

ORIGINAL

BUREAU OF MILITARY HISTORY 1913-21
BURO STAIRÉ MILEANTA 1913-21
NO. W.S. 646

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BUREAU OF MILITARY HISTORY, 1913-21.

STATEMENT BY WITNESS

DOCUMENT NO. W.S. 646

Witness

William Christian,
33 Ballyfermob Crescent,
Inchicore,
Dublin.

Identity.

Member of Fianna Eireann, 1911 - ;
" 'B' Company, 3rd Battalion, Dublin Bgde.
Irish Volunteers, 1915 - .

Subject.

Northumberland Road, Dublin,
Easter Week 1916.

Conditions, if any, Stipulated by Witness.

Nil

File No. S.1932

Form B.S.M. 2

C O N T E N T S

	<u>Page</u>
1. Fianna Éireann.	1
2. Fianna Band.	1
3. "B" Company, 3rd Battalion. St. Patrick's Day Parade, 1916.	2
4. Easter Sunday, 1916.	2-3
5. Mobilisation, Easter Monday.	4
6. Occupation of Parochial Hall, Northumberland Road.	5
7. Battle of Mount Street Bridge.	8-9
8. Evacuation of Parochial Hall and capture of garrison.	9-10
9. Interrogation and internment of prisoners.	10-12
10. Sankey Commission.	12

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STATEMENT BY WILLIAM CHRISTIAN,

33 Ballyfermot Crescent, Inchicore, Dublin.

My Part in the 1916 Rising.

I, William Christian, joined An Céad Sluagh na Fianna Éireann, 34 Lower Camden Street, in the month of July, 1911. I was then 15 years of age and trained under the late Con Colbert. He was then known as "Cruitur" and was executed in 1916. I was also under Percy Reynolds, late Chairman of C.I.E.

About August, 1914, twelve of us were sent to a Mr. McKenzie in Bolton Street, to learn the war pipes. After about six months of training, our numbers dwindled down to three - Tommy Crimmons, Eddy Murray and myself. There were three sets of pipes left from a previous band so we got a set each and re-started the Fianna Band, with Andy Dunne as leading drummer; Conway, side, and Mark Walsh with big drum.

Early in 1915, Tom Donoghue (now Parish Priest in Leeds, Yorkshire) came to us and re-organised the band and put it on its feet. He brought pipes and pipers with him so that we were able to compete in the Oireachtas held in Dundalk in the August of that year.

During the same year, the whole Fianna was re-organised and formed into companies and battalions and any boy over 18 years of age had either to hold rank or join the Volunteers. We were a special section of the Fianna and we were not satisfied being just members of the band, so we made a rule that all members of the band over

18 years of age should join a company of the Volunteers. Each man joined a different company and we scattered ourselves among the different battalions not intentionally. It just worked out that way.

I joined "B" Company of the 3rd Battalion, then in 144 South Brunswick Street (Pearse Street now). I was under the leadership of Captain Seán McMahon, Lieut. Quinn and Jimmy Fitzgerald. When on route march I often played the pipes at the head of the Company and this included an occasion when we marched with the Battalion to the Dublin Mountains; the march commenced at 3 a.m. on a Sunday morning and ended at about 9.30 p.m. that night.

On St. Patrick's Day, 1916, Pipe Major Tom Donoghue had arrangements made for the band to lead the 3rd Battalion on parade. We met in Camden Row, sometime about 10 a.m. While waiting for orders from the then Commandant De Valera to lead, to our great surprise the Commandant gave an order to 'quick march' and we were left behind. How exactly this came to pass, we do not know - perhaps the Commandant forgot - but the incident upset us very much, particularly Tom Donoghue. He marched us back to 34 Camden Street, where we put up our instruments. Afterwards we rambled around the town looking at the Volunteers parading.

At this time I was living at 94 Bride Street, and my pal, James Daly, resided in Bishop Street. On Easter Sunday we both had orders to report at Camden Row at 4 p.m. James called for me about 3.30 p.m. and we both proceeded to Camden Row, arriving there shortly before 4 o'clock. Here, we were told the manoeuvres were off, and this information was confirmed by a notice to the same effect which we saw on a door of a hut in the grounds. We were very disappointed

and lingered around for a while. It was then that an officer of the Volunteers named O'Meara (I am not sure of his christian name - Stephen - perhaps) called me and, recognising me for a member of "B" Company, 3rd Battalion, asked me if I would escort a pony and van to 144 Brunswick Street. This I did willingly. I had my suspicions as to what that van contained and all the more so when I noticed that the articles were covered with a canvas sheet. I guessed that here was something important or I would not have been sent to see it safely delivered, so I took due precautions. I loaded my revolver and had it in readiness in case we should be stopped. However, nothing happened. I did not see even one policeman on the way. Of course we journeyed through all the back ways and avoided the main streets as much as possible. I did not go to the front of the house. Instead we went around to the back entrance which is on a lane leading from Erne Street to Sandwiche Street. Not caring to take the risk of knocking on the door, I stood up in the van and looked around to see if anybody was in sight. As luck would have it, Jimmy Fitzgerald was at one of the windows. He saw me and presently opened the door to me. I delivered my message and he asked me to unload the van. Imagining that the van contained ammunition and rifles, I set about my job excitedly and was even contemplating asking Jimmy for one. I was disappointed however. The van contained nothing save trenching tools, i.e. axes, shovels, etc., very important tools but they meant nothing to me. I completed the job and went home.

I would like to mention in passing, that earlier that Sunday morning, about 11 o'clock, I was in Camden Row. I often went there to try and get some target practice on the miniature range, but though I had been there scores of

times, I cannot remember having got more than two opportunities of firing. I never fired ball ammunition until I was in action during Easter Week. On this particular morning, a man named Augustine Hayes, was distributing shotguns. I was not a member of his Company so I was not given one. However, I did have in my possession a point 32 old R.I.C. six-chamber revolver and 24 rounds of ammunition. These I had from my father who bought them from a retired R.I.C. man. The gun was old but in good working order.

On Easter Monday I was mobilised by Peter Kavanagh about 10.40 a.m. He was then living in Ross Road and he desired me to pass on the news to any of the other Volunteers who might perhaps be living in the neighbourhood. I knew of nobody save my pal, James Daly, so I called for him and both of us proceeded to Earlsfort Terrace - corner of Hatch Street. On our way we met Denis Pello and the three of us went into University Church to say a prayer. Mass was on at the time and we left shortly before the end of the ceremony. I will always remember the stir of excitement we created amongst those at the back of the Church. They gazed at us in open amazement. No doubt they thought it peculiar that we should carry guns into a Church especially when Mass was being celebrated. I wonder what were their thoughts later when they heard those guns going off.

When we got to Earlsfort Terrace, we found other Volunteers had gathered there from all Companies. We stood around for about twenty minutes before Captain O'Connor, O/C. "A" Company, gave the order to fall in and march off. Just before we left, however, there was an exciting little incident. I was standing at one of the doors leading into

the College when presently a man approached and was just in the act of entering the building when Captain O'Connor gave the order to arrest him. I was about to stop him when Harry Banks drew his gun and held him up. Almost immediately, however, Captain O'Connor apologised to the man and allowed him to enter the building. This little episode was over in less than a minute but as for the purpose of the action, I am still in the dark. Perhaps Captain O'Connor has forgotten the incident. Marching from Earlsfort Terrace, we proceeded down Hatch Street into Pembroke Street, Fitzwilliam Square, Fitzwilliam Street and thence to Upper Mount Street. Here we halted at the end of East James Street. There we divided. One section went to the left across to Bolands, while the section I was in continued along Upper Mount Street around the Church and crossed the canal into Percy Place. Here we divided again and I came under Lieutenant Malone's command. He took four of us - Paddy Doyle, John McGrath, Joe Clarke and myself - along Percy Lane to the back of St. Stephen's Parochial Hall. Here he called for Joe Nugent, a Fianna boy, who had followed us on a bike from Earlsfort Terrace carrying ammunition. Malone placed Joe's bike against the wall and by climbing it we got across the wall into the garden. Malone instructed me to remain in the garden to watch the back door and to let nobody in. It was then about 12 o'clock.

The hours dragged on, and my appetite grew bigger and bigger. I had a few dreadful moments when I thought my companions must have forgotten me but presently along came John McGrath with a plentiful supply of bread and butter and a large mug of tea. I need not emphasise that I attacked this with gusto for I had tasted nothing since 10 a.m.

Fortified, I renewed my vigil and presently along came John McGrath to relieve me, just as the clocks chimed out the midnight hour. I went into the house with the intention of snatching a few hours' sleep.

But, try as I might, I could not sleep. A nervous excitement was eating me up and I longed to be doing something definite instead of just lying there in bed. I decided to go back to my post but just then Pat Doyle desired me to call at the Schools and find out the latest news. I spoke to Denis O'Donoghoe who was in charge, and he informed me that there were 20,000 Germans marching to Dublin to help us and were due to arrive at any time. He did not know where they were marching from. I delivered this message and got back to my post. Barring an occasional short break for meals, I was there all day on Tuesday. Early on Wednesday morning I heard a footstep coming from the front of the house along the path leading to the back. Imagining it to be somebody from the garrison (nobody else could get by the house) I decided to seize the opportunity to show them I was on the alert. My surprise knew no bounds when Lieutenant Malone's voice asked me if everything were O.K. I assented and he smiled, saluted and passed on. I did not see him again.

During the day, Willie Fitzgerald, a brother to Tom and Jimmie, came to the back door. I let him in knowing him to be one of the Fianna. He was forced to come round to the back to enter as the front of the house was barricaded. When leaving, Paddy Doyle gave him a message to deliver. I also gave him a note to give my father saying all was well with me. Some little time later, my brother John called taking me sweets and cakes. Everything passed off very quietly that day except for an occasional shot here

and there. As I was having my tea in the house that evening, my attention was drawn to a young man in khaki uniform who was entering a house on the opposite side of the road. While waiting to be admitted, he stood facing us with his arms well away from his body indicating that he was not armed. This put Pat Doyle into a bit of a fix as he had him covered from the time he came into view, and of course, he could not fire on an unarmed man. Had the stranger not given this sign, Pat would certainly have pressed his trigger-finger.

Some little time after the above incident, Pat Doyle's sister and another woman, Anne Devlin, brought some food and first aid dressings for the use of the garrison. We were full of admiration for them, as the action required courage and resource in order to get past the British patrols.

About 2 p.m. on Wednesday, my father came to see me. He confirmed what we had already heard - that there were thousands of troops landing at Kingstown (now Dún Laoghaire) and they were on their way to the city. He also had the disheartening news that the Volunteers were being shot down everywhere and he felt our chances were poor. With a father's natural anxiety for the safety of his son, he begged me to come home with him, but having taken up my post nothing but death would make me desert it. While this grieved him, I think he also admired my spirit and wishing me God's blessing, and promising to pray for me, we parted. I know now that he must have prayed very hard for my safety, even though he confided to my mother when he got home that he had small hope of ever seeing me alive again. Still they prayed - my father and mother and all the neighbours who called on and off inquiring for news - and God protected me.

Shortly after my father left me, the attack started. The sound of machine guns reached us from a distance and then gradually grew louder and louder until we ourselves were in the thick of it. St. Stephen's Hall (where we were) is built in a sort of recess out of line with the row of houses on either side. Consequently because of our favourable position we could see what was taking place around whilst being safely out of the line of firing. As the British troops drew nearer, the bullets fell on the roof of the school opposite like a shower of hail. Excitement gripped us and we braced ourselves for the encounter. Because of our position we had to wait until the British troops actually passed us before we could fire on them; and then they came - hundreds and hundreds of them - stretching right across the road - and so intent were they in gaining their objective - the capture of Clanwilliam House - they completely overlooked our post. We opened fire and men fell like ninnypins. Those who got past us had scarcely reached the bridge before they had to face a battery of fire from Clanwilliam House. We emptied our guns on those who thought to turn back on the line, with the result that very few of those British soldiers who came with the intention of conquering, lived even to see their defeat. The attack from our point of view was a great success.

As I write this, pictures of those thrilling moments of life and death flash through my mind. The frustrated expression on John McGrath's face at one stage when his shotgun jammed and left him temporarily out of action; and very vividly indeed do I recall Joe Clarke hunched behind one of the windows, tugging at his Martini rifle and murmuring "O my God, oh my God". I had a moment's panic for

I thought he was mortally wounded. On solicitiously inquiring if I could do anything to help, I was met with the fierce rejoinder that his ammunition was a dud. Pat Doyle who was in charge, had a Mauser rifle with about 100 rounds of ammunition. His was the only reliable gun in the house and I do not doubt but that he made that gun do the work of six.

Now that the attack was over we could relax and what a blessed reprieve. I might mention that the suspense in waiting for the fight to begin was far worse than the actual battle. This lull in the fighting enabled the nurses to attend to the wounded. That again is something that is imprinted deeply on my mind - those white-coated, fearless figures marching in fours, intent on alleviating the pain and suffering of the wounded.

My position was now changed. I was sent to guard the back in case there would be an attack from that quarter. Scarcely was I in my place when the sound of tramping feet outside came to my ears. I waited and presently over the wall appeared the peak of a cap. I fired a few shots in its direction. I cannot be certain if I did any serious harm but at any rate the noise ceased. A short time passed and then came the second attack on the front of the house. This time the force was stronger and in addition to rifles and machine guns they had a party of bombardiers with hand-grenades. They must have thrown at least a hundred for the noise was deafening. After the attack, P. Doyle came to the back of the house and he was accompanied by Volunteers Joe Clarke and J. McGrath. He offered the opinion then that we could hold out no longer as the ammunition was practically spent and advised that we try and return to the base which was at Bolands Mill. Pat Doyle and Joe Clarke

went first, McGrath and I after. We did not get far. Just as we entered Percy Lane, we were shot at from the Haddington Road end. We ran to the canal end and just as we entered Percy Place we were captured. Evidently the whole place was surrounded. We were marched into a house and our names and addresses taken. Just then a British Officer came on the scene and when he had found out all that was to be known about us, he ordered his soldiers to bind our hands with rope as we were about to be shot.

From this I gathered that the next few minutes were not going to be very pleasant. The soldiers went in search of rope and the officer was called away and did not return again. How grateful I am now to God that the search for the rope proved fruitless. There was none to be had anywhere. Consequently we were marched out into Percy Place again, this time under armed escort. We were ordered into No. 1 Percy Place and on my way thither, I noticed that Clanwilliam House was on fire.

Arrived at the house, we were ordered into the kitchen and here once again our names and addresses were taken. They then took away what money we had. I had not very much indeed. I think my worldly wealth at that time did not fetch more than 7d. We were detained in this house until Friday evening when we were taken as suspects to Ballsbridge. On our way thither we were joined by James Grace who was taken from a house in Northumberland Road. When we arrived at Ballsbridge, we discovered that we were to be lodged in the cow stalls in the Show Grounds.

There was some delay before we were installed in our new most uninviting residence and during that time I got an opportunity to speak to James Grace. We were both very glad to see one another alive and congratulated ourselves on our

good luck. Next moment, however, I thought less of my good fortune for I received such a kick in the pants as abruptly terminated the conversation and effectively silenced me. I was mortified beyond words and would have given a great deal indeed to be able to kick back.

While we were in Ballsbridge, James Grace was taken out several times for interrogation. I was present on the first occasion of his going away and in my heart I offered a prayer for him for I thought they would shoot him. He came back though and if we were glad what must he have felt.

On Saturday morning we were changed from the cattle pens to a long hall in the main building. There were about twenty of us (prisoners) in all and the desire to make us comfortable was shown in the large bucket of tea which the English sent in to be shared out amongst us. Later that evening an Irishman, an officer, in the uniform of the R.A.M.C. spoke to Grace. He spoke in a low tone something to the effect that the Volunteers had surrendered and that their work seemed to have been in vain as the city was in the hands of the English. This was disheartening news indeed and who will blame Grace if he broke down under it. The officer rebuked him and told him not to let the British see how he felt. He could still serve his country by keeping a brave face.

We were kept in the main hall until Tuesday morning, when we were brought out and placed with the main body of prisoners from Bolands, who were lined up inside the railing of the Show Grounds. A British officer addressed us and said that if there was any attempt at escape or rescue there would be 150 dead rebels on the streets of Dublin. We were then marched under heavy escort to

Richmond Barracks, later known as Keogh Barracks. When in Richmond Barracks we were asked our names and addresses, age and occupation. While there we were visited by two priests of the Capuchin Order. I think they were Fathers Albert and Augustine. On a few occasions Detectives came in and scrutinised us.

On Friday, 5th May, we were marched to the North Wall, put on a cattle boat and deported to England. We were brought to Wakefield Jail, near Leeds, Yorkshire. We were kept in solitary confinement for two weeks. Then we were allowed to talk while taking exercise in the ring. Gradually conditions improved and we were allowed visitors. I remember seeing Andy Clarkin, now Senator and Lord Mayor of Dublin, visiting Dan Colgan. After about eight weeks we were transferred to Frongoch Internment Camp, Balla, North Wales. After a short while I was sent with about fifty others to Wandsworth Prison, London, for questioning by the Sankey Commission. The only questions I was asked were, my name and address, where I was employed, my wages, and the number of people dependent on me. I was not asked anything about my part in the Rising, or my Volunteer activities. I was sent back to Frongoch and released from there about the end of July 1916, with about twenty others.

SIGNED William Christian
WILLIAM CHRISTIAN

DATE 5th February 1952
5th February 1952.

WITNESS: Sean Brennan Comdt

Sean Brennan, Comd't.

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