battalion - Con McMahon, Navan.

Following this meeting our organising activities were intensified. The appointed members of the Brigade Staff arranged to take over certain areas and assist those who had been made Battalion O/Cs. This plan worked very satisfactorily and in a short time the Brigade was in fairly good shape. Needless to say, this was not done unknown to the R.I.C. and we found

that we were under constant observation from them. However, the enthusiasm of the men with whom we made contact overcame any inconvenience which this surveillance caused, and our work continued uninterrupted although all kinds of intimidation was used on the men through approach to parents, employers, even to the clergy. We did lose some men who would have been ideal leaders in their areas but nothing could stop our advance. Everywhere we went we were met with requests for trainers or books on military training, and we concentrated on this at our Brigade council meetings.

Our principal meeting places were Larry Clarke's, Navan, John Newman's and Pat Keane's of Bohermeen and Jim McGann's of Kilmore. These houses, with the addition of some others, continued to be used as temporary headquarters from time to time until the end of hostilities in July 1921, notwithstanding numerous raids accompanied by lootings and breakages by enemy forces. This was a great tribute to the unbreakable spirit of those men who accepted the risks attending these acts of hospitality.

We were successful in getting a supply of training manuals and issued them one to each Battalion, and towards the end of the summer G.H.Q. found us an instructor whom they sent down to the area with strict instructions that we were responsible for his safety from arrest. This man's name was Pat Garrett and he was a real find. We arranged classes for officers in Trim and on three nights each week we attended for drill

in O'Hagan's. Later G.H.Q. asked for some officers to be selected and sent to Dublin for a more advanced course. These courses continued right through the whole period of hostilities, being occasionally interrupted by arrests and deaths of the men giving these lectures.

Signed :

*Seamus Finn*

(Seamus Finn)

Date:

*June 1<sup>st</sup>, 1953*

June 1st 1953.

Witness:

*Matthew Barry Comd't.*

(Matthew Barry) Comd't.

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