

ORIGINAL

BUREAU OF MILITARY HISTORY 1913-21

BURD STAIRÉ MILÉ TA 1913-21

No. W.S. 581

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BUREAU OF MILITARY HISTORY, 1913-21.

STATEMENT BY WITNESS

DOCUMENT NO. W.S. 581

Witness

Christopher Fitzsimons,
3 St. Brigid's Avenue,
North Strand,
Dublin.

Identity.

Member of 'F' Company, 2nd Battalion, Dublin Brigade,
1917 - ;

Member of A.S.U. December 1920-July 1921.

Subject.

- (a) National activities 1917-1921;
- (b) Bloody Sunday, November 1920;
- (c) The A.S.U. Dublin, 1920-1921;
- (d) Burning of the Custom House, Dublin, May 1921.

Conditions, if any, Stipulated by Witness.

Nil.

File No. S.1830

Form B.S.M. 2

STATEMENT BY MR. CHRISTOPHER FITZSIMONS.

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STATEMENT BY MR. CHRISTOPHER FITZSIMONS,
3, ST. BRIGID'S AVENUE, NORTH STRAND, DUBLIN.

I joined "F" Company, 2nd Battalion of the Dublin Brigade early in the year, 1917. This was about the time that Dick McKee handed over the Company to Oscar Traynor. Up to the summer of 1919, the activities of the Company were confined to drilling, training and lectures. The headquarters of the Company were at the rear of Clonliffe College.

I joined the I.R.B. late in 1917, the Thomas Clarke Circle, which was then known as Lubi. A man by the name of J.J. Murphy was the Centre. We used meet at 44 Parnell Square at least once a month. The only incident I remember arising out of these meetings was the occasion when Kevin Barry came into the room to be sworn in and objection was taken to him, due to his youth, but he was eventually accepted.

Burning of R.I.C. Barracks at Raheny:

One of my first engagements while with the Company was the burning of Raheny Police Barracks late in the year 1919. About twenty men of the Company under Pat Sweeney proceeded to Raheny Barracks one evening about 8 p.m. and entered the local houses in the vicinity of the Barracks to collect paraffin oil. My recollection of the event is that no shots were fired. About three R.I.C. men occupied the Barracks at the time and they handed it over. It was duly set alight and burned out. I was not present when our officer demanded the R.I.C. to hand over the Barracks. At that particular time I was collecting paraffin oil with others

and, when we had collected a sufficient quantity of oil, we brought it up to the barrack gate and saw that our comrades had already taken over the place. The Police were assembled on the opposite side of the street.

Belfast Boycott:

When the Belfast boycott was declared in August, 1920, the Company took an active part in confiscating goods and merchandise that had come from Belfast and were being sold in shops around Amiens Street, Seville Place and Talbot Street. On the instructions of the Company Commander, a number of men were told off to enter these shops, take out the goods and destroy them. The goods destroyed mostly consisted of cigarettes, tobacco, snuff and linen. In each shop that we entered we warned the occupants that there was no point in getting further goods from Belfast, as we would come back and destroy them.

Eight months later we were compelled to take a rather serious view of a traveller who was travelling for a Northern firm and who took no notice of warnings that we had already given to him to discontinue his business activities on behalf of this firm. We duly arrested him and held him a prisoner at 100 Seville Place for two nights. He still declined to dissociate himself with the Northern firm. The result was that on a Sunday morning we took him to the canal at Charleville Mall, ducked him three times and then handcuffed him to St. Agatha's church railings with a notice displaying his crime. The Tans released him some hours later.

Police Duties:

From then on, Company activities were concentrated on providing armed patrols nightly in the district of Gloucester Street, Gardiner Street, Summerhill and Corporation Street.

Each patrol consisted of about six to twelve men. The idea of these patrols was to try and maintain law and order in the districts concerned. The D.M.P. had ceased to take a very active interest in protecting public property and prohibiting street fights and brawls, so it was decided that the Volunteers would take over. A robber gang operated in this area who took advantage of the political position at the time, which rendered the D.M.P. more or less inactive. They raided and robbed factories, offices and shops. I believe the local residents appealed to the I.R.A. for assistance in the matter. I cannot say if our patrols served any purpose or not. No arrests were made.

I recollect one morning in the same year the Squad descending on Gloucester Street and arresting many members of the robber gang. On the morning in question when the Squad raided the houses of the individuals concerned, we acted as a protecting guard for them. There was a considerable number of them arrested and, as far as I can remember, about eight of them were deported to England. The result of this raid was that robberies and burglaries became less frequent.

Raid on Boats at Alexandra Basin:

Late in 1920, twelve of us from "F" Company were instructed to carry out a raid on two boats belonging to the Head Line, trading between Belfast and Dublin, which were at that time docked at Alexandra Basin. It was known that the officers of these boats were armed, and the purpose of the raid was to procure arms. The raid took place about 3 p.m. No opposition was made when my comrades went on board and held up the staff. My particular job was to secure the radio so as to cut off communication with land. Both ships were raided separately and the whole thing went off very quietly. Even a British gunboat, which was discharging

supplies for the Air Force, was lying quiet close, totally unaware of what was happening. In all, we captured about eight short Webley revolvers together with a considerable amount of revolver ammunition. One of these revolvers was taken from a policeman who was on patrol on the quayside at the time. He was taken prisoner temporarily until both raids were completed. Tom Ennis was in charge of these raids.

Shortly afterwards, three of us held up a British military despatch rider in Charleville Avenue, North Strand, and confiscated his bicycle and despatch book. The despatches, however, must have been delivered as none were found in the bag at the time. My two companions were Jim Conroy and Barney Keogh.

Bloody Sunday:

On the eve of Bloody Sunday, four men of the Company and myself were instructed by the Company Commander, Pat Sweeney, to report outside City Quay chapel at 8.45 I think next morning, and that we were to proceed to 54 or 84 Lower Baggot Street to shoot an Intelligence Officer who was residing there. Charlie Dalton, who was one of the five, was regarded as being in command, and we were to take instructions from him.

We all - Charlie Dalton, Frank Saurin, Jim Conroy, Barney Keogh and myself - met at the appointed time and proceeded to the house in question. We knocked on the door of the house concerned and it was immediately opened by a maid. We asked for the individual whose name we had, and the maid told us he did not sleep there that night. However, we did not take her word for it and searched every room in the house but without result. I think our instructions that morning were very precise, that we were

to enter the house at 9.3 and that we were to be out of it by 9.10. There was some mistake about the retreat that morning following the operations. We had been directed that, when we finished at Baggot Street, we were to retreat to the South Quays where a boat would be in readiness to take us across the river to the north side. On arriving at the quayside, we found that there were about forty Volunteers assembled there. A boat was there alright but there was no man in it, or oarlocks. However, a docker was standing by the quayside and he asked us who were we. We said we were not Tans anyway. He said, "Alright. I will get you across". The forty of us scrambled into that small boat and he sculled it safely across. I think that this docker deserves a tribute because had a big number of us been left stranded, we would have been an easy capture for the British military immediately the results of that morning's operations became known. I don't know how the plans miscarried but the man who was detailed to row us across was not at the point we were directed to.

The Active Service Unit:

I was selected very early in December, 1920, for transfer to the Dublin Brigade Active Service Unit, with which Unit I served until May, 1921. My first parade was in Oriel Hall, Seville Place, where we were addressed by Oscar Traynor and Paddy Flanagan, the O/C. Oscar Traynor said that, as curfew was imposed at 8 p.m., the ordinary Battalions of the Dublin Brigade would be rendered inactive, as the time at their disposal from finishing work until 8 p.m. was too short, and that Dáil Éireann had decreed that a full-time active service unit was to be formed to combat the activities of the British forces in Dublin city for twenty-fours of the day. He there and then nominated Paddy Flanagan to be Officer Commanding this Unit. The Company was divided into four Sections, Nos. 1 and 2 Sections

to operate on the north side under Frank Flood and Nos. 3 and 4 on the south side under Paddy Flanagan.

Paddy Flanagan's headquarters were at Temple Bar, in the vicinity of the present E.S.B. offices in Fleet Street, at a shop, the property of Jimmy Brown who was also a member of the A.S.U. Nos. 1 and 2 Sections used to meet in a cul-de-sac off South Anne Street. It was in a flat provided by Tom McGrath who was also a member of the A.S.U. I was allotted to No. 2 Section and my recollection is that the two sections were combined and acted under the leadership of Frank Flood.

Michael Collins searched by British Military:

I remember one morning early in January, 1921, when Volunteer Kerrigan and myself were on what we would term an Intelligence ramble. We were on the Castle side of Dame Street. The British had cordoned off several blocks of streets all round the Empire (now the Olympia) Theatre. On looking across, we saw a group of civilians being held up and searched. To our consternation, we saw Michael Collins was one of them. Knowing us, he winked at us. We reported the information immediately to our Company officer. Mick Collins, however, was not identified and was back at his headquarters in a short time.

First Daylight Ambush in Dublin by A.S.U.:

One of my first engagements with the A.S.U. was an attack on a military lorry at Bachelors' Walk on the 12th January, 1921. Preparations were made beforehand for this attack as it was well known that it was customary for a British lorry to travel down the Quays towards Collins Barracks from the city each morning.

On the morning in question Nos. 1 and 2 Sections took

up positions extending from Carson's Lane in Bachelors' Walk to Liffey Street. I was standing at the edge of the sidewalk outside of Wren's furniture shop, half-way between Liffey Street and Carson's Lane, and was armed with two grenades. I was not long there when Johnnie Dunne, who was stationed at Carson's Lane, fired a grenade at a lorry of British troops which had come abreast of his position from O'Connell Street. The car, having passed his position, came towards me. I stepped on to the roadway and fired my two grenades at it coming towards me. I withdrew immediately through Wren's auction rooms, making my escape through the Lotts. At Liffey Street Nos. 1 and 2 Sections were bunched together on both sides of the road, hoping the car would wheel into Liffey Street. It kept on straight, however, down the Quays for Collins Barracks. Fire was not opened on it from Liffey Street as our men were positioned too far away from it. Paddy Flanagan was the officer in charge.

Attempted Rescue of Frank Flood and others:

Frank Flood, Thomas Bryan, Thomas Whelan, Patrick Moran, Patrick Doyle and Bernard Ryan were executed in Mountjoy Prison on the 14th March 1921. Except for Whelan and Moran, all the others were members of the A.S.U. About two weeks preceding their execution, an attempt was made to secure their release. Members of the 1st Battalion reinforced by Nos. 1 and 2 Sections of the Active Service Unit were to carry out their rescue. I cannot recollect precisely what the plan was. All I remember is that the main gate was to be opened on some pretence or other and, when this was done, the rescue party outside were to rush in, secure the second gate and shoot their way, if necessary, to the cells where the prisoners were detained. I cannot remember who was to take charge of this operation. As far as we, the ordinary

rank and file of the rescue party, were concerned, we were to act on a signal. For three nights we took up positions in the vicinity of Mountjoy but nothing happened. After the third night, the whole plan was dropped. I believe that, when the matter was carefully considered, it was felt that the thing was impracticable and that the cost in lives would not justify its being put into effect.

A.S.U. attack Auxiliary Officers at Phibsborough:

There was no Intelligence section as such attached to the A.S.U. Each member was in himself an Intelligence man in so far as if he saw an enemy lorry travelling through the city on any morning, he would go back the next morning to see if it was regular for that lorry to use that route. If he was satisfied that this was the case, he would report back to the O/C and then an attack on it would be planned.

One of our men residing in the vicinity of Phibsboro' observed that it was usual for four Auxiliary officers to pull up in a car outside St. Peter's Church on Sunday mornings and subject members of the congregation coming from Mass to a search. This information was given to the O/C of the Sections, Tom Flood, who succeeded his brother, Frank, later executed. A decision was taken that these four men would be attacked.

On the 2nd April, 1921, eight of us were detailed for this job. We took up positions at the entrance to Dalymount football grounds and at the apex of St. Peter's Church. As the people were coming from eleven o'clock Mass, the car containing four Auxiliary officers pulled up a little south of the Church on the North Circular Road side. As the Auxiliaries were about to alight from the car, I threw a grenade at them. This was followed by another grenade from Volunteer Carrigan. Almost simultaneously fire was opened on the car from our men at Dalymount.

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The streets were fairly well packed with people at the time and I cannot say what was the result of our attack but I believe that some of the Auxiliaries were wounded. The attack had the desired effect. As far as I can recollect, people coming from Mass in Phibsboró' were not subjected to any further searching by the Auxiliaries.

Auxiliary Officer - Captain Tams:

I was detailed to go to Harcourt Street on a Saturday morning early in April, 1921, unarmed, and to keep looking into a newsagent's shop window near the Ivanhoe Hotel until some person would come up to me and ask me if I was Johnnie Dunne. I was instructed to reply that I would take a message to him. I was only about five minutes looking into the shop window when the porter of the Ivanhoe Hotel tapped me on the shoulder and asked me if I was Johnnie Dunne. I replied I would take a message to him. The porter then informed me that the man we were looking for was sprawled on the couch in the hall of this hotel, with his wife. He was an Auxiliary officer by the name of Captain Tams. I walked to the hotel door and saw that the porter was telling me the truth. Following this, I immediately made contact with Volunteer Billy Doyle who reported back to the Company officer at Temple Bar. I kept the Auxiliary officer under surveillance for some time, hoping that Billy would return soon with the necessary arms to eliminate this man. Shortly after Billy had departed, Captain Tams left the hotel with his wife by car. I made a note

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of the number of the car, also a description, make, colour etc. The porter informed me that they were gone to the Phoenix Park races. That same Saturday evening, Nos. 1 and 2 Sections were posted along the Quays from Queen Street bridge to Parkgate Street to catch him returning from the races but wisely, and lucky for him, he changed his return route.

A.S.U. destroy military transport:

One evening in April, 1921, four of us were sitting in the park at Fairview, known as the Sloblands, which at that time was actually a Corporation dump. A large Leyland lorry manned by three unarmed soldiers drove into the dump. We held up the soldiers, took over the lorry and destroyed it by burning it with petrol from the tank. In fact, the soldiers proved very helpful in destroying the lorry. They pushed the lorry back to the end of the dump when requested to do so and, when we had it well alight, with their help we pushed it into the sea. In fact, we appreciated the help of these soldiers so much that we gave them their tram fares back to barracks.

We destroyed another car, this time a Ford touring car at Newcomen Bridge railway siding. This car was in transit to some military station in the country and was being carried on an open waggon. Four of us brought up petrol and burned it.

Attack on munitions train at Killester that failed:

In the month of April, 1921, the Squad, Nos. 1 and 2 Sections of the A.S.U. and members of the 2nd Battalion were mobilised to destroy a munitions train at Killester bridge. Great preparations were made to ensure that this operation would be a success. The Engineers worked throughout the night laying three mines on the railway at the point chosen to destroy the train. The site was ideal and it gave plenty of cover by way of a high embankment. Our equipment for the destruction of this train was in plentiful supply as we had grenades, revolvers, mines, rifles and a motor tanker of petrol or paraffin oil commandeered from one of the oil companies. This was backed on to the Bridge at Killester in such a position that, when the train was passing under the bridge, it could be sprayed with the contents of the tanker.

About fifty men took part in this operation under the command of Commandant Tom Ennis. Between 2.30 and 3 p.m., the munitions train arrived but the mines, for some reason or another, failed to explode, with the result that the train passed on and no attempt was made to fire on it. Tom Ennis was very annoyed that the operation was unsuccessful. Some of the experts attributed the mines' failure to explode to be due to heavy rain which had fallen the previous night. At least, that was the excuse they gave, maintaining that the fuses became too wet to be effective. I should mention here that it may seem a bit unusual that the operation should be under the command of Tom Ennis, the Battalion Commander, seeing that so many men of the Active Service Unit and the Squad were present, the reason being, however, that Tom Ennis, when he ever wanted men for a special job, apparently had full authority to call on the services of Nos. 1 and 2 Sections of the Active Service Unit.

Narrow escape of A.S.U. Members:

Some time in April 1921, Tom Flood, Ned Breslin and myself were proceeding towards Phoenix Park. An open touring car with four Auxiliaries approached from behind going in the same direction. We were armed with automatic pistols. Immediately the car passed us Tom Flood dived for his gun but Ned Breslin seized his wrist and steered us into a pub at the corner of Queen St. Just as we entered the pub an armoured car came from the same direction as the touring car. The touring car was, of course, a decoy. I may mention here that Tom's brother - Frank - had been executed at this time and he was most impatient with the enemy, especially as he had succeeded Frank's command. But what an escape we had!

A.S.U. in position to attack convoy in Dorset St:

Towards the end of April, 1921, it was usual for the British to provide armed escorts for civilian employees coming into the city from Collinstown. The civilians and armed escorts were mixed together in three tenders. The two Sections were mobilised many evenings to intercept and ambush this convoy in the vicinity of Dorset Street and Drumcondra. For some reason or other, on the evenings that the Sections took up positions for an ambush, the lorries took a different route.

Detective Officer Steadman shot Jervis St. by A.S.U.:

Information was sent to us that a detective officer by the name of Steadman, who was a special courier between Dublin Castle and the Police Depot at Phoenix Park, usually carried despatches between these two places around 11.30 each day, and that the route mostly used by him was via Capel Street and Mary Street. Nos. 1 and 2 Sections were told off to intercept this man and to have him shot. For two mornings six selected men of these Sections waited in

Mary Street at the corner of Jervis Street for him but he did not turn up. On the third morning, however, he did appear on his motor cycle and, as Tom Flood and I were already in a position waiting for him at Jervis Street corner, we stepped off the footpath and shot him. Our covering party of four men relieved him of his gun. This detective was not killed outright. He lived for three or four days. This incident took place during the last week in April.

At that particular time Michael Collins had his offices over Todd Burns in Mary Street. We were, of course, totally unaware that Collins had offices so near to us on that particular morning. Before the detective died, he was able to give his superiors a very accurate description of Tom Flood and myself. Our descriptive particulars appeared in the police gazette known as the "Hue & Cry".

A.S.U. attack British Convoy - North Frederick St.:

On the evening of the 3rd May, 1921, Tom Flood and myself were standing at Frederick Lane watching for any British enemy vehicle that might pass our way. We were armed with one grenade each. Around 5 p.m. we saw the convoy from Collinstown coming down North Frederick Street and proceeding towards O'Connell Street. Acting without any instructions, we both threw our grenades at the second and third lorries with the result that casualties were caused. I cannot say how many but a short time later we were complimented for our initiative.

British spy escape A.S.U. net:

On the morning of the burning of the Custom House, three of us were told off to watch out for and eliminate a Castle spy who was residing in Charlemont Street. At 10a.m. we were in position at the tram-stop where he usually boarded the tram. We timed it that we would arrive at this tram-stop simultaneously with Hegarty, the man we were after.

For some reason or other, he did not come to the tram-stop. He allowed the tram to pass him and, just as it had passed him, he raced after it and boarded it. This precluded any further action on our part. We were told that he knew quite well that we were watching him for some time.

Burning of the Custom House:

On returning to a stable in the Lotts, Tom Flood was getting his two Sections ready to move out for the destruction of the Custom House. We knew beforehand that the Custom House was to be burned on that day. Our instructions were that we were to proceed to Talbot Street where we would receive a signal from Paddy Daly to proceed to the Custom House, hold up policemen and staff there and assemble them in the backyard known as the quadrangle. We left for Talbot Street in two's, arriving there about 12.55. We were not long there when Paddy Daly appeared and gave the arranged signal. We then walked briskly to the Custom House.

On entering the Custom House, we met four policemen who were going to their lunch. We ordered them down into the yard and they did not resist. While these police were being conveyed to the back, other members of the Section rushed all over the building and got the staff down as quickly as they could. I believe the only man who objected to taking orders was the caretaker and he was shot dead. When we had cleared the staff out and were guarding them in the quadrangle, men of the 2nd Battalion who were already in readiness brought in fuel and mattresses to set the place alight. Arrangements had been made beforehand that we would get an all-clear signal when the Custom House was well alight. On receipt of this signal, we were to release the police and staff. We never heard the signal but the next thing I knew was that, in a few minutes, we were completely surrounded by

Auxiliaries. I fired whatever ammunition I had in my gun but, of course, it was of no avail. Seeing that we could not escape capture, we dumped our guns. We mingled with the staff and walked out. We were segregated on the quayside and taken to Dublin Castle. We were interrogated at the Castle for three days and suffered pretty severe handling from the Auxiliaries.

The men of the Active Service Unit, the Squad and 2nd Battalion captured as a result of the burning of the Custom House numbered between 83 and 100. The bulk of the prisoners were transferred to Arbour Hill. After a short time there, we were moved to a disused wing in Kilmainham and put into solitary confinement for a considerable time. While there, we were brought out on identification parades four or five times each week.

The method of identification used was that the identifying person was enclosed in a small galvanised shed and looked out through slits. Each prisoner had a number and was told to walk up to the shed, stand in various positions and walk when ordered. Any prisoner whose identity was established, a military Sergeant placed his hand on his shoulder and kept it there for some time. I may mention that this identification parade was for the purpose of trying to establish the connection of various prisoners with various activities that had taken place before their capture.

I remember that, when I was in the Castle, I saw the despatch rider from whom I had taken his bicycle sometime previously. Presumably he had recognised me because on one of these identification parades the military Sergeant placed his hand on my shoulder which was the indication that I had been identified.

Charge sheets were prepared for 83 prisoners charging them with various crimes, such as, murder, attempted murder, levying war, arson, possession of arms, etc. At about 11 a.m. on the day of the Truce, copies of these charge sheets were about to be handed to us. We were paraded to receive them but, knowing that the Truce would take place as from twelve o'clock, we refused to accept them. Late in the afternoon, a liaison officer entered the prison and told us that, as the Truce had now been signed, we were to be regarded as prisoners-of-war and that the charges which had been preferred against us would be dropped. We were held in Kilmainham until November, 1921, when we were released at the general amnesty. The A.S.U. and the Squad were practically all captured on this operation.

Signed:

Christopher Fitzsimons

DATE:

27. Sept 1951

Witness:

William Ivory Bondt

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