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ORIGINAL

BUREAU OF MILITARY HISTORY 1913-21

BURO STAIRE MILEATA 1913 21

No. W.S. 746

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COSANTA.

BUREAU OF MILITARY HISTORY, 1913-21.

STATEMENT BY WITNESS

DOCUMENT NO. W.S. 746

Witness

Sean Culhane,
19 Parnell Place,
Cork.

Identity.

Member of 'B' Company, 1st Batt'n. Cork 1 Brigade,
1917 - ;

Intelligence Officer, Cork 1 Brigade,
1918-1921.
Subject.

- (a) National activities, Cork, 1917-1921;
- (b) Mutiny of R.I.C. Listowel, 1920;
- (c) Shooting of Divisional Commissioner Smyth, R.I.C.
19/7/1920;
- (d) Shooting of District Inspector Swanzy, R.I.C.
Conditions, if any, Stipulated by Witness. 22/8/1920.

Nil

File No. S.2046.

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STATEMENT

BY

SEÁN CULHANE, 19, PARNELL PLACE, CORK.

I was born in Glin, Co. Limerick, in the year 1900. My parents were farmers.

I attended the local school until I was almost twelve years of age and then my parents sent me to the O.M.I. College at Belcamp Hall, Raheny, where I spent three years, following which I was in Mungret College, Co. Limerick, for nearly one year.

On reaching the age of sixteen years I was apprenticed to the drapery trade and came to Cork in 1916 to serve my time in the Munster Arcade, Patrick Street, Cork.

1917. I joined the Volunteers in Cork City at the end of 1917, becoming a member of 'B' Company, 1st Battalion, Cork No. 1 Brigade. Arthur White was then the Company O.C., and 1st Lieut. was Mark Wickham and the 2nd Lieutenant - Seán O'Tuama. The Brigade O.C. was Tomás MacCurtain and the Vice O.C. - Terence McSwiney.

The area of the 1st Battalion was that portion of the city north of the River Lee and embracing approximately three miles of the suburbs on the north side.

The Company areas were generally as follows :-

- 'A' Company - St. Lukes district.
- 'B' Company - Flat or centre of City.
- 'C' Company - Blarney Street district.
- 'D' Company - Fair Hill district.
- 'E' Company - Blackpool district.

'F' Company - Dublin Pike district.
'G' Company - The Marsh district.
'E' Company - College Road district.

As far as I recollect we had training parades about twice weekly which were mainly carried out in No. 56 Grand Parade, then the Sinn Féin hall. Very frequently we had Sunday route marches when we moved out into the country-side and occasionally field training was carried out across country.

Our Company would be approximately one hundred strong - a fine crowd of young men, all imbued with a great spirit of enthusiasm.

A short time after joining I took a particular interest in the making of what were known as the "Tin-can" bombs, the main ingredients of which were an ordinary tin can (such as cocoa-tins, etc.,) cement, filings which we obtained from Passage Dockyard, together with a stick or half stick of gelignite and some sort of acid.

1918.

In early 1918 we had a try-out of these bombs at Clogheen (near Cork City) under Tomás MacCurtain. Each Company of the 1st Battalion brought its own samples. I was there representing our Company ('B' Company). The results of this test only proved fair as some of them failed to explode, others only partially exploded: some of them, however, were satisfactory enough.

Some time in 1918 Tom Crofts became our Company O.C. and I was appointed as the Company Intelligence Officer. I think the main reason for my being appointed to this job was due to the fact

that the firm where I worked - Munster Arcade - was very extensively patronised by all the Officers of the British garrison in Cork and the other surrounding garrisons, including Ballincollig and Fermoy, etc., and our firm provided both their military and civilian clothing requirements. One of the principals at that time was a Mr. Ledlie, who was a great friend of the senior members of the British garrisons.

During visits to the firm of some of these Officers it was a comparatively easy matter, while purchases were being made, in the course of general conversation, to put a few well chosen questions, and without appearing too inquisitive. In this way I kept in touch with any main changes in the garrison of individuals and units, etc., Some of my comrade workers also gave valuable assistance in this respect.

PROPOSED ATTACK ON KILLEAGH AERODROME.

Sometime late in 1919 an attack was planned for the capture of the enemy aerodrome near Killeagh, East Cork. I do not know the details of the plans unless that it was under Brigade control and the 4th, 10th and 1st Battalions were co-operating. About forty of us from the 1st Battalion cycled to Killeagh that night to take part in the attack.

On our arrival we gradually made our way across country with the help, as far as I remember, of a local guide. In the small hours of the morning - about 2 a.m. or 3 a.m. - we had approached to the outer boundary fences of the aerodrome and were awaiting the order to proceed with the attack.

We remained there for two or three hours and no order came, so coming near dawn we received word to disperse and eventually made our way back to Cork City.

A number of Brigade and Battalion Officers were there, including Mick Leahy, Sando Donovan, Tom Crofts, Jack Fitzgerald, Cobh, etc.,

I heard sometime later that the reason the attack was not proceeded with was that the motor car which was conveying Terry McSwiney via the back or byroads had a break-down or took a wrong turning and failed to arrive in time. Terry was said to be in charge of the operation, therefore some of the Officers who were present did not like to take the responsibility on themselves in his absence and especially as dawn was approaching and the element of surprise which was our strong point would be nullified.

At this time I was still only Company I.O.

Near the end of 1919 I became the Battalion I.O. and slowly built up a network of contacts in the Battalion area. I was able to keep abreast of any major happenings in the military posts and also had one or two members of the staffs in the big hotels and Clubs who could keep me posted on any activities of importance to us.

1920.

In early 1920 I was appointed as Brigade I.O. and enlarged my activities to embrace the Brigade area. Tomás MacCurtain was still the Brigade O.C. and Terry McSwiney the Vice O.C.,

About this time, too, I was initiated into the I.R.B. Sando Donovan was the centre; he was also O.C. of the 1st Battalion. The main activity of the I.R.B., as far as my memory goes, was the

maintenance of control of the Volunteers and the allotment of any special jobs to its members.

SHOOTING OF DIVISIONAL ^{Commissioner} COMMANDER SMYTH, R.I.C.

In June, 1920, Divisional Commissioner Smyth of the R.I.C., made his infamous speech to the members of the R.I.C. garrison at Listowel in which he counselled them to murder and pillage, etc., and told them they would not be brought to account for any such misdeeds committed. His aim was to terrorise the people. To their credit the R.I.C. strongly resented this harangue and a mutiny occurred in the force and a comparatively large number of Listowel R.I.C. resigned forthwith.

This speech of Smyth received a lot of publicity in the Press at that time and caused a furore throughout the country.

We had discussed the matter at Brigade level on many occasions and had decided if ever the opportunity arose that we would effectively deal with Smyth.

My main contact in the County Club, Cork City, at this time was a Waiter named Ned Fitzgerald, a native of Ballyhooly, Co. Cork - his nickname was "Bally". (The poor fellow died about three years ago). It was "Bally's" practice to keep me informed of any visits of important personages to the Club from Major General Strickland down.

Smyth visited the Club on the 18/7/1920, but left again after a short interval. This information was conveyed to me but, owing to his short stay, nothing could be done on that day.

He returned to the Club again the following evening and I received word of his visit very shortly after his arrival. I

immediately contacted Seán Hegarty, who was then acting Brigade O.C., as Terry MacSwiney was in Brixton Prison. Mick Leahy was Vice O.C. Following my conversation with Seán, he got into immediate touch with the following: Sando Donovan, Corney Sullivan, J.J. O'Connell, Danny Healy, Seán O'Donoghue and these, together with myself, proceeded immediately to the vicinity of the Club on the South Mall and all of us were fully armed. The five whom I have named above remained at the opposite side of the street and I went across to the entrance of the Club and met "Bally", who told me that Smyth was still inside. I took off my cap and ran my fingers twice through my hair, which was the signal arranged with my comrades. They immediately came to the Club entrance and with "Bally" in front of us, as if at the point of the gun, he moved to where Smyth was sitting in the room and faced him. This was arranged to ensure that we got the right man.

We opened fire simultaneously, without any preliminaries, and most of our shots hit the target. Smyth made an effort with his one arm to make for his gun but collapsed in the attempt - he must have died at once. When I was firing at Smyth, I noticed sitting opposite him County Inspector Craig, R.I.C., to whom I had sold some socks in the Munster Arcade a week or so before. I opened fire then on Craig and although I aimed at his heart I only succeeded in shooting him in the leg. My comrades did not know Craig, hence did not understand until later why I turned my gun on him. Had they known, Craig's fate would also have been sealed.

During the shooting a number of comrades also had taken up positions at the various vantage points along the South Mall, ready for action should any eventuality arise or enemy reinforce-

ments arrive before the completion of our mission.

Following the shooting, Sando Donovan and I made for Peg Duggan's house in Blackpool and remained there till darkness set in and then went to our respective homes in the city.

I resumed my work at the Munster Arcade on the day following the shooting, taking a chance of Craig not having recognised me, or if he did that he would keep his mouth shut. At any rate, I was not approached by any of the enemy.

There was a great 'spate of enemy activity after the shooting comprising extensive raids, searches, hold-ups, etc., and, although a number of arrests were made, none of the actual participants in the operation was arrested.

Intelligence work about this period was at its peak and all my spare time and often late into the night was devoted to following up information from various sources.

MURDER OF LORD MAYOR TOMÁS MacCURTAIN AND SHOOTING OF DISTRICT INSPECTOR SWANZY, R.I.C.

Following the murder of the Lord Mayor, Tomás MacCurtain, at his home in Cork in March, 1920, the Cork Jury, which sat subsequently, gave the following verdict :-

"We find that Ald. Thomas McCurtain, Lord Mayor of Cork, died from shock and haemorrhage caused by bullet wounds and that he was wilfully murdered under circumstances of the most callous brutality and that the murder was organised and carried out by the R.I.C. officially directed by the British Government. We return a verdict of wilful murder against David Lloyd

George, Prime Minister of England; Lord French, Lord Lieutenant of Ireland; Ian McPherson, late Chief Secretary of Ireland; Acting Insp. Général Smith of the R.I.C.; Divisional Inspector Clayton of the R.I.C. and District Inspector Swanzy and some unknown members of the R.I.C."

From evidence given at the inquest and as a result of information we gathered at the time, there was no doubt among the Officers of our Brigade that District Inspector Swanzy, R.I.C. was the prime instigator in this murder. Members of the murder party actually left Swanzy's home on that night to carry out the murder. Feeling was very high in the Brigade over this exceptionally brutal crime, for not alone was Tomás MacCurtain the Lord Mayor but he was also Brigade Commander.

The Brigade Staff examined the whole question in great detail and it was eventually decided that Swanzy should pay the penalty for his crime. I was told that I could go ahead with the shooting provided he could be located.

Swanzy had left Cork under an assumed name shortly after the inquest and had moved to some unknown destination. Sometime following his departure from Cork I heard that some baggage had left his house and had been brought to Glanmire Railway Station. I visited the station on the same evening and met a railway clerk named Seán Healy, who was a Lieutenant in 'A' Company of the 1st Battalion. I told Seán my business and we proceeded to the Parcels Office and after rummaging around for a short while I found a hat-box and after examining the label on the box and,

whether by chance or good fortune, I removed the top label and found another label underneath marked "Swanzy", "Lisburn". I forget now what name was inscribed on the top label, but the destination was shown as "Lisburn".

This information was sent to General Headquarters and it was later confirmed by General Headquarters that Swanzy was in Lisburn.

I was then selected to go to Dublin and Belfast to make all necessary arrangements. I went to Dublin and after first calling to Brennans and Walsh's - well known Republican drapers - one of the staff (I forget his name) brought me along to Vaughan's Hotel where I met Mick Collins.

I informed Mick of my mission and told him that I was en route for Belfast. He told me to get in touch with Matt McCarthy, then a Constable in the R.I.C. in Belfast, (later a Garda Chief Superintendent, since deceased). I met him in a pub in Belfast and, as far as I can recollect, it was in McKearneys of Rosemary Street. We compared notes and confirmed that our information was similar. I decided then to go to Lisburn and examine the lie of the land but McCarthy thought it was inadvisable and, after a full discussion of the proposal with Joe McKelvey, it was agreed that the latter would provide reliable scouts to obtain all the information required. When all the necessary information was gathered and we were satisfied that Swanzy was still there I reported back to Dublin and sought further help as it was General Headquarters which financed the job. I met Mick Collins and, after a frank discussion, he remarked that the job was much too

big for me. I probably looked immature as at the time I was not yet twenty years of age. He said it was a job for experienced men and mentioned about picking selected men from Dublin. I made a strong protest to him and informed him that my orders were very emphatic and that it was solely a Cork Brigade job. After thinking it over he said he would leave the decision to the Minister for Defence.

Later I accompanied Dick Mulcahy to the Minister (Cathal Brugha), where Mick Collins had already arrived. The Minister questioned me very closely as to my proposed plan of action, which I fully detailed to him. Whether due to my youth or innocence I was not overawed by the presence of such important figures, so after a lot of questioning I apparently established my point for at the finish Cathal Brugha said "Go ahead and do the job".

I thanked him and then requested permission to get four men from Cork to assist me in the operation, and this was agreed to. The men selected by the Brigade were: Dick Murphy, "Stetto" Aherne, C. McSweeney and Jack Cody.

They arrived in Belfast some time later where I met them on arrival. At this time I was stopping in Belfast at the home of Joe McKelvey and his widowed mother in Cyprus Street, Falls Road district.

After these men were sent for to Cork and prior to their arrival in Belfast I had had more time to examine the project in greater detail and I had satisfied myself that it was only a two-man job and that any number over and above this might mean a

bungling of the job and a bigger danger for all of us. I chose Dick Murphy, who was Captain of 'G' Company, 1st Battalion, to accompany myself on the operation.

I explained the position to the three lads whom I was returning to Cork, and also to Joe McKelvey who was exceptionally keen to participate. All of them were very disappointed but took it in good parts for they fully realised that while two might stand a good chance of making a safe getaway it would not apply to a party of six or seven. I wrote to Mick Collins explaining the change of plan and sent the three lads back to Cork same day. This was on a Friday and the following Sunday, 22/8/1920, was the date fixed for the job.

There was a lad working in a Belfast garage at this time whose name was Seán Leonard, a native of Tubbercurry. The garage was owned by a loyalist, but Seán was a most reliable fellow and was prepared to help us in every way possible. Seán was due for driving duty at the garage on the Sunday. On Sunday morning I got Joe McKelvey, on account of his Northern accent, to 'phone the garage to hire a car to convey two persons to Lisburn and stating where and when the car would pick us up. If Seán did not turn up as the driver it was our intention to dump whoever came and get Seán for the run.

Seán, however, arrived at the appointed time with the car. So Dick Murphy and myself took off for Lisburn. By arrangement we stopped the car about 150 yards from the place selected for the shooting in Lisburn and it was also fixed that Seán would turn the car about facing Belfast and keep the engine running. It was also arranged that Joe McKelvey would meet us about a mile outside

Lisburn on completion of the job and that he would guide us across the hills to Belfast.

On our arrival at Lisburn we met Tom Fox and Roger McCorley (both of whom were later Colonels in the Army) who had been detailed as scouts. They informed us that Swanzy had gone to Church and gave the approximate time the Service would finish. We remained on the opposite side of the street near the Church and made ourselves look as inconspicuous as possible and took special care not to speak for fear our Southern accents would betray us to any passers-by.

We were not too long waiting until the congregation started coming from the Church so when I observed Swanzy and saw the direction he was taking I gave the tip to Dick Murphy and we moved towards the corner, about a block away from the Church, where we had provisionally selected for the job. When he was only a few yards away from us I said to Dick "That's him". I fired the first shot getting him in the head and Dick fired almost simultaneously into his body. It transpired at the inquest held later that either of the shots would have proved fatal.

Immediately the shooting ceased the crowd of approximately one hundred persons coming from the Church were stunned at first and when they gathered their wits some of them ran away and a few threw sticks after us and generally they were hostile and threatening. We fired a few shots in the air and made a fast run for our car. We had almost reached the car when a shot struck the wind-screen.

We got into the car and Seán started off without a moment's

delay. We met Joe McKelvey, as arranged, about a mile outside Lisburn and dismounted, and accompanied by him we moved across the hills and reached Belfast after some hours.

I had asked Seán Leonard to accompany us and promised him a job in Fords Works in Cork. He preferred, however, to take his chance and said if apprehended he would say he had to do the job under compulsion with a gun to his body. He was later arrested and tried for his life. As far as I know he was sentenced to death, later commuted to fifteen years' imprisonment.

We reached McKelvey's house and partook of food and change of socks, etc., kindly provided by Mrs. McKelvey, a splendid character and one of the finest types it had been my privilege to meet. In the meantime we had made enquiries as to the time of the train service from Belfast to Dublin for that same evening, so we planned to arrive at the station a minute or so before the train was due to leave. At this time there was great military activity around the city, but, however, we reached the railway station without mishap and got first-class tickets at the booking office and boarded the train. On the train passing through Lisburn we noticed a number of houses on fire, which we heard later were houses of Catholic sympathisers and one of them was the home of a Hughie Bradley who later came to work and reside in Cork.

We arrived in Dublin without any hitch whatever and proceeded to Vaughan's Hotel where we met Mick Collins, Liam Tobin, Tom Cullen and Gearoid O'Sullivan. After reporting to Collins of the success of our mission he made a 'phone call to confirm whether Swanzy was actually dead, so when he ascertained this he and the

others present were profuse in their congratulations.

Collins sent us back to Cork the following day and he kept our revolvers stating he would send them along in due course. The journey was made by train and when it reached Blarney, about five miles from Cork City, we detrained and walked into Cork. On arrival at Blackpool suburbs there was a 'military hold-up in progress: we were held up and searched, but after insisting we were only out for a walk we were allowed to go through. Incidentally, we never got back the guns from Collins and one of the guns which I was especially keen on getting was one time the property of Tomás MacCurtain and in respect of which Jim Gray, our Brigade Transport Officer, had obtained a permit from Swanzy - Gray had posed as a loyalist to get this permit.

The day following my return to Cork I resumed my job in the Munster Arcade and produced a certificate of illness from Dr. Morrissey to cover the period of my absence. This was accepted for I had not yet completed my apprenticeship.

I resumed my intelligence duties and kept the Brigade informed of military and R.I.C. dispositions and movements, together with any other information of value.

JOINED FLYING COLUMN.

Coming near the end of 1920 most of the principal business premises in Patrick Street and other parts, together with the City Hall, had been burned down by enemy forces. The firm where I worked - Munster Arcade - was amongst those destroyed.

At the very end of 1920 I joined the Brigade Flying Column,

then under the command of Sando Donovan - the Column was about forty strong and included Seán Hegarty, the Brigadier, and other Brigade and Battalion Officers.

We were billeted in various houses around Gougane Barra (Valley Desmond) and were put through a course of training, including use of ground and cover, security measures and musketry, etc., by the Brigade Training Officer - Seán Murray, who was an ex-Irish Guard. This training continued for roughly a month.

BALLYVOURNEY AMBUSH.

Our first job was about the 25th or 26th February, 1921. The Column took up an ambush position at a place called Coolavokig near Ballyvourney. Nothing happened the first day and on the morning of the second day we again took up position. After being some hours in position an Auxiliary Unit patrol, consisting of three lorries of Auxies from Macroom Castle, made its appearance. When the patrol was approaching the position they must have observed some movement on the part of some of our lads for they started to open fire immediately. We returned the fire and a heavy exchange of shots ensued. The nett result of the ambush was that the O.C. of the patrol - a Major Grant - was shot dead and a few others dead and a number of them wounded. Apart from a few of our lads slightly wounded, we had no serious casualties, as far as I remember. The Auxies then cleared off.

Personnel from the 1st, 2nd, 6th, 7th and 8th Battalions were represented in our Column. Our arms consisted of some rifles, revolvers, shot-guns and, I think, some home-made bombs.

RECALLED TO CORK.

After this ambush I was recalled to Cork City and was whole-time engaged on intelligence and general Volunteer duties.

During March, 1921, following some prior arrangements and contacts with the I.R.A. prisoners then in Cork Jail, it was decided to make a determined effort to rescue them. About twenty of us were on the job and we had a few rope ladders. One of the rope ladders was secured to the outer wall and Mick Murphy climbed to the top of the Jail wall and had the second rope ready for the inner wall. After waiting for what seemed a long time there was no appearance of any of the prisoners. Whatever plans the prisoners had for getting to the boundary wall failed to materialise, consequently our attempt proved abortive.

In the latter part of 1920 and during 1921 it was the practice of a number of us to sleep away from home every night. Seán Hegarty, Sando Donovan, Florrie Donoghue and myself usually slept in Ballygarvan district outside Cork.

About May, 1921, Sando Donovan, who was back temporarily in Cork City, came with me one night to sleep in Evergreen Road. Sando was to sleep in Tom Molyneux's house and I was to stay in an adjoining house owned by a man named Sisk. There was a great military activity at this time and during that night a military cordon was drawn around and extensive searches were carried out. When I became aware of the search I made a desperate attempt to make a get-away but was captured making for the back part of the premises. Sando, who had got some considerable distance away, was also taken.

This was the period the names of all occupants of houses should be shown on a notice on the back of the front door. My name, obviously, was not so recorded. I made a gallant effort to bluff my way through and said I was a son-in-law of Mr. Sisk and had been to a pub for a few drinks, and having been caught out by Curfew I said I took a chance in sleeping in the father-in-law's and forgot to record my name at the back of door. It seemed for awhile that the bluff was working but, however, they decided to bring me to Victoria Barracks. On the following morning I was brought before an Officer and charged only with breaking Curfew regulations. My bluff had worked to some extent. After stating my case, much to my surprise I was only fined 10/-. I had not this amount on me but said I would send to some friend for it. My trial, however, had hardly finished when another Officer came into the room and after speaking to the Officer who tried me - the latter said I would have to be detained for further investigation. On that same evening I was removed to the County Jail and outside on my cell door was a card marked A.C.M. and which abbreviation I knew meant "Awaiting Courtmartial". I need hardly tell you that this came as a big shock to me and was a source of great worry to know exactly how much the authorities knew of my record. Although we had kept the details of the Smyth and Swanzy shootings to a very limited inner circle, I feared, however, that the secret may have got out: About this time the enemy agents had succeeded in getting information from a Volunteer in Clogheen (near Cork City) which resulted in the deaths of six Volunteers in Clogheen. Luckily, for me, however, my fears proved groundless for within a day or two I was removed to Spike Island and only kept there a few days from whence I was sent to Bere Island for internment, but escaped from there about three

months following the Truce in July, 1921, and reported to my
Brigade. I was subsequently appointed Divisional I.O.

SIGNATURE:

Sean Culhane
(Sean Culhane)

DATE:

8th November 1952

8th November 1952.

WITNESSED BY:

Thomas Halpin

LIEUT.-COLONEL.

(Thomas Halpin)

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