

ORIGINAL

BUREAU OF MILITARY HISTORY 1913-21

BURO STAIRE MILEATA 1913-21

No. W.S. 1,648

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BUREAU OF MILITARY HISTORY, 1913-21.

STATEMENT BY WITNESS.

DOCUMENT NO. W.S. 1648.

Witness

Seán Farrelly,
Scurlogstown,
Trim,
Co. Meath.

Identity.

Vice Comdt., Meath Brigade.

Subject.

Carnaross Coy., Irish Volunteers,
Co. Meath, 1913-'21.

Conditions, if any, Stipulated by Witness.

Nil.

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STATEMENT OF SEÁN FARRELLY,

Scurlogstown, Trim, Co. Meath.

When I was a young man, previous to World War I, the political activities of the country were concentrated around Home Rule for Ireland. The Members of Parliament were not then paid by the British Government. The Irish Parliamentary Party, which represented the Nationalists of Ireland, got their expenses from a Parliamentary fund which was subscribed by the Irish people. This fact brought our Members of Parliament at frequent intervals around their constituencies. When they came to our parish of Carnaross, they usually addressed us from an empty porter barrel, standing outside one or other of the public houses. The cheers and welcome with which they were received are not easily forgotten. They never failed to tell us how useful the poor man's shilling was, in achieving our objective - Home Rule for Ireland. The good people of Carnaross never sent them away without a good few pounds for their fund.

My father was an active Fenian, and was afterwards a staunch supporter of Parnell. I often heard him tell of an incident that happened when he took my brother, Hughie, on his outside jaunting car, to have him baptised. On the way, he met two neighbours returning from the church with their baby girls. Both of these men were Parnellites. They

were Christy Yore and Andy Rourke. They stopped my father, and told him that he might as well go home, as the priest would not baptise his child as long as he (the father) supported Parnell. When they had presented their babies for baptism, they were told by the priest that he would not baptise the children unless they ceased to support Parnell. Christy Yore refused to listen to the suggestion of the priest, but Andy Rourke agreed, saying that, in future, he would only support Healy. The priest refused to baptise Yore's child, but did baptise Rourke's child. My father decided to see the matter out for himself, and proceeded on his journey, accompanied by Yore. To his surprise, there was no objection to baptising Hughie, after which the priest also baptised Yore's child. It should be remembered that Parnell, at that time, was not favoured by the Irish clergy, and was condemned by them subsequent to a split in the Irish Parliamentary Party.

When Parnell died, John Redmond became the leader of the Party, and achieved great popularity. The cause of Home Rule was making great strides, and it was fervently hoped that the measure would become law. The Orangemen of the North who, at all times, bitterly opposed Home Rule, and described it as Rome Rule, decided to resist it by armed force. They accordingly started to organise and train a Volunteer force known as the Ulster Volunteers. Up to this, it was illegal for civilians to march in military formation in Ireland. The Government of the day always looked with suspicion on members of the Gaelic Athletic Association. If an Irishman in the British

army, or an R.I.C. man on leave, was known to play a game of Gaelic football, he was severely punished. One such R.I.C. man, a native of Carnaross, who will come into this story later, was dismissed from the R.I.C. for playing in a Gaelic football match while off duty.

About this time, the Ancient Order of Hibernians was a very strong organisation, led by Joe Devlin, M.P., in support of the Irish Parliamentary Party. After the passing of the National Health Act in the House of Commons, the administration of insurance under the Act was entrusted to the A.O.H. organisation. This helped them to grow apace all over the country. They built their own halls, and, notwithstanding the fact that they had been the "Molly Maguires" who had brought discredit to the Fenian movement earlier, they were a strong and popular organisation, and, with very few exceptions, had the full support of the clergy.

In 1913, they built their hall in Carnaross. To obtain the benefits of the hall, such as dancing and other functions, all the young men around joined the organisation. I well remember the night I was initiated. After being duly proposed and seconded, an old man, named Mickey Miscall, and I approached the President to take the oath. He was dressed in an elaborate robe and looked like a clerical figure. Mickey and I stood before him. With our right hands raised, we repeated after the President the words, "I declare and promise that I will not divulge any of the secrets that transpire at any of these meetings

except to the priest in confession". Mickey was so enthusiastic at becoming initiated that he immediately shouted, "No, by _____, not to him either!" He was ushered from the hall, while I was installed, a fully fledged member of the A.O.H.

After my initiation, I attended meetings occasionally. The President, very pompously, opened the meeting in the name of St. Patrick, Patron Saint of Ireland, declaring that it would remain open until the business of the day was done. He prayed that peace and harmony would remain with us, and that true Christian charity would be our constant guide and deliberation, Amen. We wound up by singing "Faith of our Fathers".

The organising of the Orangemen in the North into a military force, known as the Ulster Volunteers, under Sir Edward Carson, M.P., gave an undisputed excuse to the extreme nationalist element in Ireland to organise a military force also. Thus, the Irish Volunteers came into being. At first, the A.O.H. were very hostile to the new organisation, and at their meetings, false, scurrilous and unjust pamphlets and correspondence were read, condemning the Volunteer movement. These pamphlets were at first challenged by a few. After a while, the interruptions during the reading of them became so frequent that the Secretary found himself unable to defend them. After reading them, he would throw them on the table, saying, "There it is, in print!", and then challenge anyone present to contradict their substance if they were able.

All this time, Padraig Pearse and his gallant band were making gigantic efforts, from a very tiny start, to establish the Irish Volunteers. One summer's evening in the year 1913, after a very stormy meeting of the A.O.H., a few of us decided to start a unit in the village of Carnaross. After some preliminary meetings, we succeeded in engaging the services of Paddy McGuinness. This was the R.I.C. man who was demobbed for playing a game of Gaelic football. We considered that, with his military training, he was capable of training a coppers of Volunteers.

For the first few evenings, our two lines of Volunteers were very small indeed. Our instructions consisted of lectures on our duties as soldiers. We were not to question any order issued by an officer; our duty was to obey an order, even if we knew the order was wrong. If the order happened to be wrong, that was the officer's responsibility. Such lectures continued for several evenings. Paddy McGuinness was only marking time. He had apparently forgotten all he had learned about drill, and was awaiting the receipt of a drill book which we had ordered for him. However, the following Sunday evening saw a great improvement in the number of men who turned up on parade. We had two long lines of the most motley recruits ever seen on parade in the whole of Ireland. We had the blind, the lame, crooked old men suffering with rheumatism, and old men with flowing whiskers. We had poor old Owey Rock, with his one eye, and Mickey Dunne, with one eye always closed, and always smiling behind his

big beard. We had Crooked Terry from Denver Lane. Terry was doing point duty on the streets of Dublin forty years before. While on duty one day, a woman approached him, and reported that her purse had been snatched from her. She pointed out the culprit. Terry lost no time; he chased the young man around a few blocks, and eventually caught him and retrieved the purse, after which he gave the young man a few good kicks in the pants, and let him go his way. He gave the purse back to the woman, and resumed his point duty. He was subsequently dismissed over this incident.

After lining us up in two straight lines, our instructor read the rules of our organisation. They included parades three nights per week at a given time and place; we would have to be punctual and of smart appearance, and we would have to pay sixpence per week into a fund for the purchase of arms at some future date. The instructor dealt with these matters for some time, and had finished speaking when Owney Rock spoke up, and wanted to know when pay-night would be, or what wages we were to get for soldiering. When the instructor explained that we were Volunteers and would not receive any pay, Rock remarked that we were going to be a damn queer army, and walked out of the ranks, leaving a blank file. Within a short time, many of the others failed to turn up on parade.

In about three weeks, our company settled down to routine drilling, with a strength of twenty-six men. It was the only company in County Meath at the time. These twenty-six men, in the main, remained loyal throughout. In the meantime, other companies

were being organised all over the country. The new army being recruited and trained diverted the attention of the people from Home Rule. So, when Prime Minister Asquith of England got the measure through, and on the Statute Book, it did not arouse any great enthusiasm among the Irish people. At this time, John Redmond wanted control of the Volunteers, and, sooner than have two separate Volunteer forces willing and prepared to fight for Ireland, Pearse let him have his way. Redmond immediately launched a recruiting campaign, and was instrumental in bringing into the Volunteer ranks thousands of new recruits. Those Volunteers became known as Redmond's Volunteers. They included nearly every ex British soldier and militia man in Ireland. A short time later, World War I started. John Redmond and other leaders of the Nationalist Party addressed meetings of the Volunteers all over the country, and advised them to join the British army. I remember one particular meeting held at Loyd where John Redmond himself spoke. A huge parade of Volunteers had mobilised for the occasion. Redmond told us of our duty to defend our freedom, saying that, although the British fleet were determined to guard the shores of Ireland, still if our country was invaded, we would lose our dearly cherished freedom. John Redmond was followed by the County Surveyor, James Quigley, whose theme was to advise all Volunteers to train to be soldiers, to fight for Ireland and only for Ireland.

By this time, ill-feeling was growing apace in our ranks, due to the disappointment caused by the postponement of Home Rule until after the war, and

the advice given by Redmond and the Nationalist Party to the young men of Ireland to join the British army. The climax was reached when John Redmond, in a speech in the House of Commons one day, offered the Volunteers of Ireland to England "in her fight for small nationalities". He also ordered all the Volunteers in Ireland to mobilise in the Phoenix Park, Dublin.

At this stage, we hadn't any officers, but our company was in charge of a Chairman, Secretary and Treasurer. It had grown so large that we had to have three drill instructors. They were Paddy McGuinness, already mentioned, Jack Tyrrell, a greasy old soldier from Moynalty who was fond of his drink, and an old soldier from Moyrath, named Feeney, who took a great pride in his work, as will be seen later.

Following the receipt by the Secretary of the mobilisation order for the Phoenix Park, a special mobilisation was held on the Curragh road, just beside the village, to decide what action the company would take in the matter. The vast majority were in favour of travelling to the Park, but all of the old hands stood fast, and made a great case against the idea, including the expense of such a journey. Things were becoming very hot, and eventually my brother, Bryan, who was the Treasurer, took the funds of the Company out of his pocket and, handing them to either the Chairman or Secretary, said, "Here is the cash for you! When you have it spent, it will be the end of the Volunteers!" The mobilisation broke up, without any decision being taken as to whether

to travel, or not, to the Park. Anyone who went had to travel at his own expense. In a very short time, we found ourselves as we were before Redmond took charge. We were again under Pearse as heretofore, with our old company intact. By then, a similar company was operating in Dunboyne, another in Kells, and a small section in Drumbaragh.

We continued to meet a couple of nights a week, and were now proficient in foot drill and field exercises. The R.I.C. began to take an active interest in our meetings, and one or two of them were always present or in the vicinity. We were now looking forward to rifle exercise, but had no idea where rifles were to come from. In the meantime, we provided ourselves with wooden ones which we used on parade. We knew that a couple of consignments of rifles had been smuggled into the country sometime earlier, but none of them reached Carnaross.

We had not, as yet, fully broken with the A.O.H., and continued to use the hall for dances, but we saw they did not want us. The split had to come sometime. And so it did - when we decided it was time to get some proper arms. All of us who were able paid down the price of a revolver. Bryan, our Treasurer, when he counted the money, discovered that he had enough to buy a few extra for those who were unable to subscribe. My brother, Philip, was sent to G.H.Q., Dublin, and returned with twenty brand-new shining revolvers. Our meeting place then was my old home in Carnaross. There, all of us started target practice, and, in a very short time, learned

how to take aim properly and, with the dint of practice and enthusiasm, several of us got quite quick on the draw.

The procuring of the guns and the noise of our target practice finished us with the A.O.H. We were at daggers drawn from now on. All the slander that could be thought of, was heaped on us. We were paid German agents. We were getting German gold. We were Bolshies. We were Larkin's men. We had a Communist cell in Liberty Hall (a name they applied to my old house in Carnaross), and many such phrases.

Now that we were armed, we were still not satisfied. We knew that we did not look like soldiers, and decided we must get some kind of uniform, but Bryan had no money in the kitty to help us out. Our only plan was to organise a dance, but where were we to hold it? After all, we had all given great help in the erection of the A.O.H. hall, and at least we could get the loan of it for a night or two, even if we had to rent it. Our Secretary was instructed to write to the Secretary of the A.O.H. for the use of the hall. We were refused. However, one way or another, we managed to procure a number of soldiers' green caps, with a glazed peak. With these, we proudly marched around the village, shouldering our wooden guns.

With the purchase of the caps, our funds became exhausted. We had no money to pay our instructor, Paddy McGuinness, who was due a few weeks' wages. Jack Tyrrell and Feeney, our other instructors, had long since been dismissed. After

some scraping and a small collection among ourselves, we eventually paid off Paddy McGuinness also. By this time, we had obtained the loan of a rifle - I don't know where it came from - and were fairly confident in the use of such weapons, and considered ourselves very qualified as soldiers. From now on, we had only to keep together for the sake of discipline, and carry out our drill under the command of any of our own men. This exercise gave us great experience in the handling of men, and proved a great advantage to all the parishes around afterwards, as will be seen later. We were all powerfully built men. In the grain loft at my own home where we met and trained, there was a weighing scale and a great number of weights. Here we practised weight lifting, and it was only child's play to each of us to stand with arms extended, with a 56-lb. weight hanging from the fingers of each hand.

We were now regarded as a very important company by our G.H.Q. in Dublin, and had frequent visits from G.H.Q. men, including one by that splendid character, Liam Mellows - God rest his soul! He came late one night. We did not hear of his coming until we were on parade. He came on a push bicycle. We had no arrangements made to give him refreshments, so we all felt very disappointed. Fortunately, someone had a brain wave. I was sent to an old girl, named Miss Rahill, who lived in a lane, to borrow a cup and saucer, a kettle and teapot. She was not a supporter of ours; in fact, she was a staunch Hibernian. Nevertheless, she lent me the cup and saucer, kettle and teapot. We joined up, and bought

a twopenny brack, some tea and sugar, butter and, I suppose, milk, so that Liam would have high tea with us.

Things were becoming more strained between us and the Hibernians, and we often wondered how they knew so much about our business. We later found out that one of our members - Berney Reilly - was still a member, ~~although his two brothers were our most loyal members.~~, although his two brothers were our most loyal members. This information shook us badly, so we decided to strike out at the A.O.H. at last. Their dances, up to this, were quite successful. When one was being held on a particular night, we took up positions at Rathendrick crossroads. As the patrons arrived, they joined us and asked why we were not at the dance. When we had convinced them that all the stories about German gold, German agents and all the other lies propagated by the Hibernians about us were untrue, and that they were damaging the cause of Irish freedom, they took our advice, and did not attend the dance. The dance was a complete failure. Even Berney Reilly came out to us that night, and advised us to leave and not to cause any trouble. To the best of my knowledge, it was the last dance they ever organised in Carnaross.

We kept up our regular weekly meetings for drill, revolver practice and the handling of the rifle all through the year 1915 and the early part of 1916. By then, the English garrisons throughout the country, and the R.I.C. in Carnaross, were getting restless and more watchful. This had the effect of keeping us in closer touch with G.H.Q. in Dublin,

where it was expected that steps would soon be taken to suppress the whole Volunteer movement. At last, the fateful time arrived. While on parade on Good Friday evening of Holy Week, 1916, a despatch arrived from G.H.Q., pointing out that the authorities were becoming very interested in our movements, and ordering our company to mobilise in the Phoenix Park, Dublin, on Easter Sunday, where a general mobilisation was to take place for a show of strength. Our instructions were to proceed to the Hill of Tara where we would be joined by other contingents and from there to proceed in a body to Dublin.

Our immediate concern now was to get away without our usual watchful bodyguard of R.I.C. Three jaunting cars were commissioned, one with Berney Reilly in the dickey, three Volunteers each side, and one seated behind, dangling a football. My brother, Bryan, and Larry Farnon were turned out similarly. All set out, to all appearances, for a football game. The ruse worked, and the R.I.C. remained at home.

Easter is a very busy time of the year around a farmer's house, or at least it was about our house, with stall-feds, pigs and ewes lambing. Someone had to stay at home, and I was picked for the job. To tell the truth, I had not the slightest idea of the significance of the mobilisation. They all set off in great spirits, and never before in Irish history did a more enthusiastic body of men set out for so important a mission, as it turned out to be.

When the others had gone, those of us who remained at home organised a dance to raise funds to augment our very limited resources. It was held at Bryan Daly's loft at Loughan, and was a great success. The whole yard, house and loft were full. Our three drivers had returned and were enjoying themselves with the others. They had left their men at the foot of Tara Hill, and had returned. The dance was in full swing when, about midnight, to our great amazement, all of our wanderers turned into the dance. All they could tell us was that a messenger had come to the hill to say that the mobilisation was off, and that they were to disperse quietly and return home. The fact was (as is already recorded) that Eoin McNeill, who was Chairman of the Volunteers, was not in favour of open rebellion, and, on his own initiative, had cancelled, as far as he could, the mobilisation. We continued to dance and enjoy ourselves until seven o'clock in the morning. Little did any of us know of the fateful arrangements being made on that never-to-be-forgotten Easter Monday morning.

We heard nothing of the rebellion until Tuesday. The rumours then were startling and ridiculous. One wiseacre in particular had it that the North Wall, Dublin, had been blown up by a cannon ball. During the afternoon of Tuesday, a despatch was received at our house. It was carried by Jack Dardis of Kells. Our company was ordered to mobilise and stand to, and to await orders to march at the shortest notice. In preparation for this event, our guns were taken to "Liberty Hall". By

our guns, I mean all the shotguns we could lay our hands on, together with our revolvers, haversacks, belts, water-bottles and ammunition. Almost all of our men reported twice a day for the next couple of days, in readiness to march. A few of the boys, however, who had gone to the Hill of Tara on Easter Sunday, fell shy and did not show up at all during the week. Probably, like myself, they did not realise the significance of the mobilisation on Easter Sunday. In the meantime, with a couple of other Volunteers, I looked after the cleaning and oiling of the guns, and awaited any despatch which would arrive. Several despatches did arrive, but they were of no importance. On Thursday morning, a despatch arrived, ordering a full mobilisation of the company, with instructions to be ready to march that evening.

We were all present, at our usual strength, discussing the fighting in Dublin and anticipating the result. One of the boys remarked that there was no guarantee that we would ever see Carnaross again, that a stray bullet might get one or more of us. Someone then suggested that it would be a good thing to be ready for such an eventuality. I was sent to the presbytery to ask Fr. Farrell to call to the house to hear our confessions. When I arrived and was admitted, I found the priest sitting over the fire, all wrapped up - he was ill. When I explained my mission to him, he told me to bring the lot to the presbytery and he would hear their confessions there. They went there, and made their confessions. When Fr. Farrell had finished, he said he would wait up

sometime longer, in case there were any others.

In the meantime, a despatch arrived, saying the mobilisation had been cancelled. By this time, word was leaking through that the lads were getting the worst of it in Dublin. We felt that we were not to be called. Nor were we.

I went back to the priest to tell him there were no more for confession. He told me that he knew of the rebellion before it started, and remarked that the Carnaross men would not be justified in taking part. He asked me what chance of success did we think we had. I replied that every man in the company felt certain of ultimate victory. "If that is so", he said, "go, and God bless you all! I am an old man. I cannot see any chance for you. I would not feel justified in taking any risk whatever!"

That is the story of Easter week in Carnaross. The Rising had ended in apparently complete failure. The mass of the people, if not hostile, were not in the least interested. In the County Meath at the time, we had not one hundred Volunteers. The South Meath Volunteers arrived at Tara Hill on Easter Sunday, after our boys from North Meath had left. They knew nothing then of McNeill's countermanding order. They fell in with a detachment from Kildare and another from Monaghan, and all of them were under the command of Tomás Ashe. At Ashbourne, they fought and defeated a contingent of R.I.C. from the County Cavan and County Meath. They stripped the R.I.C. of their uniforms, and tied their loose cash in the tails of their shirts, and let them loose to run back home. ~~_____~~

South Meath Volunteers

~~They~~ They gave a good account of themselves at Ashbourne. They are all dead now.

Our darling army was defeated, and we never got a chance to fire a shot. We were a dejected and forlorn body of men for the next few days, and could hear nothing of our beaten comrades. The driver of a steam-roller - the first ever to appear on the roads in County Meath - told us several stories of arrests and surrender in Dublin, but how much of this was correct, we did not know. Early in the following week, a special parade was called to discuss our position. My brother, Bryan, and Larry Farnan were our chief counsellors. We were advised, above all, not to surrender our arms, not even the wooden guns. We were to have no national literature in our houses, and were to deny any connection with the Volunteers. I remember Larry's parting advice, "Remember, if they get your gun, you are for the stone jug!"

After dinner at the end of the week, we had the first raid on our home by the R.I.C. They arrived, and took up positions half-way down the drive to the house. One of them approached the door, and enquired from my mother if her sons, Bryan, Philip, Pat and John were at home. She replied, "Yes, we are all inside!" He ordered that no one was to leave the house without permission. Another policeman approached, and called out Bryan whom they questioned for half-an-hour. When they finished with him, they ordered him into the haggard. Philip was called next, then Pat. I was the last. We all got the same questioning,

and all gave similar answers. Finally, the police withdrew without taking any of us into custody.

After this, our trouble was to find a hiding place for our guns where they would be safe. We knew of several properly built hiding places at Fegath, built and used by the Fenians for their guns in their day. But would our guns be safe there? How many people around also knew of those old hiding places? Finally, it was agreed that each man would look after his own, and that no two guns would be kept in the same place. In this way, each man looked after his gun, and kept it oiled and safe. One day, Bryan, while going through the fields, noticed a pass or track going direct from a house in Fegath. Each day, he noticed it becoming more beaten, so he followed it to see where it led to. It led to a very large stone. He looked around everywhere, but could make nothing of it. He got down on his knees and, after groping around the base, he came across a shining revolver. It belonged to Philip who, in his constant anxiety for its safety, had beaten a track through the fields to make sure it was there.

By then, the authorities had issued a proclamation, ordering the surrender of all guns in the hands of the rebels to be handed in at local R.I.C. barracks,, on the promise of some kind of amnesty. Unfortunately, in spite of all the warning by Bryan and Larry Farnan, quite a few of our men handed in their guns to the local R.I.C. barracks. Some of them had not been paid for.

Among the County Meath Volunteers who had been arrested and deported were the three sons of a

widow, Mrs. Boylan from Dunboyne, one of whom - Seán - later became Brigade O/C of Meath Brigade, and later Commandant General, 1st. Eastern Division. Paddy White, our "respected" Nationalist M.P. in the House of Commons, made great representations on the floor of the House for the release of the widow's three sons. His appeals were successful, and they were released before the end of the year.

I might mention also that the detachment from Monaghan, who were in charge of Eoin O'Duffy, when returning from their encounter with the R.I.C. passed through the town of Navan. They looked for food around the town and, after some trouble, got it. The following week, an article appeared in the "Meath Chronicle", dubbing the Monaghan Volunteers as looters and ruffians. The writer of that article was compelled by the local Volunteers to apologise and withdraw the offensive remarks in the following week's issue.

SIGNED: Seán Farrelly

DATE: 16 July '57

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